

Lecture 12: Islam, Muhammad, the Qur'an

In my last lecture, I began by introducing you to the third of our main families of religion, a family which includes the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and which may be described as western, Semitic, Abrahamic, and—most importantly for our purposes here—monotheistic. They all believe, in other words, in the unity and uniqueness of a single God. These religions are also alike, but different from their Asian counterparts, in the emphasis they place on nature and the created environment. The Jew, the Christian, and the Muslim all believe the world was deliberately and purposefully created by God and is therefore real and inherently good. They also attribute great importance to time, insisting that history has a direction and purpose.

I then went on to discuss the oldest of these Semitic religions, namely Judaism, the basic teachings of which I summarized under four main headings: God's unity, God's gifts, God's demands, and God's patience. In working through these four points, we discovered a very different picture of the Divine from what we had seen in either South or East Asia. According to religions from those parts of the world, the Supreme Reality is basically impersonal, or perhaps better transpersonal: *Nirguna Brahman*, *Nirvâna*, and *Tao* are not the sort of things you can talk to or have a personal relationship with; they simply are, and they're known in and through a mystical or noetic intuition. By contrast, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the creating, sustaining, demanding, and negotiating God of Judaism—is not a Something but a Someone, who is best known not through His being but through His doing, through His action and agency. This stress upon the divine Personality is found in each of the Abrahamic religions.

But it's time to turn to our main focus in this module, namely, Islam. I mentioned in passing in Lecture 12 that Islam is at the other end of the chronological spectrum from Judaism: where Judaism is the *oldest* of the western religions, Islam is the *youngest*—in fact the youngest of all the world's major religious traditions. As it happens, however, I need to qualify that claim just a bit. Speaking strictly in chronological terms, if we date the beginnings of Islam simply from the birth of its founder, the Prophet Muhammad, it's the most recent of the major religions to appear on the historical scene. Hence in moving from Judaism to Islam, we're moving from one of the most ancient of the historically datable traditions to one of the latest. Nevertheless, as the faithful Muslim sees these things, Muhammad was himself just the last in a lengthy series of prophets

stretching back through Abraham all the way to Adam, the first human being—a series that included Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. In our last session, my aim was to give you an introduction to Judaism that would serve as a background to our study of Islam. But from the Muslim point of view, this was more than just background. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, the Old Testament prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel, and the founder of Christianity, Jesus, were all in fact “Muslims”, generically speaking—all members of the same basic religion as the Prophet Muhammad and those who’ve since followed him. Thus the Qur’an—the Muslim “Bible”—can say: “We believe in that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob ... and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the Prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them” (Qur’an 2:136; cf. 3:84, 4:163-64). The truths that God has made known to the world through Muhammad are thus to be understood, according to Muslims, not as some unprecedented novelty but rather as a recapitulation, a final summing up, of what He had always intended for His faithful people to know.

With this in mind, it’s useful to look at the various meanings the words *Islam* and *Muslim* can have. The Arabic term from which these words are derived can mean both “peace”, on the one hand, and “submission” or “surrender”, on the other. Islam is therefore sometimes defined as the peace that comes from submitting in all things to the will of God, and the Muslim is the person who so surrenders himself. (As I mentioned once before, the names of two world religions signify the ideals to which their adherents aspire; Islam is one, and the other is Buddhism, where the goal is “wakefulness” or “enlightenment”.) In the Qur’an the “submissional” meaning of *Islam* can be seen with special clarity in a classic story concerning Abraham, a story many Christians will already be familiar with because it’s also found in the Bible. God, we’re told, once called upon Abraham to sacrifice his son. According to Islam, this son was Ishmael, who was Abraham’s child by his second wife, Hagar, whereas in the Bible it’s his son Isaac whom Abraham is told to kill; otherwise the stories are alike in that God ends up calling a halt to the sacrifice, which had been commanded simply as a test of Abraham’s faith. Abraham’s utterly faithful obedience to God is referred to in the Arabic text of this story as his *islam* (see Qur’an 37:102-106), and the cognate term *muslim* is used in a corresponding way throughout the Qur’an to refer to anyone who (like Abraham) obeys God’s commandments, whether the person is a Muslim in the formal or “denominational” sense of the word or not. From this point of view, you see, a Jew or a Christian can also be a good “Muslim”.

Actually the term is sometimes used in an even wider or deeper sense to refer to God's creatures in general. In the Islamic perspective, anything that conforms to what modern science calls the "laws of nature" is a *Muslim*, for those laws are simply the expressions of God's will for the world. When a stone falls in accordance with the law of gravity, or when a plant turns toward the sun as a result of phototropism, or when fire burns in accordance with certain chemical laws of combustion, all these things are being good Muslims. Of course the stone can't help but fall, and the plant can't help but turn, and fire can't help but burn, at least given certain conditions; they cannot *not* be Muslims. It's only man who can cease to obey and thus cease to be Muslim, for man's *islam* depends on choice and responsible action. He is to become consciously and freely what other creatures of God are unconsciously and by their very nature.

Now obviously the question we're likely to ask at this point is this: if all faithful religious people, and even inanimate objects, are *already* Muslims, what makes this religion distinctive? What's the point of the Islamic tradition specifically? For its adherents, the answer is easy. Of all the world's religions, they say, only Islam fully preserves a complete revelation of God's will for the world, and therefore only those who practice this religion can be fully obedient to God and thus uncompromisingly Muslim. There are degrees of revelation and degrees of obedience, and only by practicing the religion of Islam (with a capital "I") can one's *islam* (with a small "i") be perfected.

The key to this complete revelation, the most important thing we creatures should know, is that there is but one God, whom Muslims call *Allah*. In this respect, as you can see, Islam begins with the same foundational teaching as Judaism, with the idea of God's unity. As for the Jew, so for the Muslim: authentic revelation is always monotheistic in character. There is a problem with Judaism, however, from the Muslim point of view: having begun as they should with a focus on unity, the Jews ended up "confiscating" or "monopolizing" the message, keeping it to themselves as God's "chosen people", and in doing so they compromised or diminished the true meaning of oneness. To say that God is one is to say not only that He's unique and not only that He's simple—as you'll remember, Judaism stresses both of these points—but also that He's universal, that He's the God of all people. As I told you last time, Judaism has always been primarily the religion of a single ethnic group. Islam by contrast has always sought to convert others to its perspective, and this—as Muslims see it—is crucial to a correct understanding of *Allah*. Only by spreading the pure

and undefiled religion of Abraham throughout the whole world can a person fully testify to the truth of God's unity.

Having stressed both the antiquity and the universality of Islam in its broadest sense and having clued you in to its most essential claim, I want to narrow the focus now and spend a few minutes telling you a little about the beginnings and early history of Islam. And this means that we need to say a few things about the man who got everything started, namely, the Prophet Muhammad. As I just noted, Islam has always been characterized by a certain missionary emphasis, and in this respect it's like Buddhism and Christianity. These three religions are also alike in having a particular historical figure associated with their beginnings: in the case of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama; in the case of Christianity, Jesus of Nazareth; and in the case of Islam, Muhammad. Unlike Jesus, however, Muhammad is not regarded as unique by his followers. He was not, say Muslims, the only prophet who ever existed, but rather (as already mentioned above) just one in a long series of Divine messengers—124,000 altogether, according to Islamic reckoning. On the other hand Muslims believe that Muhammad was the greatest of these prophets or messengers, the “Seal of the Prophets”, through whom God's revelation to mankind was summed up and perfected. He was also the last prophet, and Islam is the last religion, they say. There will be no further revelations before the end of the world and the final judgment.

Muhammad was born in the year 570 A.D. in the city of Mecca, which is located in the western part of present-day Saudi Arabia. His name means the “one who is highly praised”, and it was such an unusual name at the time that the rest of his extended family couldn't understand why his parents wished to give it to him; Muhammad has since become, however, the most common name for a male child in the entire world. Muhammad's early childhood was full of sadness: his father had died before he was born, and his mother died when he was only six, leaving him an orphan. He was soon adopted, however, by one of his uncles, who raised the young child in a loving and exemplary manner. Like many other little boys of his time in that part of the world—like Abraham and Moses and numerous other Semitic nomads before him—Muhammad spent most of his youth minding the family's sheep and other livestock and tending the camels on frequent caravan trips. By the time he'd reached his early twenties, his extensive experience in this domain came to the attention of a wealthy businesswoman named Khadija, who hired him to serve as the foreman of her own caravan trading business. Their relationship soon blossomed into love, and they were married.

The larger social context in which Muhammad grew to adulthood was not a happy one, to say the least. According to Muslim historians, who refer to this as the period of *jahiliyyah*, an Arabic term meaning “ignorance”, late sixth- and early seventh-century Arabia was the scene of on-going violence and political chaos. Blood feuds, a lack of law and order, drunken orgies and gambling, and crass idolatry and sorcery in the realm of religion were the rule of the day. If you know the Biblical stories about the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which God destroyed for their wickedness and immorality (see Genesis 19), you’ll have a pretty clear picture of the city of Mecca during Muhammad’s youth. In the midst of this chaos, Muhammad, even as a young boy, is said to have very quickly acquired a reputation for honesty and fair dealings, and he was often sought out as an arbiter in quarrels and business disputes, being known far and wide for his scrupulosity, common sense, and dignity.

His biographers tell us that Muhammad was also noted for his strongly contemplative temperament and that he would often withdraw from the city for extended periods of prayer, fasting, and spiritual retreat. One of his favorite places was a cave in the side of a mountain just outside Mecca, Mount Hira. During his meditations on these occasions, Muhammad became more and more convinced that the superstitions and pagan practices he saw all around him must be completely rejected, and he began to pray with more and more urgency that he might be given direction and come to know the will of the true God.

When he was forty years old—the year would have been roughly 610 A.D.—Muhammad set off on one of these retreats to his cave, perhaps even more intent than usual on finding an answer to his prayers. According to Muslim tradition, he was awakened in the midst of the night by a loud voice, saying “Read!”—to which he responded, dumbfounded, “I *can’t* read”, for in fact he was illiterate. At this point he felt himself seized by a pair of tremendously strong but invisible arms, which pressed him so hard he thought he might die, and again the voice said “Read!”, and once more he was forced to reply, “I can’t!” Yet again he was seized by the arms, which hugged him even more tightly, and the voice—even louder and more awesome this time—commanded, “Read!” This time Muhammad was able to squeak out the reply, “What am I supposed to read?”, and the voice continued: “Read: in the Name of thy Lord! Who created man from a clot of blood. Read: And it is the Lord the Most Bountiful Who teacheth by the pen, teacheth man that which he knows not” (see the Qur’an 96:1-5). By now Muhammad was completely terrified—who wouldn’t be?!—and with these mysterious words emblazoned on his heart and burned into his memory, he

went running out of the cave, only to hear the same voice say: “O Muhammad! Thou art Allah’s messenger, and I am Gabriel.” At this point Muhammad raised his eyes and saw the archangel Gabriel in the form of a gigantic man, standing above the horizon and filling the entire night sky—the same angel, according to Christianity, which came to the Virgin Mary to announce Christ’s birth.

Thinking at first he might be losing his mind, Muhammad fled back home to his wife, who (we’re told) comforted him, confirmed his sanity, and became his first disciple. This whole episode is referred to in Islam as the Night of Authority or Night of Power (*Laylat al-Qadr* in Arabic); I mentioned this in YouTube Lecture 11 as one of those decisive events or moments that are so important for the western religions. According to Islamic tradition, it’s a night on the anniversary of which every year the world becomes supernaturally hushed: a night (say Muslims) when you can hear the grass grow and the trees speak as all nature becomes attuned to God. To quote from the Muslim scriptures, “Better than a thousand months is the Night of Authority. Thereon come the angels and the Spirit down, by leave of their Lord, for every behest. It is a night of peace until the breaking of the day” (Qur’an 97:3-5). As it happens this extraordinary experience was only the first in a series of revelations, which would last for the next twenty-two years, up until Muhammad’s death in the year 632 A.D. Sometimes the messages came to him as they had that first night with a loud and commanding voice; at other times Muhammad would first hear sounds like tinkling bells, which would only gradually crystallize into the form of human language. He explained to his companions that he would often experience the messages as a tremendous weight; one time he was on the back of a camel when a revelation began, and by the time it was finished the poor beast had sunk to the ground, with its legs sprawling to the sides, so heavy had its rider become as the recipient of a Heavenly message. As I’ve already mentioned, Muhammad himself was illiterate, unable to read or write. He was therefore obliged to memorize each message and repeat it verbatim to his friends, who would then write down what had been revealed. The Holy Qur’an, the Muslim scripture, is a record of all these revelations; the Arabic word *qur’ân* (Qur’an and Koran are the two most common transliterations of the term) can mean either a “reading” or a “recitation”; it is thus paradoxically the recitation of a man who could not read.

I want to say more about the Qur’an momentarily, but first a couple of other crucial events in Muhammad’s life should be mentioned.

Not surprisingly, the responses to Muhammad's first revelations were mixed, to say the least. As I've already told you, his wife, Khadija, immediately believed him, and this—Muslims say—is an excellent sign, for a person's spouse knows him best and would be the first to suspect if the claimant were faking. By and large, however, the reaction of other people was one of vehement rejection. The city leaders of Mecca saw at once that this new revelation was going to cramp their style and cut down on the revenues that poured into their city from the many travelers who were eager to visit its pagan temples and take advantage of the nightlife. There were three basic themes in the earliest of the Qur'anic messages, and each of them spelled trouble for the Meccan authorities: first was a clear and uncompromising insistence on the worship of one God alone, a stark contrast to the current practice in Mecca, where we're told there were as many as three hundred sixty separate pagan shrines, one for each day of the year; second was an emphasis on absolute moral purity, and this of course was opposed to the widespread immorality I've mentioned, including prostitution, slavery, and gambling; and third, Muhammad was given the basis for a social ethic that stressed the equality of all people, and this too was very different from the situation in Mecca, where a rampant materialism had come to identify wealth with power and privilege. In any case, as Muhammad gradually began to gather a small band of believers around him, the disbelief of a powerful majority turned first to insults and mockery and then to active persecution. Muhammad and his followers were pelted with dirt and filth as they prayed, they were kidnapped and beaten and sometimes tortured, they were thrown into prison and their property was confiscated, and the city's tradesmen refused to sell to them.

At first as was only natural, Muhammad couldn't help but doubt himself just a little. Of course his wife had reassured him on a personal level, but humanly speaking he needed a more obvious, and more certain, confirmation of what he'd been told. This soon came in what Islam calls the *miraj* or Night Journey, when—according to Muslim tradition—Muhammad was miraculously transported at night on the back of a celestial steed: first, from the city of Mecca to the former site of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem (where a famous mosque called the Dome of the Rock is situated today); and then vertically up through and beyond the sky to the Seventh Heaven. Readers of the Bible will remember that much the same thing happened to the prophet Elijah, who was taken into Heaven in a "fiery chariot" (2 Kings 2:11), and also to Jesus, whose miraculous ascension is recounted in Acts 1:9-11. As Muhammad rose through the various levels of being, he's said to have met and talked with other prophets of God who'd come before him—notably,

Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Finally, he was brought before the throne of *Allah* Himself, who verified what the angel Gabriel had been telling him, that he was indeed a new prophet of God.

A second, and in some ways even more decisive, event—one which eventually served to confirm Muhammad’s authenticity for the rest of the Arab world—was what Muslims call the *hijrah* or “migration”. I’ve already explained that Muhammad’s reception in Mecca was not exactly warm and welcoming; he was seen instead as a threat and enemy, and with each passing day it looked more and more as though he might soon be assassinated. It turns out, however, that Muhammad’s experiences, revelations, and good character had come to the attention of the leaders of another Arabian city, a town about three hundred miles north of Mecca called Yathrib. Yathrib too was faced with social turmoil and chaos, but among its most prominent citizens (many of them Jews), there were several who wished to bring moral order back to their homeland, and hearing about Muhammad they sent a delegation to visit him in Mecca, asking whether he would be willing to come to Yathrib and govern their city. Their invitation had come just in the nick of time, it seems, because the Meccans were planning to kill the new prophet. Muhammad agreed to their offer. Accompanied by a single companion and dodging the pursuing Meccan horsemen, he was able to make his way finally to the safety of Yathrib. At one point in his journey they were forced to hide in cave. His companion despaired, crying, “What shall we do? We’re only two,” to which Muhammad replied in a famous saying, “No, we are three, for God is with us.” Meanwhile, the tradition says that a spider sent by God had been weaving its web over the mouth of the cave, and a dove had been busily building its nest at the entrance, so that when the pursuers came looking for the runaways they naturally concluded that no one could be hiding in the cave. And thus Muhammad escaped.

From the Muslim point of view this dramatic escape was a kind of turning point in world history; in fact the Islamic calendar dates all subsequent events from this very moment. The *hijrah* occurred in what a Christian would call the year 622 A.D., but for a Muslim this was actually the start of the year 1, and all subsequent years are dated A.H.—that is, “after the *hijrah*”. Having successfully made this perilous journey, Muhammad swiftly became renowned for his statesmanship, establishing a model social order, and Yathrib in turn soon came to be known throughout Arabia as *Medinat al-Nabi*, that is, the City of the Prophet. Today we simply call it Medina. Within a few short years, his authority confirmed, Muhammad was able to return to Mecca, this time in triumph, having united the warring bands of Arabia and having laid the

foundation not only for a new religion but for an entire civilization. The Prophet died in the year 632 (10 A.H.), and within about a century his followers had managed to carry his message as far as Spain in the West and as far as China in the East. The speed, the decisiveness, and the geographical extent of the early spread of Islam, beginning with the *hijrah*, are—for the Muslim—a proof of Muhammad's authenticity and a testimony to the truth of the religion he established.

I'm going to save a discussion of the specific doctrines and practices of the Islamic tradition for my next lecture, but before concluding these remarks a few more things should be said about the Qur'an. As I've already explained, the Qur'an is a written record of the messages revealed by God to Muhammad, beginning in 610 A.D. and lasting over the course of the next twenty-two years. This record is about four-fifths the length of the Christian New Testament. With the exception of a very short first chapter, its one hundred fourteen chapters (called *sûrahs*) are arranged in an order of decreasing length: *Sûrah* 2 has two hundred eighty-six verses, and *Sûrah* 114 has only six. From a Jewish or Christian point of view, it must be said in all candor that the Qur'an is a very strange book. It presents itself as a continuation of the basic story and message already revealed by God in the Old and New Testaments, but its form and structure are for the most part very different from the linear narrative that readers of the Bible are familiar with. In general and rather simplistic terms, you could say that the Bible is basically history with some theology and ethics mixed in; it takes the form of a more or less continuous narrative, and God is presented as an actor—the leading actor, needless to say—in a cosmic drama, beginning with creation, passing through the fall, and ending with the world's final judgment. The Qur'an presupposes this basic narrative, but in a sense it reverses the Biblical pattern: the emphasis is mainly on theology and ethics, with a re-telling of some of the Biblical stories mixed in.

There's also this to be said: unlike the Bible, which is mostly prose with some poetry, the Qur'an is poetic throughout, and this also accounts for the difficulty many non-Muslims have in interpreting it. Poetry, as I'm sure you know, depends much more than prose on sound and rhythm: its meaning is not merely discursive or informational, but is linked instead with images and rhymes and many plays upon words. For this reason poetry is notoriously difficult to translate into other languages, and this is certainly true of the Qur'an. Muslims say in fact that it *can't* be translated but must be read in the original language of Arabic if one wishes to understand its true meaning. According to the Islamic point of view, each and every word of the Qur'an was directly dictated by God to Gabriel, then by Gabriel to Muhammad, and finally by Muhammad to his companions.

It's therefore essential to read this sacred text in the original if one wishes truly to understand its deepest meanings. This is why Muslims insist that converts to their religion learn Arabic, or at least enough Arabic to say their daily prayers in that language. Christian missionaries have traditionally translated the Bible into the languages of the people they wished to evangelize; Muslim missionaries by contrast establish language schools in the new countries they visit so as to teach people Arabic in order for them to be able to read the Qur'an in the original.

Actually when I talk about "reading" the Qur'an, I really should use the word "reciting", for to go back to my point about poetry, the only way to get the full meaning of a poem is to speak it aloud and to hear its rhythms and melodies. This is true all the more, say the Muslims, when it comes to the Qur'an, which is nothing less than divine poetry or music, composed by God Himself. Spoken or chanted recitation of the Qur'an is thus for the Muslim a kind of sacred or sacramental act. It is what Holy Communion is for the Christian. The Christian believes that Jesus Christ was God incarnate, and through participation in the sacrament of Communion—in which one eats of Christ's body and drinks of His blood in the bread and wine of the rite—Christians come as close to Christ as is possible in this present life. The Muslim doesn't believe in the incarnation; he doesn't think that God became man. But he does believe that God "became book", for in a sense the Qur'an is the very embodiment of the Divine, and in its words and rhythms and sounds the Muslim feels himself united with God.

When it comes to authority, the Qur'an is thus at the very center of Muslim faith. Christians have sometimes referred to Islam as "Muhammadanism"—whether from ignorance or as a deliberate slight—but this is actually most misleading and for a Muslim quite offensive. It would be rather like calling Christianity "Saint Paulism": for Christians Saint Paul was a messenger, an "apostle", who was sent to bear witness not to himself but to the truth of Christ. Similarly for the Muslim, it's not Muhammad who should be placed at the center, for he too was merely a messenger, and it wasn't himself but his Message, the Qur'an, that counts. I don't want to mislead you here: Muhammad is by no means denigrated or ignored in Islam; on the contrary it's difficult to exaggerate the profound blend of respect, admiration, and affection that pious Muslims feel toward their Prophet. In fact they never even mention his name without immediately adding the benediction "may peace be upon him", and traditional accounts of the way he acted and what he said, which are known as *hadiths*, carry a great weight of authority for the traditional Muslim. Nonetheless, no Muslim would ever say that Muhammad the man is the cornerstone of the Islamic

faith. In the words of the Prophet himself, “I never said *Allah*’s treasures are in my hand, or that I knew hidden things, or that I was an angel.... I am only a preacher of *Allah*’s words, the bringer of *Allah*’s message to mankind.” If you’re looking for a Christian equivalent to the role of Muhammad in Islam, you’d have to compare him, not to Saint Paul, but to the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus. For one thing, the annunciation of Christ’s birth came to Mary, like the revelation of God to Muhammad, through the archangel Gabriel. But there’s also this very significant, paradoxical parallel: Mary, who was a virgin, nonetheless gave birth to God’s son, while Muhammad, who was illiterate, nonetheless authored God’s book.

I’ll be coming back to other differences and similarities between these two religions next time, but for now I must simply stress once more the unsurpassed importance of the Qur’an for Muslims. Absolutely central to their religion, poetically powerful and sacramentally charged, the Qur’an is believed to be the world’s most perfect revelation, containing the fullness of eternal Truth. According to Islam the Bible was also an authentic and trustworthy message from God when it was first revealed, and this fact entitles those who accept it, Jews and Christians, to be classed with Muslims as “peoples of the book”. On the other hand it’s believed that in the course of time both the *Torah*, or Jewish Law (see Lecture 11), and the Christian Gospel became distorted and corrupted; where certain discrepancies appear within them or between them and parallel accounts in the Qur’an, it’s the latter alone that may be trusted as the only infallible revelation. The second verse of the Qur’an’s second *sûrah* makes this point categorically: “This is the Scripture whereof there is no doubt.”