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A Comparative Study of Religions

J.N.K. Mugambi

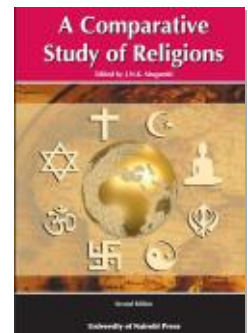
Published by African Books Collective

Mugambi, J.N.K.

A Comparative Study of Religions: Second Edition.

African Books Collective, 2010.

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The Religious Heritage of Arabia Before and During Muhammad's Time

J.N.K Mugambi

Introduction

The chapter will discuss another of the religions originating in the Middle East – Islam. This religion was established in the middle of the 7th Century AD by Muhammad of Arabia. It will be worthwhile to consider the cultural and religious background within which Muhammad proclaimed his message. The chapter will describe the cultural and religious background within which Islamic arose.

Geographical Context

The Arabian Peninsula is the desert region between the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Apparently, there used to be a prosperous civilization in this region as evidenced by a disused irrigation dam at Marib in the southern part of the Peninsula, where the Sabean Kingdom had once flourished. In the north of the Peninsula the Romans had destroyed the Arabian culture, which had build the centers of Petra and Palmyra.

By the 6th Century AD, the majority of the Arabian population was nomadic, surviving on camels, dates and long distance trading. There were three important settlements in the north-west of the Peninsula at Taif, Mecca and Medina. The latter two towns (Mecca and Medina) became the focal points of Islam. They are still considered to be the most important centers of worship in Islam – especially Mecca.

The trade routes extended across the Arabian Desert to Damascus in Syria. Large caravans of camels carrying dates and other goods would travel to Damascus and return with ornaments and other goods from the north. Muhammad in his youth became associated with this trade, as a manager of one of those caravans.

Arabian Religious Heritage

Polytheism was one of the main features of the Arabic religious heritage before and during Muhammad's time. Many gods and goddesses were worshipped. Among these were the following:

- Allah – The creator of the world, and the lord over all things.
- Allat – Allat was a moon goddess, apparently adopted from Syria through the continuing cultural and commercial interaction. The attributes of Allat were similar to those of mother goddesses who were worshipped amongst the peoples of the Middle East.
- Al-Uzza – Al-Uzza was Venus, worshipped as the goddess of fate. All fortunes were believed to depend on the whims of Uzza. Owing to this belief, there was a strong sacrificial cult associated with Al-Uzza. Apparently, even human sacrifice seems to have been included in this cult, according to the interpretation of archaeological discoveries of human remains in the region. There was also a cult of venerating stone pillars, which symbolized nature's fertility.

One of the cults associated with these deities was a ritual conducted around the Kabah, a cube-like building without any external decoration containing a sacred black stone towards which all Muslims must face when they pray.

The Kabah

The cult associated with the Kabah was incorporated into Islam. In the building there were as many as 360 gods worshipped by the

Arabs. Muhammad's concern was to eliminate this polytheism and idolatry. He wanted to lead the Arabs towards strict monotheism.

The Kabah cult included a ritual in which all the fighting would be stopped for four months in order for worshippers to visit the shrine every year. The pilgrims would move around the Kabah chanting prayers, and run a sacred race between two hills near the Kabah. The ritual is still an integral part of Islamic practice during the pilgrimage to Mecca.

It is worthwhile to consider why Mohammad decided to incorporate this ritual into Islam. In the other religions we have studied so far, it was shown that some of the old practices and beliefs were carried over when a new religion was formed. Thus the founder has to convince his prospective followers that the new religion is better, or helps them to meet their social and religious needs more fully

Many aspects of Hinduism were carried over into Buddhism. Likewise, many aspects of Judaism were carried over into Christianity. When Christianity spread amongst Romans and Greeks, many aspects of the Fraeco Roman heritage were incorporated into European Christianity. Christianity will no doubt incorporate some aspects of the African heritage, if it is to become firmly rooted in Africa.

Islam, as a religion established to purify the Arabian religious heritage had to ensure continuity with the tradition it sought to improve. The Kabah ritual, which was central to Arabian religious practice, was an effective choice to enhance continuity between the old and the new religion.

Influence of Judaism on the Establishment of Islam

A study of the Quran, Islamic traditions and practices will show a very close association between Islam and Judaism.

Jewish Communities had settled in the Arabian Peninsula since the 6th Century BC, particularly in the northern part. In Yemen

(southern part of Arabia) there was a large Jewish settlement since the 4th Century AD.

These Jewish communities were relatively wealthy in comparison to their Arab neighbours. Moreover, they maintained the Jewish way of life, as was required, since the Babylonian exile in the 6th Century BC.

The Jewish way of life was centered on strong monotheism, in contrast with the polytheism of Arab communities. It was easy to infer that the distinct and unified Jewish identity was rooted in the strong monotheism faith. Muhammad could see the possibility of uniting the Arabs through strong monotheism, similar to that of the Jews.

Another factor that gave the Jews a strong sense of unity was their common history. This history, traced from the legendary founder of the community (Abraham) in the 3rd Millennium BC, enabled all Jews everywhere to regard one another as members of the same community, with a common origin and a common sense of destiny.

The Jews had one set of scriptures, which provided the source of reference in any controversial questions. Although Rabbis could disagree on the proper interpretation of the Torah (Hebrew sacred scripture), they could not disagree on the divine inspiration and authority of these scriptures.

In addition to all these aspects, the Jews had a distinct way of organizing their community, including rules and regulations on how to deal with and relate to non-Jews. All these characters of the Jewish community were admirably effective in distinguishing the Jews from other peoples. Muhammad endeavoured to build a new community comparable to but clearly distinct from Jews.

Influence of Christianity on the Establishment of Islam

Muhammad was also acquainted with Monophysite Christianity. As early as the 4th Century AD, Christianity had suffered doctrinal schism over the question of the relationship between

God and Jesus. The Ecumenical Council of Nicea (AD 325) had tried to resolve that question. The Nicene Creed was formulated to express the official position of the church as agreed upon by the majority of church leaders present in the Council of Nicea. This official view was that Jesus was of two natures, one human and one divine. Thus Jesus was fully man and fully God. This was the Diophysite view.

The Monophysite view was that Jesus was divine, and that his humanity was a manifestation of his divine character. Monophysite Christianity was prevalent in the eastern part of the Roman Empire – in Egypt, Syria and in Arabia. It was strongly rooted in the local cultures, and was established in rural areas. In contrast, Diophysite Christianity was strongly Roman both in doctrine and also in practice.

One of the weaknesses of Christianity before the 6th Century AD was its internal division. There were many sects, each of which claimed to be faithful to the true teaching of the founder, Jesus. Although all Christian churches affirmed their faith in Jesus, they differed from one another in their understanding of his personality and of his relationship to God. Owing to this doctrinal incoherence, it appeared as if Christianity had compromised over the issue of monotheism. In this respect, Christianity was no better than the Arab heritage, which Muhammad wanted to purify.

Another weakness of Christianity at that time was that its scriptures had not stabilized. There were many versions of the teachings and achievements of Jesus. The authenticity of these versions had not been settled. Muhammad could appreciate that too much emphasis on human intellect could undermine the unity of the religious community. In his movement, he was to insist on divine inspiration, so that the scriptures of Islam were revealed to him as the word of God which he was commanded by God to recite. Thus the Quran, the word of God, was dictated to Muhammad, and Muhammad recited it. There is therefore no possibility of error, or debate about its authenticity. Such a strong

view of revelation and inspiration was a response to the relative uncertainty concerning the inspiration and authority of Christian scriptures.

Muhammad – Reformer or Revolutionary

In view of the foregoing observation, we can raise the question: Was Muhammad a Reformer or a Revolutionary?

According to Islamic doctrine, Muhammad was neither of these. He was the Prophet or Messenger of God. His role was to proclaim new message to the people of Arabia. This message would purify the Arabian religious heritage. It would also be the foundation of a new community, whose mandate would be to practice the will of Allah and ensure that other people would practice it everywhere and at all times.

Thus we can say that, doctrinally, Muhammad was a Prophet. Culturally, he was a reformer because he reformed Arabian culture. Politically he was a revolutionary because within a short time his movement totally overshadowed all political and military establishments in Arabia, then began to spread its influence to other parts of the world. Today Islam is one of the most influential religions in the world.

Activity

1. Try to acquire a copy of the Quran, and read it. (An authoritative English translation can be purchased at Quran House, next to Bible House, Nairobi).
2. Read Smart Ninian, *The Religious Experience of mankind*, chapter 8.
3. Read Kateregga, Badru and Shenk, David W. *Islam and Christianity: A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue*, Nairobi; Uzima Press, 1980.
4. Writing Exercise: Write notes on the differences and similarities between Christianity and Islam.

Further Reading

Smart, Ninian. *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, Glasgow: Collins Fontana, 1969.

Kateregga, Badru and Shenk, David. *Islam and Christianity: A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue*, Nairobi; Uzima Press, 1980.

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