

The Abrahamic Religions:

An Introduction to World Religions

Islam: Historical Background and
Beliefs

Session Week 10

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Aim and Learning Outcomes – Week 10 Session

Aims

- This session aims to explore Islam: Historical Background and Beliefs

Learning Outcomes

- Students identify the main aspects
 - Islam: Historical Background and Beliefs

Islam: Historical Background and Beliefs

Founder

- Especially in books written by Muslims, it is often the case that the prophet's life is divided into three parts:
 - Up to his 40th year when Muhammad received the first revelation, he was 'The Seeker';
 - During the Makkah period, he was 'The Preacher'; and
 - During the Medina period, he was 'The Master'.
- Muhammad was born in 570 CE in Makkah in present-day Saudi Arabia. He was the son of Abdullah, who died before Muhammad was born, and Aminah, who died when Muhammad was six. He was carried for first day by a woman called Halima, then by his grandfather, and later still by his uncle, Abu Talib.
- Tradition tells us that, as he grew older, he was liked and trusted by everyone (within his society). Although he never learned to read or write he was deemed intelligent and wise. At the age of 25 he married Khadijah, a 40 year hold widow who was rich and widely respected. Her wealth derived from the transport of goods on camel trains, and, on her behalf, Muhammad led those trains along the caravan routes of the Arabian Peninsula.

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- When in Mekkah, still Muhammad's home, he would go a cave on Mount Hira and spend days and nights in meditation, especially during the Arab month of Ramadan.
- Although he lived in an environment in which most people followed polytheistic faiths, he was of the opinion that there was only one God – he may have been influenced by Jewish and Christian minorities in the region – and that God's name was Allah.
- As he meditated, he became increasingly dissatisfied with the corruption, cruelty, debauchery and injustice which seemed to surround him, and he concluded that this state of affairs prevailed because people would not submit to the one and only God, Allah.
- As Muslims believe, when Muhammad reached the age of 40, he received from Allah the first of many revelations via the angel Gabriel. Initially he was inclined to believe that he had imagined the encounter, but others convinced him that something remarkable had happened and that he should not desist from visiting Mount Hira in the future.
- From then until the end of his life there were many other revelations and all of them, we are informed, were memorised by Muhammad.

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- For 13 years after the first revelation Muhammad spent much of his time preaching. At first he preached secretly basing everything on the revelations.
- Gradually, he gathered around him a group of followers and his message began to reach a growing number of people.
- The leaders of the Quraysh tribe, the tribal group who dominated Makkah and were responsible for the Ka'aba, which, at the time, contained images and statues of various gods and goddesses, saw in polytheistic beliefs.
- Following the death of Kadijah and Abu Talib – the latter had protected Muhammad from his enemies – Muhammad's position became increasingly precarious.

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- During this troubled period, Muhammad made his miraculous Night Journey and Ascension. It is claimed that in one night he travelled from Makkah to the 'Further Mosque' at Jerusalem, the 'Further Mosque' being the site of the Jewish Temple.
- Tradition says that the journey was undertaken on a winged horse called Buraq. In Jerusalem, from the top of the hill now crowned with the Dome on the Rock, he ascended to Paradise, spoke to the earlier prophets, and brought back the command to pray five times a day.
- Devoid of his uncle's protection, Muhammad was driven from Makkah by an assassination plot in 622 CE. Followers of the new faith had already moved to the city Yathrib, or modern Medina, where many people had converted. As informed, the people of Yathrib invited Muhammad to become their leader, an offer he accepted.
- On 16th July Muhammad set off from Makkah with Abu Bakr, one of his followers. This journey is known as the Hijrah, the Arabic name for migration, and it marks the event from which Muslims count their years.
- On 5th April 2012 we entered the year 1432AH. AH stands for After the Hijrah.

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- In time Yathrib's name was changed to Medina, or the Town of the Prophet. Medina became the first Islamic city state. Many Muslims think of Medina in its early days as the ideal state which humankind ought to recreate. Over the next ten years Muhammad's power and influence spread as the religion to which he gave birth united growing numbers of Arabs living in the Arabian Peninsula.
- In 630 CE a large Muslim army advanced on Makkah but the Makkans put up on resistance. Muhammad is said to have spread his enemies but insisted that the images and statues in the Ka'aba be removed. The Makkans complied, Muhammad had reclaimed in the holy city for Allah.
- In March, 632 CE Muhammad went on pilgrimage to Makkah for the last time and delivered his famous Farewell Speech to his follow pilgrims. Most of the sermon concerned human rights and the Five Pillars of Islam. We are also informed that the reminded his followers about the existence of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. The Qur'an, or Recitation, is the name given to the Muslim holy book and which contains all the revelations received by Muhammad, and the Sunnah are records of what Muhammad said and did in his endeavours to give expression to the principles enshrined in scripture. If Muslims cannot find answers to their problems in the Qur'an, answers may lie in the Sunnah. In time, the Sunnah came to form the most important part of the Hadith, collections of writings which describe what Muhammad and his companions said and did. The word 'Hadith' means statement or report.

The Five Pillars of Islam

- One of the most convenient ways of introducing Islam to the uninitiated is to examine what are known as the Five Pillars of Islam.
- The pillars, which, in essence, define what makes a Muslim a Muslim, embrace the central beliefs and core duties of the faith.
- A majority of Muslims would say that compliance with the Five Pillars is essential for anyone describing themselves as Muslims.
- Because some Shia Muslims and many Sufi Muslims are lax about compliance, some Sunnis regard Shia and Sufi Muslims as heretics.
- In Arabic, the sacred language of Islam, the Five Pillars are known as Shahadah, Salat, Saum, Zakat, and Haj.
- In English, the Five Pillars are known as confession of faith, prayer, fasting, alms giving and pilgrimage.

The Five Pillars of Islam – Shahadah (Confession of Faith)

- When someone decides to embrace the Islamic faith, his/ her first task is to say the Shahadah in Arabic in front of witness. In English, the Shahadah is: “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.” Inherent in this simple statement are various ideas central to Islam. First, since there is only one God, God alone should be worshipped and those who believe in other gods simply mistaken. Second, followers of monotheistic faiths who believe in the oneness and unity of God- usually defined as Jews and Christians – are thought to be saying their prayers to the same God even though they have different names to describe Him. Third, idolatry is worshipping something less than God and is strictly forbidden. The sin of idolatry is called ‘shrik’ and is regarded by most Muslims as the worst of all sins.
- The reference to Muhammad requires some elaboration. Muhammad, the final and perfect prophet who might be thought of as the ideal Muslim, is accorded immense respect in the Islamic world, but there was nothing divine about him. He was an ordinary person who happened to receive messages from Allah which, in time, became the Muslim holy book, the Qur’an. Muslims think of Muhammad as the last in a long line of prophets with whom God communicated. As the recipient of the final and perfect revelation, he is the most important prophet in Islamic faith. Other prophets include Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Solomon ... All the prophets of Islam are accorded great respect.

The Five Pillars of Islam – Salat (Payer)

- Salat (Payer) is the duty most non-Muslims have some knowledge about. Muslims should pray five times a day and the prayer times depend on the passage of the sun. Winter prayer times are packed more tightly together than in Summer when the day is longer than night. Friday is, in most of the Islamic world at least, the Sabbath, and the Friday midday prayer is everywhere the most important prayer time of the week.
- In Mosques, men and women pray separately. Before praying, all worshippers ensure that they are ritually clean by doing the ‘wudu’, a wash that takes about five minutes to complete. Muslims know when it is time to pray because, about 15 minutes before prayers are due to begin, a muezzin, or chanter, sings the adhan, or the summons to prayer. Muslims can say their prayers wherever they want provided the space where they pray is clean. Often, they say prayers on small prayer mats which are unrolled at home or in the workplace to create a clean spot.
- When prayers are said worshippers face Makkah, Islam’s holiest city and site of Ka’aba, the simple, black, cube-shaped stone structure which Muslims believe was rebuilt by the prophet Abraham for people to say their prayers to the one true God whom Muslims call Allah.

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- All mosques have rooms or facilities for worshippers to complete the 'wudu'. At midday on Friday the Imam, or the religious leader, delivers a sermon from the minbar, or pulpit.
- During the prayer cycles, each one of which is called a 'rakah' – two, three or four rakahs are completed depending on the time of day – Muslims stand, bow, kneel and prostrate themselves on the ground.
- When they touch the ground with their foreheads they are giving physical expression to a key idea associated with Islam, submission to the will of Allah.
- In its strictest sense the word 'Islam' means submission. However, some scholars suggest that Islam may also be a corruption of 'salaam', Arabic for peace.
- It is for these reasons that many Muslims characterise their religion as being one which requires submission to the will of Allah and commitment to peace.

The Five Pillars of Islam – Saum (fasting)

- Saum (fasting) takes place in the 9th month of the Muslim year, Ramadan. Ramadan lasts 29 or 30 days.
- During the hours of daylight Muslims abstain from eating, drinking, smoking and so on, moderation is expected during the hours of darkness.
- In every 24 hour cycle only two meals are generally eaten, a breakfast before sunrise and an evening meal after sunset. Because the Muslim year is 354 day long, Ramadan shifts its position every year by 11 or 12 days.
- Fasting need not be done if, by fasting, people may damage their health. For this reason young children, the elderly, the sick, pregnant women and breast-feeding mothers are exempted from their obligations.
- Nonetheless, children from the age of 7 or 8 may be encouraged to fast for a day or two a week to get an idea about what ‘Saum’ involves.

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- In common with other religious people who fast, Muslims undertake 'Saum' as a self-discipline.
- They do it to reveal that they can remain steadfast in their faith even though they are denied pleasurable things. But they also fast so that the privileged and relatively comfortable are given an insight into what it must be like to be poor. When you are poor you cannot eat what you want when you want.
- Toward the end of Ramadan is 'Lailat-ul-Qadr, or the Night of Power. This is the annual commemoration of the first night when Muhammad received the revelations which eventually became the Qur'an.
- Muslims may gather in the local mosque, break the fast with a large communal meal, and spend the night reading the Qur'an, listening to stories about Muhammad and providing entertainment for the children before they fall asleep.

The Five Pillars of Islam – Zakat (Alms giving)

- Zakat (Alms giving) is the obligatory 2.5% annual donation all Muslims make for charitable purposes.
- The money is used to help people who are poor or homeless, or the victims of famine, natural disasters and war.
- Zakat donations are made at specific times of the year. Many wealthy Muslims give more than 2.5% and, if the devout so wish, additional money for charitable purposes can be given at any time of the year.
- Such additional donations are called ‘Sadaqat’.

The Five Pillars of Islam – Haj (Pilgrimage)

- Haj is pilgrimage. The word 'haj' means to set out for a definite purpose, and Makkah, Islam's holiest city, is the purpose which Muslims set out for. All Muslims try to visit Makkah at least once in their lives during the pilgrimage seasons set aside in the 12th month of the year. Male pilgrims wear the 'Ihram' two lengths of white cloth which are wrapped around the lower and upper halves of the body. Everyone circles the 'Ka'aba' seven times, then they run seven times between two hills in a long covered corridor. A day or so later they visit the nearby Plain of Arafat where pilgrims beg forgiveness for their sins.
- The following day they visit 'Mina' where they stone the devil by throwing seven pebbles at the pillar known as the Great Devil. At Mina pilgrims who can afford it arrange to have an animal killed. The meat is shared with fellow pilgrims after a third has been set aside for those too poor to buy their own animal. This event is a reminder of the story of Abraham who was prepared to sacrifice his son (Muslims say Ismael – Jews and Christians say Isaac). Male pilgrims have their hair cut – some are shaved all over their heads – and women have a lock snipped off. Their cutting of the hair is a sign that they are coming out of a state of consecration. At the end of all these duties, pilgrims perform a farewell circling of the Ka'aba. Once home, male pilgrims are called 'hajjis' and females are called 'hajas'. Male pilgrims may grow a beard to show that they have been to Makkah during 'Haj'.

Islam – Belief (1)

- For those of us more concerned to identify the main beliefs of Islam, there are the Five Articles of Faith known collectively as ‘Iman’. These relate to belief in God, belief in God’s angels, belief in God’s holy books, belief in God’s messengers or prophets, and belief in the homecoming, or life after death.
- We will add a little flesh to what we already know about Allah.
 - First, although Muslims are held responsible for their own actions, they also believe that Allah knows everything even before it happens.
 - Second, belief in one creator encourages a sense of oneness with all creation.
 - Third, in the Qur’an Allah is described with 99 names which, in essence, define His character or nature.
- The names include the Merciful, the Compassionate, the Creator, the Patient, the Almighty, the All-seeing, the All-powerful and the Eternal.

Islam – Belief (2)

- Although Allah is the only supernatural being who is worshipped, there are other supernatural beings called angels. Angels are the servants of Allah. Unlike humans, angels have no free will and are therefore sinless. Gabriel is the angel who transmitted the revelations from Allah to Muhammad. Izrail is the angel of the death who will blow the trumpet to herald the Last Day. We also read about Iblis, the fallen angel. This is Islam's name for the devil or satan. Iblis appears to be outside Allah's control, but far inferior in power and influence.
- Although the Qur'an is the final and perfect word Allah, Muslims believe that many of the prophets left behind holy books which, although now lost, contained God's revealed truth. However, some of the books survive. The Torah and the Psalms, defined as the Jewish scriptures, are accepted as God-given, as are the 'Injil of Isa' or the Gospels of Jesus contained in the New Testament. However, the Torah, the Psalms and the Gospels are imperfect in that, over time, the words of humans have been added to the words of Allah so that now there is no way of knowing which parts of God-given. The corrupted nature of these scriptures necessitated the transmission of the revelations which eventually found their way into the Qur'an.

Islam – Belief (3)

- The Qur'an identifies 25 prophets, most of whom are found in the Old and the New Testaments, but tradition says that there have been 124,000 prophets altogether. Prophets known as rasul are prophets who provided humankind with holy books.
- Belief in life after death, or 'akhirah', is fundamental to Islam. The Qur'an is full of warnings to disbelievers about the doom awaiting them after death, and the promises of good things for those who submit to Allah.
- Muslims believe that this life is only a short part of their existence. Here on Earth human beings have the chance to live the good, or the morally sound, life as Allah intended, or human beings can turn their backs on Allah and his laws. After death human beings have to answer for their lives and this will affect their eternal destinies.

Islam – Belief (4)

- After death, souls are asked three questions by two angels:
 - Who is your Lord?
 - What is your religion?
 - Who is the man who was sent among you?
- Those who answer correctly – Allah, Islam, Muhammad respectively – remain in comfort until the Day of Resurrection.
- The rest are kept in great discomfort. The nature of the three questions asked by the angels suggests to many Muslims that only Muslims have any chance of gaining to Paradise.
- At the Last Day, or the Day of Judgement, the world will come to an end. Everyone will be raised up – this is why cremation is forbidden in Islam – and the soul will be reunited with the body.

Islam – Belief (5)

- Muslims believe in a physical, or bodily, resurrection. People will be judged not only on their deeds but also on their faith. Believers will go to Paradise but disbelievers will go to Hell. Paradise and Hell are described in the Qur'an as physical states.
- Paradise is like a wonderful garden where everyone is young again and able to enjoy endless pleasures. Hell is like a scorching fire that never goes out.
- One is tempted to ask whether Islamic visions of Paradise and Hell are conditioned by the physical environment in which Islam first emerged.
 - Might the scorching fire of Hell be the barren, dry and excessively hot deserts of Arabia?
 - Might Paradise be the fertile, well watered and temperate lands which the first Muslims wished to live in?
- Historically, wealthy and powerful Muslims have devoted a lot of time, energy and resources to the creation of beautiful gardens, as in the case of those surrounding the Alhambra in Granada and those enclosing the tombs of the Mughal emperors in India.
- Often, these sanctuaries of beauty and peace were thought of as visions of Paradise on Earth.

Reference

- Guillaume, Alfred (2011) Islam (Literary Licensing)
- Kenney, Jeffrey and Moosa, Ebrahim. Eds. (2012) Islam in the Modern World (Routledge)

Next Session

- We continue to discuss about Islam: Practices and Sects