

The Social Origins of Universalistic Monotheism

A Comparative Analysis of Paul and Muhammad

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Abstract

In this paper I compare Paul and Muhammad, placing them side-by-side in Jerusalem and Mecca, in the Diaspora and on the caravan routes, with the objective of providing a more complete picture to explain the rise of universalistic monotheism. In so doing, it is my intention to add to the studies that have been produced on the social origins of Christianity and Islam. The question I raise is the following: What accounts for the dismantling of the old pagan pluralistic cults of the Roman Empire, and the tribal paganism of Arabia, followed by the emergence of a much more abstract monotheism? I argue that there are strong sociological reasons for this sequence of events in both contexts, and that a comparative study of Paul and Muhammad is a useful means of discovering them.

Introduction

Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God . . . You are all sons of God through faith in Jesus . . . There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Paul (Galatians 3:26-28)

There is no god but God alone; He has no associates. He has fulfilled His promise and helped His servant. He alone has put to flight the confederates. Oh men, we created you male and female and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may know one another.

Muhammad (Ibn Ishaq, cited in Peters 1994: 236-37)

[1] There have been limited studies comparing Muhammad with major Christian biblical figures,¹ but I know of no study that compares Paul and Muhammad. This is surprising given the fact that a comparison between these two figures is extremely illuminating with respect to the rise of universalistic monotheism and the making of two world religions. As we will see, the milieus of their biographies cry out for a comparative analysis that has much to teach us about the rise of religious systems and the social landscapes that make it possible. As we will discuss below, in the first century C.E. near the eastern margins of the Roman Empire and again in the seventh century in the Arabian Peninsula, a major development in the history of monotheism occurred. For the first time in history, full-blown monotheism would emerge as the imperial religion for two major world-empires. Why did this happen at these places and times, and what social factors account for it? What accounts for the dismantling of the old pagan pluralistic cults of the Roman Empire and the tribal paganism of Mecca, followed by the emergence of a much more abstract monotheism? This essay will argue that there are strong sociological reasons for this occurrence in both areas, and that a comparative study of Paul and Muhammad is a useful instrument towards this end.

¹ Although not a comparison in the strict sense of the word, Khalidi presents an excellent overview of Jesus' significance in Islamic source.

[2] I believe that part of the answer to the questions posed above resides in the lives of these two fascinating historical and religious figures. They both lived in times of great social, economic, and political change that had implications for their revelations and conversions. Although I will elaborate on this in more historical detail below, both lived in a social context that made it difficult for a large sector of their community to live in a religious system that was particularistic in its practice. The social facts of their lives, Paul being a Diaspora Jew who traveled regularly and Muhammad a long-distance trader, experiencing a complicated world of intertwined cultures, made it extremely difficult for them to live in the flesh and bones of the old order. Instead, they lived in a cultural universe that was moving towards a complex form of syncretism, in a world that was increasingly incorporating the multiple layers of its many tribal, clan, and linguistic associations into a complex network of interlinked communities, classes, and traders.

[3] In this paper I will compare Paul and Muhammad, placing them side-by-side in Mecca and Jerusalem, on the caravan routes and in the Diaspora, to demonstrate the utility of looking at the two together, with the objective of providing a more complete picture to explain the rise of universalistic monotheism. Unlike prior studies on the social origins of Christianity and Islam, we refuse to limit our analysis to dealing exclusively with one or the other by searching through the socio-biographies of Paul and Muhammad to look for similarities and differences and by analyzing the social milieu that inspired their theology.

Paul and the changing landscape of the Roman Empire

Moses taught that God promised a holy land . . . to those who lived according to his law. And the good land was not, as some think, the earthly land of Judea.

Origen (cited in Peters 1996: 42)

Paul and the Economic and Political Changes of the Greco-Roman Empire

[4] The hostility of the Greco-Roman world in the first century of the Common Era must have been stressful to the Jews of the Diaspora. During this first century, as was the case earlier, there were “many Jews traveling the highways and trade routes,” traveling long distances and visiting major cities, not only in the Hellenistic east, but “as far west as Italy and North Africa” (White: 60). These Jews, accustomed to the larger Greco-Roman culture, must have been unsatisfied with maintaining a strictly Judeo-centered interpretation of the Law, especially an interpretation that did not permit them to worship their deity as members of the larger communities with which they were in regular contact. Indeed, as was the case with many cities outside of Palestine that contained a large Jewish population, there tended to be a relaxed attitude to Jewish Law, where Greeks, Romans, and Jews intermingled in worshipping the God of Israel together in the same synagogues (Meeks). No doubt this was a response of the Jews of the Diaspora to the fact of “living as aliens, as an ethnic and religious minority, in the dominant culture of urban life in the Greek east and then Rome itself” (White: 60). But running parallel to this negative pressure was the difficult issue a strict interpretation of the Law presented to the Jews of these Greco-Roman cities, especially those Laws that insisted on maintaining a clear separation from the Gentiles in worshipping “the God of Israel.” Something had to give, and the result was the eventual break between Judaism and Pauline Christianity.

[5] Paul found unacceptable the idea that participation in any given community ought to exclude all other people and only be available to those defined as insiders. As noted in the New Testament’s account of Paul’s struggle with the Jewish-Christians of Palestine, Jews that practiced “those rites that are special, performed by and marked in the body,” were misled by their shortsighted

commitment to maintaining their religion as “an affair of a particular tribal group, ‘Israel in the flesh.’” As Boyarin remarks:

The insistence on the literal, the physical, is a stubborn resistance to the universal, a tenacious clinging to difference. By substituting a spiritual interpretation for a physical ritual, Paul at one stroke was saying that the literal Israel, “according to the flesh,” is not the ultimate Israel; there is an allegorical “Israel in the spirit.” The practices of the particular Jewish people are not what the Bible speaks of, but faith, the allegorical meaning of those practices. It was Paul’s genius to transcend “Israel in the flesh” (Boyarin 1994: 37-38).

[6] In Paul’s interpretation of the Torah, from circumcision and dietary regulations to Sabbath observance and other practices, the laws were no longer applicable to the faithful, for faith in Christ Jesus had overturned all those practices that were once the property of a particular ethnic group. The laws had been replaced with a universal message for humankind. Thus, faith in the resurrection of Jesus was, for Paul, a revolutionary moment that had theologically overturned those laws that were applicable only to the Jews. “It remains, after all, a valorization of difference,” according to Boyarin’s provocative observation, one that Paul sought to transcend, and “is precisely the motivating force behind Paul’s entire conversion experience and mission” (1994: 54). Rather than clinging to difference, Paul preached its erasure, maintaining a strong stance against especially those Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. His persistence on this issue was due to his desire to subordinate the ideal of difference, found in the notion of a “chosen people,” the Jews, and replace it with the ideal of human unification. The Christ event, the resurrection of Jesus, was “the vehicle for this transformation of humanity” (Boyarin 1994: 106).

[7] The early Jewish Christian community at the time of Paul adopted strategies that were pertinent to its future success. The one in which I am interested here is the manner by which Jewish monotheism is transformed from being identified with a specific community (the Jews) to another, more abstract monotheism with no affiliations to any one group (see Long; Strange). I will focus on first century Pauline Christianity, where this innovation became incorporated into the Christian ethos, making it finally possible for a person like Paul to live an identity that was more conducive to living in a world-empire. This period interests me insofar as it will clarify the process by which the early Jewish Christian community in the first century C.E. radically altered the traditional Jewish understanding of the sacred. In doing so, this diverging Jewish sect turned “Judaism” on its head and changed forever the relationship of the one chosen people to God, temple, and land. After such changes, the Christian movement reshaped land and people, in effect making monotheism more palatable to empire and its Greco-Roman inhabitants.

[8] What is most interesting to keep in mind is the fact that, no matter how universalistic a message the Hebrew Scriptures offer, they nevertheless represent the victory and success of those redactors who are interested in portraying the struggles and aspirations of a particular people. The universalists, although present throughout ancient Israel and especially the Hellenistic period (see Hengel; Levine: 3-95), lost the struggle and remained marginal. It is only with the rise of Christianity and Islam that we see the universalists succeeding and transforming the meaning of the Hebrew Scriptures in their favor.

[9] This social context is absolutely crucial for our analysis of the emergence of this new Jewish Christian sect in relation to Paul’s teachings, for it will produce a strategy that positions itself in opposition to the victors of this early struggle, with the end product being a universalistic monotheism that performs extremely well in a world-empire social environment. According to the

biblical account, the Israelites rarely ruled their own territories, from the period of their settlement in the land of Canaan to the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E., a period of roughly twelve centuries. More often, they were, at best, vassals of the great superpowers that surrounded them. This is a profoundly significant fact that is all too easily left out when discussing the biblical period. Even those moments when they enjoyed outright “independence,” their status depended largely upon the balance of power of the great superpowers of the ancient Near East. Indeed, it was usually the case that when this balance of power disintegrated and was replaced by one major power, as was the case with the Assyrians in the eighth century B.C.E., with the Babylonians in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E., and with the Romans in the first century C.E., the Israelites found their world turned upside down with their lands dispossessed and their people sent into exile.

[10] The social context in which the Hebrew Scriptures came to fruition, therefore, made possible the peculiar religious meaning that the land, and specifically Jerusalem, would come to symbolize in Jewish social and religious discourse. It is “improbable that the Hebrew prophets would have asserted their view of the chosen people and the Holy Land so clearly if the Assyrians, Egyptians, and other great powers of the time had not existed” (McNeil: 162). Consequently, the Israelite production of what came to be known as the *Torah*, with its historical account of a unique people who have made a contract, or covenant, with the One God, has to be contextualized in this political environment.

[11] The most significant religious tenets of the Jews were, undoubtedly, the covenant and the Promised Land. Both were based “on a particularistic idea and provided the foundation on which the Israelites built their nation” in the face of international realities (Long: 21). Thus one can say that “God’s promise to favor the Israelites in return for their allegiance and obedience helped form them into a people by setting them apart from others,” especially from the empires that looked for every opportunity to incorporate them formally and directly (Long: 21).

[12] Indeed, the Jews’ religious tenets resulted in so-called “peculiar practices” that Tacitus and other writers of the ancient world despised. Tacitus’s statement is revealing in this respect:

[Jewish customs], which are at once perverse and disgusting, owe their strength to their very badness . . . Among themselves they are inflexibly honest and ever ready to show compassion, though they regard the rest of mankind with all the hatred of enemies. They sit apart at meals, they sleep apart, and though, as a nation, they are singularly prone to lust, they abstain from intercourse with foreign women; among themselves, nothing is unlawful. Circumcision was adopted by them as a mark of difference from other men. *Those who come over to their religion adopt the practice, and have this lesson first instilled into them, to despise all gods, to disown their country* (cited in Simon; emphasis added).

Living among people with these attitudes, it is not surprising that Hellenized Jews and their early Christian converts took on the project of adapting Judaism to bring it more in line with the larger world in which they lived and, in the process, made the Jewish notion of the One God more attractive to their Greco-Roman neighbors. The fact that they emphasized more and more the universal strand of monotheism at the expense of the particular can be seen, therefore, as an adaptation to Greco-Roman philosophical and religious ideals (Boyarin 1994: 58). By calling into question the particularity of Judaism to the Jews, they fine-tuned their message for an already existing Greco-Roman community that had similar ideas about God (Boyarin 1994: 58).

[13] Elements of a non-particularistic form of monotheism were already quite visible before the emergence of the Christian sect. The Greeks, as early as the fifth century B.C.E., claimed Zeus to be the God who goes by many names. The Romans also were well on their way to framing an officially syncretistic form of political universalism, as James Strange convincingly argues. Martin Hengel has also shown that, immediately preceding the emergence of the Christian movement in the second half of the first century C.E., there already existed a great appreciation for the Jewish notion of monotheism on the part of Greek philosophy. The alleged abstraction of the Godhead greatly appealed to many literate Greeks and Romans. He concludes from this:

The universal religious attitude of learned men which developed in the Hellenistic period through “*theocracy*” regarded the *different religions as in the end only manifestations of the one deity*. Thoughtful Greeks . . . may have acknowledged Jewish belief in its unfalsified form to be a high stage of spirituality, and Greek philosophy with an interest in religion had long been on the way to monotheism . . . (261).

[14] The Stoics as early as the fourth century B.C.E. succeeded in pushing their philosophy towards monotheism. According to Zeno in Citium of Cyprus (335-263 B.C.E.), the whole universe was governed by divine reason, “and men should therefore live in conformity with it and with the order of nature established by it.” A saying of Zeno also presents the view “that men should not live in a state of division according to separate cities and peoples and differing rules of justice; rather all men should be viewed as belonging to one state and community and sharing one life and order” (cited in Griffiths: 284). Chrysippus (280-207 B.C.E.) would extend this vision to the word *polis* by equating it with the universe so that god and humans were in harmony.

[15] This search for a universalistic discourse had a powerful spiritual effect throughout the empire, one that Hellenized Jews would soon hear loud and clear. Indeed, a comparison of Plutarch’s writings with Paul’s demonstrates just how influential the idea of universalism was to the literate population of Rome. Compare these two well-known verses: The first belongs to Plutarch, who argues that the gods of Egypt should be preserved as “our common heritage” and not made the peculiar property of the Egyptians:

Nor do we regard the gods as different among different peoples nor as barbarian and Greek and as southern or northern. But just as the sun, moon, heaven, earth and sea are common to all, though they are given various names by the varying peoples, so it is with the one reason [logos] which orders these things and the one providence which has charge of them, and the assistant powers which are assigned to everything . . . (cited in Griffiths: 248)

Paul’s address to the people of Athens, narrated in Acts of the Apostles, is remarkably similar:

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Aeropagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you” (Acts 17: 22-23).²

² The Paul of Acts repeats this theme regularly, as this example illustrates:

“We also are men, of like nature with you, and bring you good news . . . [of] a living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways; yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons . . .” (Acts 14:15-18).

Again Paul returns to the same theme, this time making a direct connection:

Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God . . . You are all sons of God through faith in Jesus . . . There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26-28).

Notice the commonality between Plutarch's statement that we do not "regard the gods as different among different peoples nor as barbarian and Greek and as southern or northern" and Paul's assertion that "there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

[16] Hence, the conception of the One God having no affiliation to any particular group or location or place fits Paul's drive to simplify deity worship quite nicely. After the Jewish notion of a chosen people had yielded to the universal "brotherhood of man," and the ties with the older Jewish center in Jerusalem had been broken, the Deity of this Christian Jewish sect, pushed aggressively by Paul, was placed in an excellent position to receive the attention of Hellenized Jews looking to assimilate into the larger world they called home.³ Paul, a Hellenized Jew himself, must have felt these same anxieties; his theological innovations and his peculiar reading of the Christ event support this interpretation and were, I believe, his way of dealing with this fact. For Paul, this meant taking the message not only to Jews on the margins of the Greco-Roman world, but also directly to its center of power, to the land of Gentiles stretched throughout the empire and into the imperial city of Rome itself. This was his way of assimilating to power in the age of world empires.

Paul and Jerusalem: The Logistics of Sacred Sites in a World-Empire

[17] Before bringing Christianity to Rome, though, Paul had to revise the strong bond established by Jewish discourse between the covenant and land, particularly the city of Jerusalem, with its connection to a specific people, the Jews. W. D. Davies asked the legitimate question whether Paul was the earliest Jewish-Christian to develop the view that the Christian community had now replaced the Jerusalem Temple as the dwelling place of God. As a Jewish-Christian, Paul seems radically to reject the Holy Sanctuary at Jerusalem, for the church

is the fulfillment of the hopes of Judaism for the Temple: the presence of the Lord has moved from the Temple to the Church. It is easy to conclude that there was a deliberate rejection by Paul of the Holy Space in favor of the Holy People – the Church. He conceived the presence of the Divine apart from holy space. Whereas the Temple in Jerusalem was seen as central to many of the Jews of his time, for Paul it was important to stress that the Divine presence is not confined to the Temple but found in every place . . . it is ubiquitous, unconfined by space (186).

Hence, the a-territorial quality that it shared with paganism, unconfined by a specific place and, most of all, free of any affiliation to an ethnic group, was a method that Paul and some of the early Jewish-Christians used to move their newly founded Jewish sect in a new direction, one that would fit well with the Greco-Roman practice of Temple worship.

[18] This theological presentation of Paul's vision of the Holy Land is important for our discussion because it sets in motion an important development in Christian thought that would allow a more universalistic identity to fit in line with a world-empire. Paul adopted a type of monotheism that

³ Rodney Stark provides a very useful analysis of this process. For an analysis of a similar experience in our modern world, see Steinberg.

could accommodate itself to the network of imperial cult worship that was widespread throughout the Greco-Roman landscape. Such an analysis is useful for any attempt to answer the perplexing question of how the new Jewish Christian sect overtook the imperial cult and became *the* religion of empire, a process that is all the more baffling given the fact that this religious movement had its beginnings in a peripheral corner of the empire. The early Jewish Christian sect mobilized Roman pagan strategies as a way to present Judaism in ways familiar to the non-Jewish, Greco-Roman culture (see Stark; Nock; MacMullen; Wilken).

[19] Paul's project was the initial major step in this direction. Such accommodations would come at a high price, causing many conflicts in the early Christian movement (see Frend: 85-160; Fredriksen). Paul, of course, was a central figure in this early struggle of the church. As his letters testify, the tensions between him and Palestinian Jewish-Christians take up much of his writing space. But there were many others who would come to share his desire to accommodate Christian theology to the larger Roman world. Origen (185-253) of Alexandria, one of the first great theologians of Christianity, for example, would follow in Paul's footsteps and build on Paul's writings on Jerusalem and the Holy Land (see Wilken). These early Christians would slowly develop a route that led them not to Jerusalem, the sacred center of the Jews, but straight into that other, imperial sacred center: Rome.

[20] Land is essential to this transcendence of difference. The thought of the land in Judaism is inextricably bound up with that of the Temple and Jerusalem. The a-territoriality of Paul's treatment of the Jewish people seems to reemerge in his interpretation of the "church as the temple of God: holy space seems to have been 'transubstantiated' into a community of persons, the Body of Christ" (Davies: 185-86). But nowhere is this clearer than when Paul brought an uncircumcised Greek into the Temple courts. He was overturning the older Jewish linking of Temple with ethnicity. In the Hebrew Scriptures, as discussed above, we learn that the Temple was closed to the Gentiles, where only those who were circumcised were permitted to enter. Paul consciously disregarded this prohibition and as a result was attacked, denounced, arrested, and finally executed:

When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, shouting, "Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple area and defiled this holy place." . . . The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut (Acts 21: 27-30).

This action was Paul's way of protesting the equation of the Temple with a particular people. As a Hellenized Jew, born and raised in Tarsus, he would have known that sacred sites were rarely the property of a single people, but rather were open to any who chose to enter them. But this example also illustrates the differing cultural practices between the Hellenized Jews of the Diaspora and the more conservative wing of the emerging Christian sect, with the latter, not surprisingly, living in the vicinity of Jerusalem.

[21] This development in early Christianity included, among others, a theology of a land that is hostile to anything resembling the Jerusalem of this world.⁴ The emphasis here was on refocusing

⁴ Paul ignores completely the territorial aspect of the promise. In his theology Paul, Jerusalem (like the law, which was too particular, too flesh like, indeed, too Jewish) had become irrelevant. The people of God were not the people of Israel living in and around Jerusalem but a universal community that had no special attachment to the Holy Land. Indeed, we may argue that Paul had made the Christian community, rather than the Temple and Jerusalem, the center.

the attention of the Christian community away from any “Jewish particularism”; this included the land of Judea itself, which was too closely identified with the Jews for the taste of the new, increasingly Gentile movement. Indeed, we may go so far as to say that, for the first three centuries of Christianity, Jerusalem and Palestine, except for a few curious travelers, was insignificant to the Christian imagination (Walker). What mattered were Greco-Roman cities like Antioch, Corinth, Galatia, and, of course, Rome itself, where real power lay. *For the new Jewish Christian sect to be successful in this Gentile-dominated empire, to sell its brand of religion, it had to shed the skin of its Jewishness and clothe itself with a more Gentile-friendly (Greco-Roman) vision.* The “flight” away from Jerusalem was an important part of this shedding.

[22] As a result, Paul and early Christianity broke decisively with the particularism of the Jewish community and slowly disappeared into the Greco-Roman world, only to re-emerge several centuries later as the rulers of the empire. For the early Jewish-Christians the practices of the Jews in the pre-resurrection period had to be overturned. In other words, “Israel in the flesh,” for these Hellenized Jewish-Christians, was now viewed as a nuisance that must be overcome.

[23] Thus, as an example, for the Christians of the first three centuries C.E., “Jerusalem below,” as one of the few early Christian pilgrim remarks, “was worthless now because of the Jerusalem Above” (Armstrong: 170-71; on early pilgrimages to Jerusalem, see Wilkinson). Christians in this early period “thought holy places were what Jews and pagans had; Christians knew better” (Markus: 258). Jesus, after all, promised to his followers a “much greater land, truly holy and beloved of God, not located in Judea.” On this point, the Gospel of John is very explicit through Jesus’s discussion with a Samaritan woman:

“Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus declared, “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (John 4: 19-20).

Indeed, no clearer distinction can be made than the way the New Testament overturns, quite consciously one might add, the Hebrew Bible’s understanding of land. “In the Old Testament,” as Connor Cruise O’Brien reminds us, “it is God who offers land to Abraham, and Abraham accepts,” but “in the New Testament it is Satan who offers land to Jesus, and Jesus refuses” (O’Brien: 3-4). Moreover, for these Gentile Christians, “Jerusalem was now the Guilty City because it had rejected Christ” (Armstrong: 171). Paul’s mission to transcend “Israel in the flesh,” together with his desire to accommodate Judaism to his Gentile way of being, had come full circle and was now fully completed, eventually even turning the heads of the most privileged and powerful sectors of his world-empire.

Muhammad and the changing landscape of Arabia

There is no god but God alone; He has no associates.

Muhammad

Muhammad and the Economic and Political Changes in Mecca

[24] In the Mecca in which Muhammad was born in 570 C.E. an important material change was taking place. As Montgomery Watt argued, this process of change began half a century or more earlier before the birth of the prophet, but its momentum had been especially gathering during Muhammad’s life. This change was the growth of trade to such an extent that “Mecca had become the center of far-reaching and complicated mercantile operations” (47). The increase in the volume of trade was largely the “result of the continuing warfare between the Persian and Byzantine

empires, which disrupted the northern land routes” and in the process diverted them south (Ruthven: 49).

[25] This long, drawn out struggle of the northern giants had its repercussions in Arabia. In the Mecca in which Muhammad grew up, the merchants were adjusting themselves to the new situation brought about by the Persian and Byzantine conflict, benefiting from it greatly as they saw more traffic and a greater demand for their skills to deliver the goods of the east to northern urban centers in the Levant and other locations. These merchants filled the void by providing an alternative route that stretched from the Arabian Sea and Yemen into the interior of Arabia, Mecca being one essential hub of it all. As Watt informs us, “they organized regular caravans southward to Yemen and northward to Damascus or Gaza,” with many of Mecca’s merchants now “gaining their livelihood solely or largely by trade” (48).

[26] Muhammad must have joined such a caravan on at least a few occasions, and may well have traveled at times in the company of his uncle as a young child. This fact should not be underestimated. Living through such times, Muhammad must have experienced first hand the cataclysmic transformation Mecca experienced in a short period of time “from a relatively insignificant stopover in the caravan trade to a major religious, commercial, and political center in western Arabia” (Ibrahim: 5).⁵ A significant consequence of such change was the decline of the tribe or clan as a social unit, which was “accompanied by a decline in the authority of tribal and clan leaders.” Tribal institutions were “no longer able to meet the needs of a growing dependent population” (Ibrahim: 97). A clan system, “which helps maintain an overall ecological balance under desert conditions,” breaks down when applied in an “environment necessitating a much higher degree of cooperation between different social groups” (Ruthven: 82). Eric Wolf recognized the significance of trade for the rise of Islam when he wrote:

The change from a type of society organized on the basis of kin relationships to a type of society possessed of an organized, if rudimentary, state . . . took place in an urban environment . . . connected with the spread of trade (329).

[27] The injection of long-distance trade into Arabia led to a series of institutional breakdowns in the way tribes and clans interacted with one another. This is not surprising given the fact that “tribalism was the only mode of social organization, where each individual saw himself as belonging to a kinship group claiming descent from a real or supposed ancestor” (Ruthven: 50). Under the “old” pre-trade system, “solidarity increased with ancestral proximity: the most immediate loyalty was to the family; then to the clan, a small group of closely related families; beyond that to broader groups of increasingly distant relatives” who could sometimes be called upon for support, up to the level of the “tribe,” which can “roughly be defined as the largest group capable of providing effective social

⁵ Patricia Crone has objected to linking Meccan trade with the rise of Islam: “The conventional account of Meccan trade begs one simple question: what commodity or commodities enabled the inhabitants of so unpromising a site to engage in commerce on so large a scale? . . . There was no such thing as a Meccan trade in incense, spices, and foreign luxury goods” (4: 11). But the problem with her analysis is the question itself. In asking what did the Meccans *produce*, she is led to look for proof of manufacturing and the making of commodities *within* Mecca. By doing so she avoids the fact that the Meccan merchant was a trader and his town an *interlocutor node*, linking the caravan routes that had their origins far from the precincts of Mecca. Crone seems to be blinded to the fact that surplus can be much more lucrative for traders than it is for producers, as Marx has eloquently argued. As a central actor in the movement of goods from supplier to consumer, Mecca was important to Late Antique trade not for its manufacturing and production of goods but for its ability to move goods across a large span of territory.

solidarity” (Ruthven: 50). Such a social organization required loyalties that were not conducive to the new environment (Ibrahim: 75-98).⁶

[28] Mecca’s economic progress, however, took this tightly bound tribal system beyond what its institutional structure could support. The emergence of a society based on long-distance trade gradually unraveled the structure of allegiance and in the process weakened the tribal bonds that held it together. As Ibrahim cogently argues, “Mecca’s tribally supported superstructure was no longer viable in the new social environment” (75). The new crisis situation was in tension with clan solidarity under the authority of a clan head. As the basis of social organization, this bond began to give way. The response by the Meccan elite was far too little and much too late; the crisis situation needed a visionary who had the capacity to foresee the need for a complete renewal. But before that time would come, Mecca’s contacts with tribes outside of the haram area (the precinct surrounding the sacred stone, the Ka’ba) continued to increase, weakening the city even further. “These contacts grew in closeness and complexity, and the changed political and economic circumstances made the Meccans ripe for new institutional adaptations” (Ibrahim: 43). The burden on the structure was too heavy to withstand the new circumstances and too cumbersome to maintain:

A far-reaching change was needed, especially in Mecca’s relationship with tribes outside of the *haram* area. A better relationship with other tribes was required so that merchants could be more secure in their travel. Only then could they have access to a wider market area and thus more opportunities for commerce (Ibrahim: 41-2; see also Wolf: 337-39).

[29] Muhammad’s mission was especially designed to break down the barriers between rival tribes, replacing that social unit with the deeper and more universal loyalty to the Islamic *Umma* (Ruthven: 100). There was an organic connection between the changing environment of Arabia and Muhammad’s biography, the result of which, I believe, led to the eventual rise of Islam. Growing up in this new environment, he introduced relevant solutions to these contradictions by providing an ideological and institutional superstructure that led to transformations of the society in a manner consonant with the new circumstances (Ibrahim: 84).

[30] Muhammad was thus born into an environment ripe for change. The institutional structure of the tribe and clan was proving to be inhospitable to the expanding world of trade. In what follows, I would like to explain how the breakdown of these ancient and antiquated structures must have looked to the eyes of Muhammad. Muhammad felt these large-scale and macro-level forces in the intimate details of his daily life. What needs to be explained, therefore, is how these macro-level forces intertwined with Muhammad’s biography. More specifically, what was it about Muhammad’s biography that made such social forces come together in this one individual and create a revolution that would be felt throughout the world? To answer such questions we have to probe the details of his life.⁷

[31] Through reading the Quran and the excellent biographical accounts written shortly after Muhammad’s death, it seems to me that two important characteristics stand out most visibly. The

⁶ Ibn Khaldun’s concept of *‘asabiyya* is intended to describe this unifying phenomenon. For this classic observer of the Muslim world, religion is critical to the integrative forces of the *Umma*, and *‘asabiyya*, according to Ira Lapidus’s reading of ibn Khaldun, “enables them to restrain themselves and cooperate in a common cause. It supplements family loyalties to create wider, more encompassing solidarities” (29).

⁷ In following in the spirit of C. Wright Mills concept of the sociological imagination, I have been influenced by other historians – most notably, Maxine Rodinson, Tor Andrae, and Marshall Hodgson – who have linked the prophet’s biography to the larger structures in which his life unfolded.

first is his birth into a Meccan tribe that was well placed in the caravan trade of Arabia (the Quraysh) and his marriage to a woman of wealth (Khadija). The second is the role he was often called upon to play as a mediator in tribal conflicts in Mecca before his conversion. As we will see, an important event occurred when he was asked to mediate disputes between conflicting tribes over issues related to the pagan sacred sites of Mecca. This role, I will argue, placed Muhammad in an opportune position to envision an alternative society, and ultimately led him to formulate a movement whose intentions were to transform the tribes from “Israel in the flesh” to “Israel in the spirit.” His success would produce a unified force ready to do battle with the two greatest empires of the time – the Byzantine and Persian.

[32] As Ruthven has noted, we know little about the Prophet’s early life that is of historical value, as distinct from mythically or theologically significant material. The latter includes “stories of impressive encounters with holy men who instantly recognized the young Muhammad’s spiritual destiny, and tales about the angelic surgeons who opened up his breast and ‘cleaned his heart’ before replacing it with a purified one” (Ruthven: 55). But these stories do provide interesting details. One of Muhammad’s reported encounters with holy men, for instance, occurred near Bostra with a Syrian Christian hermit, the monk Bahira (for accounts of this meeting, see Rodinson: 46-47). What interests me most about the encounter is not the monk’s prediction of Muhammad’s destiny to become the next prophet, but the fact that Muhammad is to be found as far north as Syria.⁸ This information is useful for us to keep in mind as we look for clues about Muhammad’s conversion to monotheism.

[33] We know that at the age of 25 he married a 40-year-old Qurayshi woman with property, who provided the means that he would need in his future trade escapades. This is significant because, by marrying up the tribal ladder, Muhammad gained the opportunity to assume the vocation that was at the center of the changing tribal landscape. He could then view the crisis from its very heart, a vantage point without which he would not have been in a position to respond the way he did. Moreover, Muhammad’s involvement in trade, as we will see, would place him on many occasions in precarious situations, some quite dangerous. This would ultimately lead him to see the tribal structure as an obstacle that needed to be overcome.

[34] We are fortunate enough to have detailed observations that support this argument. Watt, for instance, relates the following story:

Shortly before 590 we have an account of an event that Muhammad was involved in which demonstrates the kind of conflicts he must have experienced on his caravan routes. In that year there was a series of battles, known as the Wicked War, and at one or more of these Muhammad was present accompanying his uncles. This war began with a quarrel between two nomadic chiefs, one of whom was convoying a caravan from Iraq through the territory of the other to a great twenty-day fair held annually at Ukaz, not far from Mecca. The second felt slighted, and ambushed and killed the first. Before long the Meccans were dragged into this conflict and a series of violent battles occurred (8; for a slightly different account, see Peters: 135).

Notice here that the conflict arose on the caravan route over the movement of goods through tribal territory. One of the tribes did not react kindly to this and, feeling slighted, took up battle with the caravan Muhammad was accompanying. Even though the Meccans came out victorious in this

⁸ His actual physical presence in Syria has never been verified, but the mere fact that his contemporaries suggested such a possibility hints at the likelihood that Meccans were in regular contact with the northern regions.

particular conflict, it provided Muhammad with a firsthand experience of the fragility of doing business in this environment. I contend that such experiences must have led Muhammad – as a merchant himself, traveling across long stretches of territory – to question the quality of the tribal and clan system as he knew it. The necessity of negotiating such a complicated system of allegiance and patronage must have seemed a heavy burden to this merchant, prompting Muhammad, I believe, to move in a direction similar to that of Paul toward transcendence of Arabia in the flesh – producing within him a mystical experience that eventually would be realized in his revelations.

Changing Rituals: The Irrelevance of the “Flag” System and the Need for Salaat

[35] Muhammad would use a variety of methods to transcend Arabia in the flesh. One of his most innovative practices, for instance, was the *salaat*, or prayer. As Ruthven observed, the old kinship groups of Arabia had been reinforced by all sorts of subtle physical traits so that an individual’s membership in a particular tribe might be determined by a special gesture. Muhammad introduced the *salaat* as a way to break the link between the individual and his tribe: “By subjecting itself at regular daily intervals to a series of identical and physical actions,” Ruthven argues, “the *Umma* subsumed the particularism of tribal or racial identity in a common physical discipline” (Ruthven: 83). By insisting on the interruption of ordinary mundane activities at least three times each day, later five times daily, Muhammad continually reminded the believer of the superior claims of God and community over those of tribal allegiance.

[36] The institution of the *salaat*, therefore, was intended to provide a new field of loyalty that would smooth the transition to a more universalistic consciousness. Such changes were essential to the creation of the *Umma*, “a supertribal entity whose loyalty was to Allah” (Ruthven: 83). The role of the *Umma* was equivalent to the role of the Church for Paul in his search to overcome Israel in the flesh. For in the *Umma*, as in the Church for the Christian faithful, all other allegiances, symbolized by tribal rituals and customs, were to be subsumed within the new allegiance to the Prophet’s community, and in due course were expected to wither away.

[37] Muhammad also freed the rituals from their seasonal connections: “from now on the *Hajj*, for instance, could fall at any time of the year, for the cosmic deity to whom all the rituals were to be addressed was the same God in autumn and spring, summer and winter” (Ruthven: 47). Even the appropriation of the word for God, Allah, also fits this pattern. As an abstract term it was common to all pre-Islamic tribes: each must have referred to its own deity as “the god” (Ruthven: 113), but they all qualified the term by giving it specificity. Thus each tribe had its own specific name for “the god,” represented by separate and distinct symbols. In the process of appropriating the term, Muhammad would drop the multiple meanings and specificities attached to it. As such, the new solidarity of the *Umma*, the Islamic community, replaced the old solidarity of the tribe. Muhammad knew that, by transforming the rituals in this manner, he could form a universal language composed of orchestrated bodily movements (*salaat*), shared practices (*Hajj*), and a synchronized calendar.

[38] From the perspective of this essay, the most significant aspect of Muhammad’s work comes in his final few years. In 630 and again in 632 C.E., after finally defeating the Qurayshi tribe, Muhammad made a pilgrimage to Mecca. At this point in his life things were coming together quite well, and he put the final touches on his mission. Upon entering the Holy City of Mecca, the Prophet walked to the Ka’ba and touched the Black Stone with his stick, proclaiming “Allahu Akbar” (God is Great) in a loud voice. Immediately upon entering the Sacred Center of the *haram*, he ordered the idols to be thrown down from their pedestals. Then, according to the account of Ibn Ishaq, he gave one of his last great sermons:

“There is no god but God alone; He has no associates. He has made good His promise and helped His servant. He alone has put to flight the confederates. Every claim of privilege or blood or property are abolished by me except the custody of the shrine and the watering of the pilgrims . . . O Quraysh, God has taken from you the haughtiness of paganism and its veneration of ancestors. Man springs from Adam and Adam from dust.” Then he recited them this verse: “O men, we created you male and female and made you into peoples and tribes that you may know one another; in truth, the most noble of you in God’s sight is the most pious” (cited in Peters: 236-37).

Rejection of the idols not only entailed rejection of their divine attributes but also rejection of the kind of authority that had developed around them in Mecca: “Distinctions based on lineage, with the elimination of idolatry, would wither away because the values inherent in the system itself is based on virtues and values inherent in group lineage” (Ibrahim: 83). According to the Quranic passages, however, it is clear that these values were now to be applied universally, regardless of lineage because Allah, as a Supreme Being, was the God of all creation.

[39] Because of these actions that Muhammad pursued, Arabia became unified for the first time in its history. “This unprecedented political unity was the first fruits of the new religious system, under which allegiance to Allah and his Prophet overrode all prior allegiances based on tribal or family ties” (Ruthven: 91). All aspects of the community’s life were synchronized, from the movements of bodies as represented in the *salaat*, to the multiple religious acts members were required to perform, the *Hajj* being the most significant. These would all work to generate an orderly and synchronized *Umma*, restructuring the space-time concepts of localized towns, villages, and regions into one massive, unified social entity. The new solidarity of the *Umma* opened the way to what would become the most remarkable of Islam’s historic achievements – the conquest, almost overnight, of the whole of the Sassanid empire and portions of the Byzantine empire, including Syria and Egypt (Ruthven: 91).

Marginalizing Jerusalem, or why Muhammad Changed the Prayer Direction from Jerusalem to Mecca

[40] While the pressing problems of Mecca inspired Muhammad to look favorably on monotheism, he could not accept the biblical texts as they stood in their Christian and Judaic formulations. The accounts and details of the Old and New Testaments seemed too remote and far removed from the lives and concerns of his Arabia. He needed to “Arabize” them by making them speak to local concerns and deal with issues like family, divorce, inheritance, and business ethics that were relevant to his time and place.⁹ Hence, even though there were plenty of Christian and Jewish communities that he could have “borrowed” directly from to create a universalistic culture in place of Arab paganism, by itself this would not have been enough. Ruthven makes this point well:

For a thinking man, of course, there was the alternative of religion. There is evidence that some of Muhammad’s contemporaries, or near contemporaries, adopted Christianity . . . Many former nomads adopted Judaism . . . Both Christianity and Judaism, however, entailed adherence to scriptures in foreign languages, involving an admission of cultural inferiority which most Arabs, who were rightly proud of their linguistic heritage, found unacceptable (58).

⁹ The spiritual journey that Muhammad undertook is captured brilliantly by Maxine Rodinson in the chapter “The Birth of a Prophet” (38-68).

To the issue of pride we could add that, if Muhammad left monotheism in Jerusalem, he would have lessened the impact of his message on the imagination of the local inhabitants, to say the least. The characters and story lines that the biblical scriptures possessed were intended to inspire the cultures of ancient Israel and the Greco-Roman world, not those of the Arabian heartland for whom Muhammad depended on if he was to succeed.

[41] Thus, while this new social context inspired Muhammad to adapt monotheism to Arabia, he had to find ways of bringing it home, so to speak. At times he does this most directly by literally bringing the biblical characters to and locating the settings of the Bible stories in the Arabian context. The House of God, for instance, is removed from its Palestinian setting and brought to Mecca; Abraham and his son, Ishmael, along with Hagar, at God's command, are recorded to have left Egypt only to show up in Mecca. Even the direction of prayer, initially toward Jerusalem as in the Jewish tradition, is redirected to Mecca as God Himself ordains. These and other such innovations were intended to assimilate monotheism to the Arab environment. I would like to take up such issues to demonstrate how central Mecca was for Muhammad's project. In the process of introducing monotheism into the Arabian landscape, he not only revised the issues and stories of the biblical scriptures but physically relocated the sacred center – building and all, along with such characters as Adam and others – and placed them at his town's doorsteps.

[42] Theologically speaking, this meant that he had to approach the texts with some caution. Like his predecessor Paul, Muhammad turned his attention to the Hebrew Bible and, little by little, devised allegorical ways of appropriating the text – sometimes in ways exceptionally similar to Paul's. For instance, in the context of his effort to permit the entry of Gentiles into the Church without having them go through a prior conversion to Judaism, Paul makes the following argument:

Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received the signs of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had faith *while he was still uncircumcised*. So then, *he is the father of all who believe but have not yet been circumcised*, in order that righteousness be credited to them. And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised (Romans 4:9-12; emphasis added).

Compare this to the Quran and the way Muhammad handles the issue:

O people of the Book, why dispute about Abraham? The Torah and the Gospel *were sent down after him*. Do you not understand? Neither was Abraham a Jew or a Christian, but upright and obedient (Quran 3:65-7; emphasis added).

[43] Common to both of these accounts is the attempt to link Abraham, the father of the faithful, to a religious doctrine that is all-encompassing. Paul chose circumcision because that represented for him Israel in the flesh, and if he could demonstrate that even Abraham was not circumcised when God passed on to him His message, then why must we insist that the Gentiles become Jews before they become believers in Christ? Muhammad makes a similar argument, but he focuses on the timing of the message: If we can argue that Abraham received the message before there was anything called the Torah or the Gospel, then why must we call ourselves Christians or Jews? Being Muslims, those who submit to the message, is all that God asks of us. Thus like Paul, he is saying that there is no religious value in identifying a particular community with God's message. All that matters is faith and obedience to the Almighty:

They say: "Become Jews or Become Christians, and find the right way." Say: "No. We follow the way of Abraham the upright." . . . Say: "We believe in God and what has been sent down to us, and what had been revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their progeny, and that which was given to Moses and Christ, and to all other prophets by the Lord. *We make no distinction among them*, and we submit to Him" (Quran 2:135-36; emphasis added).

[44] As Peters demonstrates, moreover, the Quran does something very interesting at this point in the discussion: it passes directly to Abraham with his son Ishmael in Mecca, and to God's command issued to father and son to construct the Ka'ba there (1994: 2-6). The Quran explicitly discusses Abraham as the builder of God's House:

Remember We made the House a place of assembly (*mathaba*) for the people and a secure place; and take the station (*maqam*) of Abraham as a prayer-place (*musalla*); and We have made a pact with Abraham and Ishmael that they should sanctify My House for those who circumambulate it, those using it as a retreat (*'aqifun*), who bow or prostrate themselves there . . . And remember Abraham raised the foundations of the House, yes and Ishmael too, saying accept this from us, for indeed You are All-hearing and All-Knowing (Quran 2:125-27).

[45] Here the Quran is obviously making a change from the original scriptures. In the Genesis story of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael, the three are last heard of in Egypt, so the question becomes how did they get to Mecca? To answer this question, Muhammad must have been very aware of the biblical version. In the original biblical account, Sarah, Abraham's wife, is growing old and cannot seem to bear a child. She offers Hagar, his maidservant, to Abraham, which he accepts. Shortly thereafter his first son is born, Ishmael. But then suddenly Sarah has a son of her own, Isaac, after which a dispute emerges over who will receive the inheritance. Sarah, concerned for her son Isaac, demands that Hagar and her son Ishmael be banished from the town: "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac" (Genesis 21:10). Genesis then continues the story line by having Abraham, at God's command, take Hagar and Ishmael into the desert of Beersheba. God at this point in Genesis promises Hagar the following: "I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also, because he is your offspring" (Genesis 21:13).

[46] But Genesis leaves us hanging at this point. We have no further clues as to what will happen to Ishmael and Hagar from then on. Muhammad must have understood this, and in one of the accounts provided by the Islamic historian Ibn al-Tabari (923 CE), the void in the story is filled by bringing Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael to Mecca through the long transit of the Hijaz of Western Arabia. This is the way al-Tabari constructs the case:

Sarah said to Abraham, "You may take pleasure in Hagar, for I have permitted it." So he had intercourse with Hagar and she gave birth to Ishmael. Then he had intercourse with Sarah and she gave birth to Isaac. When Isaac grew up, he and Ishmael fought. Sarah became angry and jealous of Ishmael's mother . . . Sarah said, "She will not live in the same town with me."

So far the story is very similar to that given in Genesis 21, but from this point it diverges radically:

God told Abraham to go to Mecca, where there was no House at the time. He took Hagar and her son to Mecca and put them there . . . When God pointed out to Abraham the place of the House and told him how to build the sanctuary, he set out

to do the job and Gabriel went with him. It was said that whenever he passed a town he would ask, "Is this the town which God's command meant, O Gabriel?" And Gabriel would say: "Pass it by." At last they reached Mecca . . . The House at that time was but a hill of red clay. Abraham said to Gabriel, "Was it here that I was ordered to leave them?" Gabriel said, "Yes." Abraham directed Hagar and Ishmael to go to the Hijr, and settled them down there (cited in Peters: 2-3).

This, then, is how most later Muslims understood the origins of Mecca and its Ka'ba, both in the Quranic version and in later renditions by writers like al-Tabari and others: the Patriarch Abraham, after taking his son Ishmael to Mecca, on God's command, lays the foundations of the House on a site in Mecca.

[47] Before explaining why Muhammad and the Quran decided to frame the issue in this manner, I want to discuss one other important account: Muhammad's and the Quran's decision to uproot "the House of God" from its Palestinian soil in Jerusalem and bring it to Mecca. As in the version given above, we will see that this relocation fit into Muhammad's grand strategy to bring monotheism home to Arabia. The question of Muhammad's revised direction of prayer receives an extended treatment both in the Quran and by the later commentators. The Quran deals with the issue, of course, as God's command to Muhammad:

The foolish among the people will say, "What has turned them away from the direction of prayer toward which they formerly prayed?" Say: "To God belongs the East and the West, and He guides whom He wills in the straight way" . . . Thus we have made you a community of the middle path in order that you may witness over humankind and that the Messenger be a witness over you. We appointed the prayer-direction to which you formerly prayed only to make known those who follow the Messenger and those who would turn back on their heels . . . We have seen you turning your face about toward heaven. We shall therefore direct you toward a prayer-direction which would please you. Turn your face toward the Sacred House of Worship; wherever you may be, turn your faces toward it. As for those who were given the Scriptures, they know well that it is the truth from their Lord, nor is God unaware of what they do (Quran 2:142-44).

[48] Later commentators wrote much about this change. Al-Tabari takes the many versions available to him and condenses them into one:

The first injunction which was abrogated in the Quran was that concerning the direction of the prayer. This is because the Prophet used to prefer the Rock of the Holy House of Jerusalem, which was the prayer-direction of the Jews. The Prophet faced it for seventeen months in the hope that they would believe in him and follow him. Then God said: "Say, 'To God belong the east and the west . . .'" (cited in Peters: 209).

[49] So why did Muhammad make this change? I believe it is related to the desire of the Prophet to persuade Mecca to accept Islam. Historians of Islam, especially those of Jewish or Christian background, usually situate the change in the context of Muhammad's struggle with the Jewish tribes of Medina (see, for example, Gibb). Their argument is based on the fact that the Jews of Medina would not accept Muhammad as an authentic prophet, and at times these Jews actually mocked him for making such claims. According to these historians, Muhammad reacted to this opposition and so decided to diverge from the Jewish path by changing the prayer direction from Jerusalem to Mecca. Fazlur Rahman provides a more satisfactory explanation. He makes the interesting claim that the

argument, as stated by many Western historians, “simply exaggerates the role of Medinese Jewry on Islam’s development and on this point particularly fails to distinguish cause from effect” (20). Instead of viewing the change in the direction of prayer from Jerusalem to Mecca as caused by the Jewish-Muhammad dispute, he argues that we need to place it in the context of the larger project of Muhammad, namely his attempt to unify the Arab tribes. I concur with Rahman on this point. Muhammad was faced by the social reality of his time: For most of the Arab tribes, including those in Medina, the center of religious activity was the Meccan sanctuary, and not the one in Jerusalem. If Muhammad had retained Jerusalem as the sacred center of Islam, this would have alienated many of the tribes. Therefore it was not the pressure of the Medinese Jews that forced him to change direction, but rather the magnetic hold Mecca had on most Arabs, hence Muhammad’s *realpolitik* strategy. Moreover, he must also have understood that, by incorporating Mecca into his overall scheme of things, Islam would receive substantially greater support from the other tribes; making Mecca the heart of the new faith would generate greater respect in the eyes of the other tribes. If he were to leave Jerusalem as the center of Islam, however, he would lose standing and respect. Again, we come back to the persistent drive of Muhammad to overcome the particularism of the Arab tribes, to create a faith that transcended Arabia in the flesh.

Muhammad as Mediator in Mecca

[50] Experiences in Muhammad’s own town – Mecca itself – also served as a catalyst for him to create a new synthesis. In a knee-jerk response to the economic changes that were undermining their privileges, the ruling classes of Mecca tried to improvise by developing wider pagan institutions based on their hold over the *haram*, since the wider the appeal of the sanctuary, the greater the flow of pilgrims and merchants to Mecca. The Quraysh attempted to accommodate various pagan deities within the Ka’ba, or around it, as a show of “universality” (Ibrahim: 55). Indeed, half a century before Muhammad, there had already been a mixture of pagan deities, many of which were represented in the sacred precinct of Mecca. There were numerous old cults in Arabia connected with various shrines, of which the shrine at Mecca was one of the more important. Many of the old practices were retained, especially in cases where taboos of time and place made trade easier by suspending blood-feuds (see Lapidus: 25-47).

[51] But the outcome of such policies would lead to serious “overcrowding.” As Ruthven has remarked, “it seems probable that the 360 idols placed around the Ka’ba represented various tribal totems, signifying adherence to the sanctuary, rather as the flags of member states are ranged in the UN Plaza in New York” (51). The god of Mecca, Hubal, “represented by a statue of red carnelian, is thought to have been originally a totem of the Khuza’a, rulers of Mecca before their displacement by the Quraish” (Ruthven: 51). Yet even though the presence of multiple symbols around the intertribal forum of the Ka’ba must have focused the attention of the tribes on that which united rather than divided them (Ruthven: 52), this patch-up would fail to secure multiple deity worship from disaster. This is partly due to the fact that, with the continual expansion of Mecca and the number of traders passing through Mecca on the increase, deity representation for all these tribes reached a scale that placed a burden on the worthiness of each individual icon. In other words, the competition reached a point that we can characterize as overcrowding, eventually leading to conflicts and outright violence concerning, for instance, whose deity should be placed in the center of the Ka’ba or above the others (on the complexity of the tribal representation preceding Muhammad’s reforms, see Kister: 33-57).

[52] Such a conflict transpired in 605 C.E. when Muhammad, at the age of 35, approximately five years before his first revelation in 610 C.E., had an experience in his hometown that would produce within him the desire to transcend Arabia in the flesh. Ibn Ishaq, a famous Muslim biographer of

Muhammad writing a few generations after the Prophet's death, tells us about this memorable event, which occurred in Mecca. His account revolves around the reconstruction of the sacred *haram* in Mecca:

The Quraysh decided to rebuild the Ka'ba when the Apostle was 35 years of age . . . They were planning to roof it and feared to demolish it, for it was made of loose stones above a man's height, and they wanted to raise it and roof it because men had stolen part of the treasure of the Ka'ba which used to be in a well in the middle of it . . . Now a ship belonging to a Greek merchant had been cast ashore at Jidda and became a total wreck. They took its members and got them ready to roof the Ka'ba. It happened that in Mecca there was a Copt who was a carpenter, so everything they needed was ready at hand . . .

The tribes of the Quraysh gathered stones for the building, each tribe collecting them and building by itself until the building was finished up to the black stone, where controversy arose, each tribe wanting to lift it to its place, until they went their several ways, formed alliances and got ready for battle. The Banu Abd al-Dar brought a bowl full of blood, then they and the Banu Adi ibn Ka'b pledged themselves unto death and thrust their hands into the blood. For this reason they called themselves the "blood-lickers." Such was the state of affairs for four or five nights, and the Quraysh gathered in the mosque and took counsel and were equally divided on the question.

A traditionist alleged that Abu Umayya ibn al-Mughira, who was at that time the oldest man of the Quraysh, urged them to make the first man to enter the gate of the mosque umpire in the matter of the dispute. They did so and the first one to come in was the Apostle of God. When they saw him they said, "This is the trustworthy one. We are satisfied. This is Muhammad." When they came to him and informed him of the matter, he said, "Give me a cloak," and when they brought it to him, he took the black stone and put it inside it and said that each tribe should take hold of an end of the cloak and they should lift it together. They did this so that when they got it into position he placed it with his own hand, and then building went on above it (cited in Peters: 139-40).¹⁰

[53] These types of experiences began Muhammad's long journey into envisioning an alternative to the tribal structure of Arabian society in his time. Such occurrences must have demonstrated to him that the tribal social structure had not only failed to resolve the ever-escalating number of social conflicts, but in fact had aggravated it. This disequilibrium manifested itself in continual social conflict, which posed several threats to society, especially to merchant-clan leaders, who had the most to lose from social violence. It is in this milieu that Muhammad appeared as a man "singularly inspired, a prophet who articulated the problems of his society and in the process founded a new religion with an institutional framework relevant to the solution of the social, political, and economic problems that impeded the progress of Mecca's merchants" (Ibrahim: 75). To this end he would introduce the so-called Constitution of Medina in which he would outline his vision of the *Umma* (on its significance, see Dabashi). Here he would propose to do away with the tribal order once and

¹⁰ The account given by al-Azraqi is more concise: "The four factions among the Quraysh each built its own side. It was on that occasion that the door, formerly on ground level, was raised. When it was time to replace the stone they had to summon 'Amin,' the trustworthy Muhammad, to adjudicate. He used his mantle as described by ibn Ishaq and all were satisfied" (cited in Peter: 140).

for all, and to replace it with a system that, unlike the existing one, was not based on a closed or exclusive social unit. Instead the social unit would be flexible and inclusive, with clan ties and tribal solidarity subordinated to the much larger *Umma*.

[54] Thus to conclude this section, in the context of the declining institutions of Mecca, “Muhammad,” as Ibrahim informs us, “adapted, introduced, and advocated the authority of a monotheistic God” (83). The Quran’s central theme, in fact, is based on the statement “There is no god but God,” imprinted at the beginning of every *Sura* (Quranic chapter) to remind the reader. It is intended to impress upon the community of believers that this form of divine authority is higher, more enduring, and more inclusive than that of any of the polytheistic cults they may have followed. Old tribal allegiances must give way to the Oneness of God. Just as God is an all-encompassing Being, so the earthly community is to replicate that unity in its oneness.

Conclusion

[55] As this paper attempts to demonstrate, Muhammad and Paul were strategically located to become disenchanted with the old order and, as a result, moved to overtake the prior pluralistic system of integration by simplifying the diversity of deity worship and centralizing it through the concept of the one and only universal God, leading to a more effectively integrated social landscape than the prior systems of multiple idol worship. Both Paul and Muhammad borrowed from the Israelites the notion of the One creator God, but in the process dropped the particularistic claims of the Jews by denationalizing and detaching Judaism from its ethnic-based affiliations. This ingenious maneuver allowed Christianity and Islam to diminish, if not eliminate, those practices and rituals common only to a specific population, and to heighten those elements of Judaism that were universally applicable to humankind in its entirety.

[56] Such religious innovations made for a powerful combination and provided the basis for the crystallization of Christendom and Islam as major world empires over the centuries. From Paul’s and Muhammad’s theological perspectives, the monotheism practiced by the ancient Israelites and the paganism of the Arabian tribes functioned largely as a social indicator of distinctiveness, a symbol of independence and preservation of land and tribe, by reinforcing boundaries between themselves and the other. As such, both the symbolic idiosyncrasies of monotheism for the Israelites and for the tribal confederation of Arabia are specific to a restricted community, a particularity that can never, under these circumstances, be diffused throughout the complicated interconnections of the new emerging social reality that they both shared.

[57] Given such characteristics, therefore, the particularistic form of Israelite monotheism could be appropriated by Paul and Muhammad only with great difficulty, because its meaning was nontransferable to the larger, new world order. This was due to the fact that Paul and Muhammad lived in a world more in line with a diffused understanding of the sacred, where the absorption of difference becomes the objective and, unlike its ancient Israelite counterpart, not a marker of difference. They would work toward a new ritual system with the capacity to adapt to the logics of world-empire, those extremely large and diverse entities, becoming diffused in such a way that they spread throughout the entire geographical reach of their vastly transformed social environment. As a result of such changes, their universalistic practices would eventually come to have meaning for a majority of the inhabitants, with their symbolism easily transferable to all the corners of their world. “They open the road,” Hans Gerth argued, “for the conception of a universal brotherhood of man and the redefinition of ‘the generalized order’” (Gerth: xxvi).

[58] But while these similarities between Paul and Muhammad can clearly be shown, the different social landscapes that the two experienced were significant as well. Whereas the early Christians

operated within an already existing imperial order and adapted monotheism to a world that had for centuries experienced religious and philosophical cultural themes similar in type to the spiritual and political concerns of Hellenized Jews, the Muslims operated in a tribal social environment lacking such experiences. Muhammad did not have a dominant group to assimilate himself into; unlike Paul, he had to create it literally from scratch.

[59] Indeed, as already noted above, the Christian innovation was to undress Judaic monotheism from its “fleshy” existence and transform it into a monotheism more in line with Greco-Roman religion. Islam, on the other hand, would develop in the context of a tribal confederation. Here there was no imperial order in place, no overarching social structure to internalize the many local social formations. Moreover, although some semblance of universalistic concerns already existed among the multiple tribal groups in Arabia before Muhammad and the rise of Islam, it was largely ineffective and had little impact on the daily lived experience of its Arab inhabitants. The pagans of Arabia at the turn of the seventh century C.E., therefore, unlike the pagans of the Roman Empire at the inception of Christianity in the first century, envisioned the world from a particularistic identity. The power structure, while criss-crossing tribal and familial lines, was dependent largely on the reproduction of this tribal social order. Social power was embedded in the multiple vertical integration of communities. As I have argued, this had a major impact on the manner by which Muhammad and the early Muslims defleshed monotheism a second time.

[60] Most important from the perspective of this essay is the fact that Mecca, the sacred center of tribal Arabia, would witness a power struggle very similar to the one that occurred between Palestinian Jewish Christians and Hellenized Jewish Christians in first-century Jerusalem. This time, however, there was very limited support inside or outside of Mecca for a universalistic, Pauline-like, movement. In seventh-century Arabia “Hellenized” Arabs, although some existed in pockets, were a weak force (see Trimmingham). Arabs like Paul were hard to come by in seventh-century Arabia. The unifying power of an imperial order was not available to the early Muslims as it was to the early Christians. Muhammad was confronted by a population that looked more like James than Paul, not only in Mecca but throughout Arabia.

[61] Muhammad thus had to become an even more radicalized version of Paul. He had to become a prophet himself. Whereas Paul had to transcend Israel in the flesh to make Judaism more palatable to his experience in the Diaspora, for Muhammad it was the pagan tribes of Arabia that would have to be overcome. The Arabian tribes were to Muhammad what Palestinian Jewry was to Paul. But here the irony lay: Paul was negating a fleshy monotheism in a context in which a pagan universalistic culture dominated. Muhammad, on the other hand, was attempting to transcend a fleshy paganism in an effort to transcend its fleshy substance in a context in which a pagan particularistic culture dominated. In order to introduce universalistic monotheism (Arabia in the spirit), Muhammad had to transcend particularistic paganism (Arabia in the flesh). It was, in essence, a reversal of the Christian path. What needed to be resurrected was not the crucified body at the hands of an imperial order, but the words of God forgotten and distorted at the hands of communities gone astray, God’s message that Muhammad had been chosen to reintroduce, in its pure form, to the world. As a result, his effort to transform Mecca from a sacred center that served the spiritual needs of multiple communities with strong tribal identities to one that aspired to imperial status was going to have to be made on totally new and untrod territory.

[62] Muhammad also had to be more forceful in negating idolatry than the early Christians were. The latter were moving into a world with an established iconoclastic culture that did not work against the universalistic tendencies of Pauline Christianity. For Muhammad, that road was not possible given the fact that Arabian paganism would have swallowed the enterprise into oblivion,

transforming Allah into yet another deity. Greco-Roman paganism, because of its universalistic quality, was much easier to negotiate towards a religious movement that was overcoming Israel in the flesh than was an Arab paganism dedicated to particularistic deity representation. Muhammad thus had to depart radically from pagan particularism. Unlike the Christian version, therefore, idolatry of every kind had to be removed. Islam would thus find itself closer to the Jewish practice of banning iconography than to the relative tolerance of Christianity on the issue, which simply incorporated the practices of their pagan predecessors. But whereas the ancient Jews banned deity representation in order to resist the universalistic intervention of the surrounding empires, Muhammad would imitate his Jewish predecessors in order to transcend the particularistic Arab tribal and clan social formations and so create space for a new imperial order.

[63] Notwithstanding such differences, however, Paul and Muhammad experienced a world that was strikingly similar. Major transformations in every aspect of their lives, as we demonstrated above, were reported, especially in the socio-economic and political spheres. These changes would prove to be significant for the disintegration of the pagan and tribal affiliations of the old order, and would offer an opportunity for revolutionary and charismatic visionaries like Paul and Muhammad. In this new environment they would begin the process of creating a new structure that was radically different from the one they were born into. In our assessment of these factors, the significance this had on Paul's conversion, Muhammad's revelations, and their strategies to overcome the tribal structure in which they lived was enormous, to say the least. The focus and energy that Paul and Muhammad attached to universalistic monotheism proved to be essential to the creation of a new spiritual enterprise and, with it, a new social order. For the first time in human history, we begin to see a full-blown universalistic monotheism coming onto the world scene, adapting itself well to those vast territorialist enterprises we call world-empires.

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