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“Introduction to Islam: "Lecture - Documentaries" on DVD for Inter Institutional Collaboration “

I produced a 47 minute DVD documentary on the Life of Muhammad. Work on the project, including securing rights to various images used in the video, video and audio recording and editing, and learning to use a number of different software programs to carry out recording and editing was vastly more time-consuming than I had anticipated.

The preliminary end product is a 47 minute video which discusses a number of issues surrounding the Life of Muhammad, including “Western” or “Orientalist” stereotypes, questions of historicity, traditional Muslim perceptions of the Life of Muhammad, and observations on Muslim – Christian relations.

The primary function of the video is to familiarize the audience with some of the basic issues involved in the study of the Life of Muhammad. I am using the video early in the semester in my “Introduction to Islam” course to alert students to the various biases, issues of contestation, and open questions in our understanding of Muhammad.

I am hoping to revise the video at a future point, as it attempts to achieve too many different things; also, I am not happy with many of the visuals, and the rapid transitions between various images, as well as some errors in content. I am hoping for critical feedback from colleagues at other ACS institutions.

Below, I am attaching the various credits for the film; please note that I have secured rights to the images used in the video to be used for non-profit, educational usage at ACS institutions only; please do not distribute the video beyond ACS institutions.

I am also attaching the transcript of the English portion of the video below; it might be useful for ACS professors who want to show the video to their classes.

Please contact me with any questions you might have about the project,

Thanks,

Alfons

Alfons H Teipen, Associate Professor
Department of Religion, Furman University
3300 Poinsett Highway, Greenville, SC 29613
(864) 294-3310 alfons.teipen@furman.edu

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The Life of Muhammad.
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Errata:

Video covers in chapter one: several videos shown are actually Iranian, not “Western” productions.

“al-kamil al-insan,” should read: “Al-insan al-kamil”

Transcript

"Western" quests to understand Muhammad and the religious tradition of Islam are as old as Christendom's first encounters with Islam, and are beset by many problems.

Early encounters between Christianity and Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries in the heartlands of Islamdom as well as on the Iberian peninsula [what is nowadays Spain and Portugal] gave rise to polemical accounts of this new religious traditions.

The medieval European Christian world produced an enormous amount of misinformation, caricature, and polemics against this new religious competitor arising out of Arab lands.

While more recent studies of Islam and Muhammad have been able to overcome much of the biases of old, our understanding of Muhammad and Islam still is far from complete.

History of Perceptions of Muhammad

Contemporary cultural images of Muhammad and Islam are anchored in and influenced by the stereotypes of medieval Christendom. How else do we explain, for example, the frequency by which Islam is associated with violence, debauchery, and sexual abandon, as in newspaper headlines about "Islamic terrorism," nineteenth century Orientalist art depicting the supposed sexual pleasures of the imagined Muslim harem, or many Hollywood film productions of the past century exploring the supposed mysteries of the Orient, indulging in fantasies about the 1001 nights?

The roots of many of these stereotypes extend back more than a millennium.

With the preaching of a new religion by Muhammad in early seventh century Arabia, Islam soon became a potent force both religiously and politically. The Muslim empire grew, with an amazing speed- from a fledgling small city state at the time of Muhammad to a world empire reaching from the Atlantic shores to India within less than a hundred years. M

Among the indigenous populations of many of the newly conquered territories we find many Christians, as well as Jews. While it is true that the early caliphate conquered vast territories in a fairly short time, conversion was not by the sword. Many of the newly conquered peoples, now living under the political regime of Islamdom, would remain Christian or Jew for a long time to come; indeed, in many of the newly conquered areas Islam would not be the majority religion for another two-hundred-and-fifty years.

Middle Eastern Christians, as well as those living on the Iberian peninsula, which Muslim armies conquered from 711 CE onward, were not only faced with the new religion of Islam, but also with the question of how to understand the success of this new religious tradition. In the early centuries, Muslim armies were highly successful, to the detriment of Byzantine Christian and Persian – Sasanid armies.

Had the Christian God abandoned his people? Was the success of the Muslim armies proof that the God of Muslims was more powerful, or that their worship of God more effectual? Or was the Christian God testing or even punishing his people? Was the end of the world at hand; indeed, were the Muslim armies a sign of the appearance of the anti-Christ?

Different Christians found divergent answers. While some Christians took the military victory of the Muslim armies as an inducement to be converted to the new religion, many rejected the claims of Islam. If Muhammad was not a proper, God-sent prophet, could he be a false prophet sent by the devil? Indeed, in many of the Christian apologetic texts of

the 9th to 16th centuries we find portrayals of Islam as a Christian heresy, a religion gone awry. In some of the more hateful accounts, Muslims are called derogatory and insulting names, and Muhammad is referred to as Antichrist. Sculptural art in European, medieval cathedrals to this day bears witness to some of the insults hurled against Muslims and Islam.

The following brief explorations will address some of the central questions in our pursuit of a better understanding of the Life of Muhammad, and the religious tradition he founded.

The Life of Muhammad: the issue of the sources

From a Muslim perspective, one might well argue that Islam has not one, but two beginnings:

“Theologically speaking,” a Muslim might say, “Islam is as old as humankind itself.”

After all, the Qur’an, Islam’s holy scripture, insists that Adam, Noah, Abraham, and many other Prophets were Muslims, that is, submitters to the will of God. Historically speaking, however, Islam is the youngest of the three Abrahamic religious traditions, beginning in the seventh century on the Arabian peninsula. It is this historical side of Islam’s beginning that we shall explore in this short video.

Is such pursuit of the historical beginnings of Islam fully devoid of theological considerations? What do we know about the founder of this new religion? How accurate and reliable is our knowledge about Muhammad from a historical - critical perspective? Is there an appreciable difference between the "Muhammad of history" and the "Muhammad of faith"?

Ernest Renan, studying the biography of Muhammad during the middle of the nineteenth century could still assert: "in place of the mystery under which the other religions have covered their origins [Islam] was born in the full light of history." Might Renan's optimistic account, which bases itself on fact that Islam's origins are relatively recent, be too euphoric?

Against such an optimistic view, a number of scholars insist that our knowledge of the origins of Islam is indeed as murky as that of other religious traditions much older than Islam.

As with other founders and prophets of different religious traditions, we do not possess any first-hand historical accounts dating back to the founder’s lifetime.

While the holy book of Islam, the Qur’an, is considered by the majority of Muslims and scholars of Islam as contemporaneous with Muhammad, it provides very little information about his life and accomplishments. Indeed, while many scholars see the Qur’an as a reliable witness to the historical beginnings of Islam, some scholars argue that the Qur’an, particularly in its sometimes rather difficult language, raises serious problems regarding our understanding of the beginnings of Islam.

Written sources that do focus on the life of Muhammad, on the other hand, are rather late, dating from the eighth to ninth centuries. One of the earliest biographies, for example, the *Sira Rasul Allah*, compiled by the Muslim scholar Muhammad Ibn Ishaq, dates back to only the mid - eighth century, and is accessible to us only in ninth century recensions, such as Ibn Hisham’s *Sira al-Nabawiyyah*. Since Muhammad’s public career took place from about 610 - 632 CE, there is a time gap of almost two centuries between the actual events and the written record pertaining to these events. Serious questions thus can arise concerning the faithfulness of the written record to the actual historical events.

During this period of orality, from the lifetime of Muhammad to the recording of these stories, unintentional errors as well as politically or ideologically motivated changes, if not altogether wholesale fabrications, might have been introduced into the oral tradition. Some scholars argue over time the life stories of religious founders such as Jesus or Buddha necessarily become embellished with more and more hagiographical, legendary materials; the original mortal human being thus might have become transformed into a superhuman, semi-divine persona. Critical scholars also point out that later narrations about the life of Muhammad reflect religio-political ideologies that came into being only after the death of Muhammad.

Yet other scholars go much further in their criticism, suspecting that major aspects of Muhammad's life stories might have been altogether invented to help the emerging Muslim community in interpreting difficult passages of their sacred scripture, the Qur'an. The lateness of written sources on Muhammad's life, as well as conflicting accounts of the first publication of the Qur'an lead these scholars to surmise that narratives about Muhammad's life were invented to render difficult Qur'anic passages meaningful for the emerging Muslim community.

Against such critical pessimism Muslim traditionalists insist that the oral tradition did indeed faithfully and authentically transmit the original stories about Muhammad. Muslims point out that Islamic tradition quite early used a system of authentication, called the "isnad" system, in which oral reports involving the Prophet Muhammad were vouchsafed and authenticated by a chain of transmitters, reaching from the time of the Prophet to the actual time of writing down that tradition.

For example, a very famous saying of Muhammad on the rewards of fasting is recorded in a number of different 9th century works.

Each of the 9th century authors provides a chain of transmitters which connects the report from the time of Muhammad with the ninth century written record. In the famous hadith collection penned by Al-Bukhari in the latter half of the ninth century, for example, one of the chains of transmission looks like this.

(pointer to video)

Since the narrative is reported through multiple chains of transmission, many Muslim historians believe it to be reliable, as many different authorities attest its authenticity independent of each other.

Furthermore, in traditional Muslim scholarship each chain of transmitters was subsequently studied and analyzed, ensuring that no known liars or unreliable transmitters were to be found in the chain. Still, the question of the reliability of our sources has not yet found an all-around, satisfactory answer. While most scholars agree that our sources for the life of Muhammad are unsatisfactory, different scholars exhibit different degrees of optimism or pessimism when it comes to the use of the few sources we do have.

Character of pre-Islamic Arabia?

As scholars are divided regarding Muhammad's life story, they are also divided regarding our knowledge of the overall environment into which Muhammad was born. While traditional Muslim sources paint a rather bleak picture of pre-Islamic Arabia, critical

historians are not always sure that the image portrayed by traditional Muslim accounts is authentic. According to the traditional imagery, pre-Islamic Arabia was a tribal society vegetating in a state of ignorance or barbarity -- in Arabic: Jahiliyya.

A brief excerpt from the Life of Muhammad by Ibn Ishaq probably best summarizes the traditional Islamic understanding of Jahiliyyah. Speaking in front of a Christian king, an early Muslim and cousin of Muhammad has the following to say about pre-Islamic attitudes:

“Oh king, we were an uncivilized people [literally: a people of Jâhiliyya], worshipping idols, eating corpses, committing abominations, breaking natural ties, treating guests badly, and our strong devoured our weak. Thus we were until God sent us an apostle . . .”

Such a wholly negative view of pre-Islamic Arabian social realities surely must be influenced by later Islamic attitudes.

Yet how widespread was this barbarity? Was “the worshipping of idols,” or a crude polytheism, the only, or even the predominant religion in the Arabian peninsula? Were other pre-Islamic vices such as alcoholism, gambling, greed, and the exploitation of women the rule of the day? Traditional Muslim texts present a highly dichotomized view, differentiating a totally degenerate pre-Islamic Arabian society of unethical lives of violence, lawlessness, and greed against a civilized, ethical, monotheist Islamic way of life.

However, some scholars suggest that pre-Islamic Arabia exhibits indications of a highly developed civilization strongly suffused with monotheistic tendencies, an ethos of hospitality and generosity, as well as an advanced culture of oral poetry. Traditional Muslim sources allude to some presence of Judaism and Christianity in different parts of the Arabian peninsula. Several Jewish tribes seem to have lived in the vicinity of the city of Mecca, as well as Medina, and elsewhere on the Arabian peninsula. Christianity also seems to have made inroads onto the Arabian peninsula. While some scholars go as far as suggesting that a strong presence of either Christians or Jews in the Arabian peninsula has had a significant impact on the development of Islam, or that the initial stages of the development of Islam might have taken shape in quasi-Jewish or Christian environments outside of the Arabian peninsula, other scholars regard Islam as an indigenous development and expression of the Arabian peninsula, and regard the general outline of the traditional story of the beginnings of Islam as authentic.

Since it is the traditional understanding of Muhammad that has shaped Islamic identity, we will follow the basic outline of the traditional narrative of his biography, occasionally interspersing critical reflections on the way the story is narrated.

Early Life of Muhammad

According to Muslim tradition, Muhammad was born around the year 570 CE in the town of Mecca, in what is now Saudi Arabia. Muslim tradition has preserved legendary accounts about miracles connected to Muhammad’s conception, birth, and childhood.

These miracle stories attempt to show the immaculate, sinless, and perfect character of Muhammad. Muslim tradition insists that Muhammad, although growing up in a rampantly polytheist environment, never indulged in any sinful polytheist practice.

Fully orphaned early in his life, he was adopted first by his paternal grandfather, and after his death by his paternal uncle, Abu Talib.

By the seventh century Mecca had risen to prominence, as a major center of trade on the intersection of various roads, and also as a religious center since Mecca was home to the Ka'ba, the sacred shrine that -- according to later Muslim accounts -- housed some 360 different deities that were worshipped by Arabs from all over the Arabian peninsula. Once a year, pilgrims from different parts of the peninsula would gather in Mecca to worship their gods, and also exchange goods at the annual trades fair. Muhammad learned the trading business from his uncle Abu Talib, and in his later teens became the employee of a successful business woman by the name of Khadijah.

According to tradition, Muhammad's employer Khadijah, some fifteen years his senior, found her employee to be of such trustworthy, honest and splendid character that she offered herself in marriage to him; in the year 595 CE the marriage between the two was contracted.

In Muslim traditional accounts, Muhammad is oftentimes portrayed as a religious seeker, unhappy with the polytheist leanings of his fellow Meccans, but also not content with the teachings of Christians and Jews. In the traditional Muslim narrative, Muhammad becomes the recipient of a new revelation by God, the Qur'an.

Yet some critical scholars offer a different interpretation of the origins of the Qur'an.

According to most traditional Muslim accounts, Sura 96, or the 96th chapter of the Qur'an, is the first revelation sent to Muhammad. In the traditional Muslim understanding, the first five verses of that Sura read as follows:

Read! in the name of thy Lord Who created—
He created man from a clot of congealed blood—
Read and thy Lord is most Bountiful.
He who taught by the pen, taught man that which he knew not.
(Quran 96:1-5)

Yet why would the first revelation of this new religion begin with the command to Read? Why would this Lord create humans from congealed blood, particularly if—as we shall see— the new revelation claims to be in continuity with Judaism and Christianity, where God creates from earth or clay?

Later Muslim tradition explains that Muhammad took regular retreats into the solitude of the mountains to reflect upon the divine. His spiritual quest would find its answer in the year 610 CE—Muhammad now is of the ripe age of 40— with the beginning of revelation. According to the traditional account, Muhammad is said to have been in a cave on Mt. Hira when the angel Gabriel approached him, commanding Muhammad to read.

Muhammad—in later Muslim tradition depicted as illiterate—is said to have responded: “I cannot read.” According to a later saying of the Prophet (hadith), Muhammad recalls: “Then ... (the angel) took hold of me and he pressed me so hard that I could not bear it any more, and then he let me go and said, Read. I said, "(I cannot) read." Only after Gabriel presses or squeezes Muhammad three times, does he continue with the now familiar verse: “Read in the name of thy Lord Who created--He created man from a clot of congealed blood--Read and thy Lord is most Bountiful. He who taught by the pen, taught man that which he knew not,” words that Muhammad now dutifully memorizes verbatim.

Muslim tradition asserts that Muhammad was terrified with by experience; some sources allege that Muhammad was not sure whether a demon might have spoken to him; a visit to a relative of his wife, who is said to have been a Christian, assures Muhammad that indeed the experience was God-sent.

This traditional narrative gives insight into Muslim understanding of the process of revelation. Muhammad receives the revelations, word for word, through Gabriel from God; according to tradition, he memorizes the received materials, and passes them to his followers, who write them down. Thus the process of revelation is –in traditional Muslim understanding- a straightforward process of passive reception; the “word of God” thus received is understood as verbatim, sacred, the very word of God.

The directness of reception explains traditional Muslim attitudes toward the Qur’an: as the very word of God, the Qur’an is understood to be untranslatable; the handling of the Qur’an in spoken or written form requires a Muslim to be ritually clean since pronouncing or touching the Qur’an is communion with the very word of God.

The narrative also alludes to a certain closeness of Islam and Christianity. In this story it is a Christian, after all, who recognizes in Muhammad’s revelatory experience similarities to Judeo-Christian revelation.

Yet some scholars have begun to raise questions about the Qur’an’s origins and its textual history. Archeological discoveries of ancient manuscripts in Sana’a, the capital of Yemen, have raised interesting possibilities about variant readings in early Qur’anic texts.

Speculation that the origin of the Qur’an might have taken place outside the Arabian peninsula is fueled by a recent hypothesis by a scholar writing under the pseudonym Christoph Luxenberg that difficult passages in the Qur’an might have their roots in the Syro-Aramaic language rather than in pure Arabic.

For Luxenberg, as well as for another German scholar by the name of Guenther Lueling, writing in the nineteen seventies, the reconstructed meaning of Sura 96 would not begin with “Read” but rather with “Call upon;” likewise, the Lord in this reconstruction creates not from “congealed blood” but from “sticky clay.”

“Call upon your Lord, who created humans from sticky clay...”

The reconstructed verse is understood by these scholars to be a hymn of praise toward the creator God, who –similar to the biblical creator God- creates humans from the clay of the earth.

These scholars regard the traditional Muslim narrative about Muhammad’s first revelation as a wholesale invention; as early Muslims no longer had access to the real meaning of the verse, and confused the command to “call upon” with the command to “Read,” they had to come up with an explanation why the first command of the Qur’an should be to read, hence the narrative about Gabriel commanding Muhammad to read. This is but one example of critical scholarship challenging traditional Muslim understandings of the Qur’an.

Critical approaches that question the integrity of the Qur’anic text are still in their infancy; calls by some European scholars for a critical edition of the Qur’an have to date been unsuccessful, encountering opposition from traditional Muslims who believe in the sacrosanct nature and divine protection of the Qur’anic text.

According to Muslim tradition, after an initial period of doubt, Muhammad started preaching the newly received message, initially to his own family, and later to the Meccan public at large. The essence of the revelation can be best summarized as a message of absolute, uncompromising monotheism. The Qur'an does not claim to be the first revelation sent by God, but rather understands itself as a continuation and possible correction to earlier revelations. In particular the messages sent to Moses, David, and Jesus are mentioned as previous revelations by the same God; in the Qur'anic scheme of revelations, the message that Muhammad receives is understood as the final, perfect revelation from God.

Thus, the Qur'an reads:

“It was we (God) who revealed the Law to Moses; therein was guidance and light... and in their footsteps we sent Jesus the son of Mary, confirming the law that had come before him. We sent him the Gospel, therein was guidance and light... let the people of the Gospel judge by what God hath revealed therein.... To thee (Muhammad) we sent the scripture in Truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety.... To each among you we have prescribed a Law and an Open Way, If God had so willed, He would have made you a single People, but (his Plan is) to test you in what he hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to God; it is He that will show you The Truth of the matters in which ye dispute.” (5:49-51)

The Qur'an also mentions other prophets to whom God has send guidance; indeed, according to the Qur'an there is no period in which God did not reveal his guidance, nor is there a people who has not been sent a messenger. According to Muslim understanding, all of these messages originally contained essentially the same truth, namely that there is one God to whom the individual believer must submit.

In traditional Muslim narratives, the strong monotheism that Muhammad preached stood in stark contrast with the prevalent Arabian polytheism, and the Meccans in particular were deeply perturbed by Muhammad's preaching, as they saw in this monotheism a dangerous threat to their own economic interest in the polytheist worship at the Ka'ba. Muslim traditional accounts speak of Meccan opposition to Muhammad and his message becoming pronouncedly violent; already in 614 we hear of a few male and female martyrs dying for the new faith.

Some early Muslims, particularly those lacking strong protection from their respective tribes, are said to have fled Meccan persecution, finding refuge in Abyssinia or Ethiopia, which at this point was ruled by a Christian king. The situation in Mecca grew more and more precarious for those Muslims staying behind, including Muhammad, as the Meccan establishment became more bent on suppressing the activities of the new prophet. Muhammad's situation seems to have grown particularly dire after the death of both his first wife, Khadijah, who had been an ardent spiritual and financial supporter of Muhammad, and his uncle Abu Talib, who had protected Muhammad against the Meccan onslaught. Yet –according to the traditional Muslim accounts- in this ever more uncertain situation, Muhammad was to undergo an experience that at once was to become a symbol of the closeness of Islam to its spiritual sisters, Judaism and Christianity, and would also leave its impact on the spiritual geography of the Abrahamic traditions for all time to come.

The Night Journey and Heavenly Ascent:

In one night during this difficult time, Muhammad is said to have traveled, from Mecca to Jerusalem, with the help of a miraculous animal called Buraq, described in an early sources as “an animal white and long, larger than a donkey but smaller than a mule, who would place his hoof at a distance equal to the range of vision.”

In Jerusalem, Muhammad is said to have landed on the Temple mount, the very spot where in times of old the Solomonic Temple of Israel had stood; after landing on the Rock, Muhammad is said to have ascended through the different layers of the heavens to be in the presence of God. While early Muslim tradition is undecided as to whether Muhammad’s Night Journey was a physical or merely spiritual experience, later Muslim tradition has expanded on the earlier story, providing legendary details and colours. In his ascent through the different layers of heaven, Muhammad is said to have met various prophets of biblical fame, including Adam, Jesus, John the Baptist, Joseph of the Hebrew scriptures, as well as Aaron, Moses, and Abraham. Finally, Muslim tradition asserts, coming into the presence of the divine, Muhammad was ordered by God to convey to his community that they pray fifty times a day. With Moses’ intervention, the legend asserts, Muhammad managed to bargain God’s requirement down to five times a day.

The narrative illustrates the relative closeness of Islam to Judaism and Christianity, and also helps understand the centrality for early Islam of Jerusalem, which after Mecca and Medina will become the third holiest city in Islam. The Dome of the Rock, built in the late seventh century, commemorates the site from which Muhammad is said to have ascended into heaven. Jerusalem in a sense is the central holy place for earliest Islam; not only is it from here that Muhammad ascends to heaven, but the early direction of prayer for Muslims, just as for Jews and Middle Eastern Christians, was Jerusalem.

[Intersperse? A Muslim perspective: how do you understand the relationship between Torah, Gospel, and Qur’an? Are these scriptures from the same God? If so, are Jews and Christians correct in their beliefs? How will Jews and Christians fare on Judgment day? Should Jews and Christians convert / be converted to Islam? Are there differences between the God of Jews/Christians and the God of Islam? Is Allah different from Jahwe / God?]

While the earliest period of Islam, for more than ten years from its inception in 610, will emphasize a relative closeness between the three Abrahamic religions, the later history of Islamic beginnings will develop a more differentiated perspective on its religious relatives, who will gradually be perceived as competitors. Instead of Jerusalem, Mecca, with its ancient shrine, The Ka’ba, will gradually assume the role of the central Islamic sanctuary. How does this shift in emphasis from Jerusalem toward Mecca come about?

[Miniatures of Buraq, Prophets, etc]

The Hijra / Medina

Muhammad’s situation in Mecca became even more precarious after the Night Journey, and his attention gradually shifted away from Mecca in search of other Arabian communities that might be more open to his message. One such community, some 250 miles north of Mecca in the town of Yathrib, became a promising candidate for Muhammad’s religio-political programme.

Several people of that town had visited Muhammad in Mecca and had pledged their allegiance to Muhammad and his religion quite early; a steadily growing number of converts from Yathrib invited Muhammad and his Meccan followers in 622 to move to

their town, which subsequently became renamed as “*medinat ul-nabi*,” literally, “the city of the Prophet,” or simply: Medina.

This flight of the early Muslim community from Mecca to Medina figures prominently in Islamic history, as it constitutes a watershed event for the community. The Muslims, hitherto under constant persecution in Mecca, now established a community (Arabic: *ummah*) for the first time and were able to practice their own religion freely with Muhammad as their religious and political leader. In a sense, this exodus, or emigration (*hijra*) was a nation-building event comparable to the Exodus of the Israelites, from bondage into freedom. The traditional Islamic calendar takes this momentous event as the beginning of a new era.

Yet other changes were on the horizon as well. Medina was home to a number of Jewish tribes, who –according to traditional Muslim accounts- were less than welcoming of the newcomers. Muhammad’s understanding of his own mission, as well as of the other Abrahamic religions up to this point emphasized a certain degree of harmony and similarity. All indications are that Muhammad understood the religious tradition he was teaching to be in concord with Judaism and Christianity. It seems that Muhammad fully expected the Jews of Medina to acknowledge his claims to prophet-hood. Many Medinese Jews, however, felt compelled to reject Muhammad’s claims; indeed, some of the early Muslim accounts suggest that many of the Jews of Medina not only rejected Muhammad’s claims, but ridiculed his lack of knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures. Growing tensions between the nascent Muslim community and the Jewish tribes would lead to a reorientation of the earlier, accommodating and harmonizing tendencies in Islam, toward a greater differentiation, as well as conflict. A first sign of the growing tensions can be observed in the year 624, when the Qur’an stipulated that Muslims henceforth no longer face Jerusalem when praying, but that now Mecca be the focal point of their devotion.

Indeed, in the Qur’anic revelations of this period, Mecca and the figure of Abraham become welded to each other. Emphasis shifts away from commonalities with Judaism and Christianity toward an original, Arabian religion centered in the city of Mecca and the shrine of the Ka’ba, which now become identified as the original locus and first Temple ever built to the one God.

Wars and further conflict

While the *hijra* to Medina had put some distance between the fledgling Muslim community and its persecutors of the Meccan establishment, it had not resolved the conflict. As a matter of fact, the *hijra* itself had been viewed with much suspicion by the Meccan leadership; Muhammad’s ability to establish a Muslim community under his leadership in Medina was perceived as threatening by the Meccans. What had hitherto been a conflict internal to Mecca, after the *hijra* became a conflict between two cities, one nominally polytheist, the other one under Muslim leadership, but with both Muslim and Jewish populations.

According to traditional Muslim accounts it is during this time that Muhammad receives new revelations from God which permit the Muslim community to take on arms against their Meccan enemies:

“To those against whom war is made, permission is given (to fight), because they are wronged; -and verily, God is most powerful for their aid;- (They are) those who have

been expelled from their homes in defiance of right,- (for no cause) except they say, 'our Lord is God.' ” (22:39-40)

[Arabic Qur'an verse “readover,” secondary audio w. Arabic]

Over the next six years, from 624 -630, three major battles would be fought between Muslim Medina and polytheist Mecca.

What induced the early Muslim community to engage in battles? Were these early battles merely defensive in nature, or are they offensive, showing the aggressive nature of the religion?

Similar to the Bible, the Qur'an contains both verses that support armed warfare, and verses that encourage other means of conflict resolution, including patience and forgiveness. While some traditional scholars argue that the permission for fighting was a prerequisite for the survival of the early Muslim community due to the merciless persecution of Mecca, other scholars argue that the Qur'an adapts the pre-Islamic ethos of Arabian intertribal raiding and turns it from a primarily economic activity into an Islamic ethos of divinely sanctioned warfare of the Muslim community against non-Muslims, while preserving its economic function, namely to sustain the growing Muslim community economically. Simplistic assertions that the Qur'anic attitude toward fighting be either militaristic or pacifistic might thus be misguided; many scholars argue that the Qur'anic pronouncements on fighting reflect the political and historical circumstances of seventh century Arabia.

[Muslim perspective: What do you make of the early fighting in Islam? What do you think the Qur'an and Sunna say about fighting? Were the early wars defensive or offensive? Can Muhammad's early military career serve as role model to modern Muslims? What does the early Muslim community's willingness to fight -rather than to take a pacifist stance- mean for modern Muslims?]

Muhammad and the Jews of Medina

Parallel to each of three major battles against the external enemy in Mecca, the early Muslim community under leadership of Muhammad also undertook military action against the three major Jewish tribes of Medina. Tensions between the Muslims and the Jews of Medina had arisen immediately after the Muslims arrived in the city.

Muhammad and his followers seem to have been disappointed by the rejection of his claim to prophethood by the majority of the Jews of Medina.

Traditional Muslim sources also accuse some of the Jewish tribes of Medina of collaborating with the Meccan enemy, and spying for Mecca. Traditional Muslim accounts speak of the expulsion of two Jewish tribes, and a third tribe, according to most sources, was put to the sword.

While Muhammad held the Meccan enemy at bay, he was able to bring his political and diplomatic skills to bear, forging alliances with a number of different Arabian tribes, many of which are said to have converted to the new religion. By the year 630, Muhammad had gained a sizeable following; being able to muster an army of 10,000 men, Muhammad finally was able to march on Mecca. The conquest of Mecca, according to traditional Muslim account- took place with almost no fighting; less than a dozen warriors are said to have died.

According to traditional accounts, Muhammad moved to the Ka'ba, cleansing it of the various images and statues of the Arabian polytheist pantheon, and re-dedicating it to the worship of the one God. Muslim tradition tells us that among the various images

contained in the Ka'ba, Muhammad found a picture of Jesus and Mary which he did not destroy, but left in its place.

After the conquest of Mecca, Muhammad would return to Medina. He led his followers one last time on pilgrimage to Mecca, and died in the year 632 CE. Muhammad is buried in Medina, which is the second most sacred city in Islam.

Assessment

What are we to make of Muhammad? The picture that we have of this very important figure of the history of civilization is still rather incomplete, and many questions about his life remain unanswered. Many Muslims hold Muhammad in high regard, and celebrate his life as that of a "insan kamil," a perfect human exemplar.

[Muslim perspective: What does Muhammad mean to you? How does his life story influence your life / your decisions in daily life? What are some of the characteristics in Muhammad that you most admire? Are there aspects of Muhammad's life about which you are critical?]

Many non-Muslims are divided in their assessment of Muhammad. In Western discourse, Muhammad has probably been the object of every insult in the book, yet he also finds admirers among non-Muslims.

Hans Kueng, one of the most famous Christian theologians of the 20th century, suggests that not only Muslims, but also Christians can learn to appreciate some of the great contributions of this man. Kueng suggests that Christians can see Islam as a path of salvation that is very close to the Christian path. Muhammad can be regarded as an authentic prophet, and the Qur'an can be regarded as a revealed scripture by Christians.

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