Chapter 24

Late Antiquity:
The Monotheistic Revolution

1. REVOLUTIONARY MONOTHEISM

The story of Late Antiquity (ca. A.D. 300–700) is that of yet another remaking of itself by Rome. This time, however, Rome's self-invention was far more thorough and more fundamental. Earlier make-overs, even that of Augustus at the end of the Republic, involved only a restructuring of the government, while leaving Roman society and its cultural values largely intact. That was not the case in the centuries following Constantine. The transformation that occurred between A.D. 300 and 700 went to the heart of traditional society. The civic values of the *polis* that had dominated Mediterranean society for a millennium were challenged, and when not replaced found themselves coexisting with a new world view based on Judeo-Christian-Muslim principles of monotheism.

The Civic Religions of the Empire

The heart and soul of polytheistic culture was religion. The festivals of paganism with their sacrifices, communal feasting, dancing, and singing structured the life of all communities everywhere. Innu-

merable gods, goddesses, spirits, and heroes were accessible at all times and in all places on individual as well as at group levels. Homes were full of representations of the gods and were themselves sacred. Cities were sacred places and their shrines and temples were even more sacred. The countryside had its own forms of the sacred. There were holy rivers, wells, forests, trees, mountains, and hills. From childhood, a map of the sacred was impressed on minds of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire, and everyone knew how to navigate it. This involved a developed sensitivity to what was needed to be done to please the gods in work, war and politics, and in household events from childbirth to death. No sphere of human activity was exempt from religion. If knowledge of the correct rituals or which god needed to be approached, there were experts who could provide the necessary information. Sacrifice in general and animal sacrifice in particular were indispensable to the civic cults, whether offered by individual in private or by the city or state in great public festivals where thousands of animals were slaughtered and their meat distributed to the festivals' participants. Their prohibition in A.D. 391 by the emperor Theodosius I represents a major turning point in the cultural history of late antiquity. Perhaps more than any other act, the rejection by both Christianity and Islam of animal sacrifice meant the effective end of polytheism.

The Challenge to the Civic Religions

The monotheistic faiths, unlike henotheism or philosophical monotheism, challenged the civic religions of the Empire head-on. If there was a divinity who not only had revealed himself through creation but also through revelation, then no other gods really existed. Polytheistic divinities were not true gods but dangerous distractions from the one true God, projections of human fears and hopes. Because they were non-existent, they had no need of worship, temples, festivals, prayers, or sacrifices. There was no room for them either in the state or in society. Many of the monotheists believed pagan deities were more than just deceptive images; they were, rather, manifestations of a demonic world opposed to the One True God and his angelic representatives. Temples and shrines were the dwelling places of evil, destructive demons. Polytheism did not deserve respect because it was intrinsically a perversion of true religion.

Should any one of the monotheistic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, Mazdaism, or Islam—have achieved a dominance, the result would, inevitably, have been the elimination of the civic religions. They would be replaced by the beliefs and practices of whichever monotheistic religion was victorious, together with its sacred scriptures, rituals, forms of prayer, moral codes and social customs. Mazdaism, however, was too closely related to Iranian imperialism and ethnicity to become a truly universal monotheistic religion. Judaism too was closely identified with a particular ethnic group and a specific territory and temple. Its two offshoots, Christianity and Islam, however, were truly cosmopolitan. In their basic theologies, both were universal and proselytizing. Their adherents believed they had a command from God that obligated them to spread their versions of monotheism to all peoples "to the ends of the earth." In means and approach, Christianity and Islam differed considerably, but not in their belief that true, revealed monotheism was incompatible with polytheism. What that meant in practice varied over time,

from place to place, and from religious community to community. The appearance of Islam in the Mediterranean and Middle East and the development of Germanic Christian kingdoms in northwestern Europe represent the true break between the ancient world and the beginning of the modern world.

The Sacred Scriptures of the Monotheists

In the period between A.D. 200 and 700, the canon of the *New Testament* was finalized, and the whole Bible, both its Hebrew and Greek portions, were translated into Latin and transmitted to all of western and central Europe. This translation—the Vulgate—remained the standard text of the Bible in western Christendom for the next millennium. Translations into other languages, such as Gothic and Syriac (closely connected with Arabic), were also available. The outpouring of philosophy, theology, sermons, hymns, liturgical compositions, histories, and religious tracts in Greek and Latin by the "Fathers" of the Christian Church was gigantic. This period, known as the "Patristic Age," established the basic doctrines of Christianity, which remain to the present the foundation of belief in both eastern and western branches of the Church (i.e., the Orthodox and the Catholic and Protestant churches). During this same period the definitive text of the *Tanakh* (the Hebrew Scriptures) was fixed. Authoritative Jewish oral commentaries on the Scriptures (the "Second Torah" or Oral Law), in the form of the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud*, were written down, edited, and disseminated among Jewish communities throughout the Mediterranean and Middle East. Normative Judaism (or rabbinic Judaism, as it is known as today), stems directly from this period. Finally, between approximately A.D. 610 and 623, the *Quran*, the holy book of Islam, was transmitted by Muhammad to his followers. By A.D. 650, a written version of the *Quran* had been produced. By about A.D. 700, congregations of one (and sometimes all three) of the Abrahamic religions could be found from Ireland to Bengal, from Sudan to central Asia.

2. THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND

In many ways the Arab conquests of the eastern Mediterranean, north Africa, and the Middle East in the seventh and eighth centuries A.D. paralleled the Germanic invasions of the west two centuries earlier. In both cases the invasions ended the predominance of Greco-Roman culture and led to the development of two new mixed cultures, one based on Roman state practices and Christianity, and the other on Islam and sharia law. The differences between the two invasions, however, were marked. The Germanic invaders came into an existing state with a long established, elaborate legal system, social practices and religion. By contrast, the invading Muslims brought with them their own religion and form of government, a new language, new scriptures, new laws, and new social customs. Where the Germans attempted to bend the existing institutions of the Roman state and religion to their needs, the Muslim conquerors expected their subjects to accommodate their institutions and social practices to those of their overlords. No unifying principle lay behind the Germanic assaults. The Germanic tribesmen (and such non-German groups as the Iranian Sarmatians and others) were uncoordinated, opportunistic warrior bands in search of plunder and land to settle. Although the

invading Arabs were also war-like tribal peoples, they were unified and inspired by a vision of the world provided them by one of the world's most significant historical personalities, the prophet Muhammad.

The Arabs

A People in Between

For centuries, the Romans and their Byzantine successors saw the nomadic Arabs as a nuisance. They were at most a frontier problem, not a serious threat to the settled provinces of the eastern portion of the empire, such as Syria, Palestine, or Egypt. The fourth century A.D. Roman historian and military officer, Ammianus Marcellinus, said of them that they waged war by "theft and banditry" rather than engaging in pitched battles and were like "rapacious birds of prey who were best suited for guerilla raiding" (14.4). Culturally and otherwise, Arabs were a known quantity. Interaction between agricultural and pastoral populations of the Middle East had been ongoing for millennia. In the endless conflict between Romans and Parthians (and later the Persians), Arab tribes—when they were not fighting each other—sided sometimes with the Romans and sometimes against them.

Arabia Felix

Arabs are mentioned in the Bible and in Assyrian annals as early as the ninth century B.C. The geographical term *Arabia,* however, dates from later times when the Romans began to systematize their frontiers in the east and took into account earlier Greek distinctions between Fertile Arabia and Desert Arabia (***Arabia Felix*** and ***Arabia Deserta***). The southern portion of the Arabian peninsula, ancient Saba (biblical Sheba, modern Yemen), the land Solomon of Israel traded with, had been highly developed in earlier centuries. It was the center of a sophisticated irrigation civilization similar to that of Mesopotamia. Saba's location at the mouth of the Red Sea was excellent for trading with India and farther east. Frankincense and myrrh, aromatic resins derived from trees that grew only in that region, were another source of wealth. By the sixth century A.D., however, southern Arabia was in decline as direct contact with India across the Indian Ocean lessened its importance. The western portion of Arabia had always been a region of warring tribes, although contact with the settled agricultural lands farther west had led some of them to form states such as the Nabataean state of Petra in the Negev and Palmyra in Syria. Both states, in due course, came under Roman control.

3. ISLAM

Muhammad

A Supersessionist Religion

The same trade routes that enriched Petra and Palmyra also enriched oasis settlements farther south such as **Medina** and **Mecca**. Muhammad was born in Mecca around A.D. 570, at a critical moment in Arabian history. Growing up as a townsman he was aware of the disruptive capacities of the warring Arabic tribes and felt

the best way to overcome their anarchy and barbarism was by way of religious moral reform. He turned for help in this endeavor not to the indigenous pagan gods of Arabia, but to the God of Jews and Christians. While it is certainly true that both Judaism and Christianity were influential in the region—the homelands of both were nearby—and Muhammad was familiar with both religions, it would be a mistake to reduce Islam to a synthetic blending of the older faiths. Islam and the *Quran*, the sacred book of Islam, clearly bear his personal imprint. From Muhammad's viewpoint, Judaism and Christianity were predecessor religions and corruptions of the true faith. Both were now superseded or abrogated by God's last and final revelation.

Messenger of Allah

Muhammad presented himself to his followers not as a savior but as someone who spoke in prophetic fashion as the messenger of **Allah** (Arabic for God). According to Islamic belief, Allah revealed to Muhammad the messages contained in the *Quran*. This took place not all at once but over a lengthy period of time (traditionally twenty-two years). These messages were bestowed at different times and in different circumstances. They were then dictated orally by Muhammad for others to memorize and eventually write down. Unlike the Bible, the *Quran* is thus not an historical narrative beginning with the creation of the world but an assembly of revelations relevant to different historical occasions in Muhammad's life. It is accepted by Muslims as divine, eternal, and immutable.

Historical Sources for Muhammad

The majority of the key Muslim Arabic texts for the life of Muhammad and his successors, the early caliphs, were composed centuries after the events they claim to describe. They do not provide an historically accurate account of conditions in the seventh and eight centuries in the modern sense of the word, but are rather interpretations reworked to fit the expectations of Muslims of later ages. Fortunately external sources of evidence, Christian, Jewish and Persian, dating from the early Islamic period, provide a separate and independent viewpoint for the emergence of Islam. Many of these were written in Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic (a language which was spoken throughout much of the Middle East), but there is also information about early Islam in Christian Arabic, Coptic (Egyptian), Armenian, and Georgian sources. The earliest comment on the Arab conquest of Syria was written by an anonymous author in Syriac in A.D. 637 on a spare leaf of a bible just a year after the decisive battle of the Yarmuk (in Palestine) which ended Byzantine control of Palestine and Syria.

Islamic Beliefs

Abraham: The First Muslim

For Muhammad, Abraham was the first *muslim* ("submitter" i.e., the first person in history who truly submitted himself to God's direction) and the first genuine monotheist, and while he recognized that Jews and Christians believed in the same God, he believed their religions had become corrupt. By contrast to the compro-

mised monotheism of Judaism and Christianity, the religion revealed by Allah to Muhammad was the pure, unsullied monotheism of Abraham, and because Abraham, as the *Quran* says, came before both the Torah of Moses and the Gospel of Jesus (*Quran* 3.55–58), Islam was older than either Judaism or Christianity. Islam did not establish a new covenant but returned to an older one, that of Abraham: "Say (when asked), we follow the religion of Abraham, the monotheist, who was not one of the polytheists" (*Quran* 2.135).

The supremacy of Islam over Judaism and Christianity was proclaimed with great precision and clarity by the building of the Dome of the Rock mosque in A.D. 691 over the ruins of the First and Second Jewish Temples in Jerusalem, from whence it dominated the then largely Christian city and its churches below it. Muslim rejection of the characteristic Christian doctrine of the Trinity was highlighted in a prominent, polemical inscription from the *Quran* inscribed inside the mosque which reads: "Praise be to God who begets no son and has no partner…. God is one, and eternal. He does not beget, he is not begotten, he has no equal" (based on *Quran* 112). To this day the Dome of the Rock mosque sums up in prominent, visual terms the history of the three monotheistic religions and their contentious relationships with each other.

The Clarity of Islam

One of the strengths of Muhammad's religion lay in the simplicity of its doctrine and the clarity of its demands. Muslims were to believe in the absolute unity and omnipotence of God, the importance of the life to come, and the interposition of divine power in history, much as Jews and Christians believed. Islamic belief, however, was more rigorously monotheistic than either Judaism or Christianity. Allah, too, was the Lord of History, but he was involved in human affairs in a much more remote and distant fashion. To the unity of God corresponded a fellowship of believers who transcended and abolished all distinctions of race, tribe, social rank, or class. Eventually the whole world was to become a single Islamic community (***umma***) that acknowledged God alone as divine, Muhammad as his prophet, and the *Quran* as the unalterable, revealed word of God. Until that moment came, the world would remain divided between the ***Dar al-Islam*** (the Realm of Islam) and the ***Dar al-Harb*** (the Realm of War).

Unlike the Christian Church, Islam had no institutional or territorial authority. There were no bishops, patriarchs, or popes; no councils or dioceses. The ***ulema***, the learned men who were the guardians of the legal and religious traditions of Islam, were not clergy. Islam, unlike Judaism and Christianity was not a sacerdotal or priestly society that required a professional clergy for the performance of sacrifice, the chief form of worship of those religions. Nor did Islam allow for a laity separate and distinct from the religious authorities. There was no dichotomy between the sacred and the profane or secular. Such concepts, while common in Christianity, were alien to Islamic thought and practice. The *umma*, the whole community of Islam, was undivided; it was simultaneously political and religious, a polity and a religion. Citizenship in the Dar al-Islam was a religious rather than a secular and judicial category. Religious truth and political power were indissolubly associated and mutually sustaining. Christians had a choice between God and

Caesar, but not Muslims. To the present day, and with good reason, Islamic political theory has difficulty squaring the idea of the modern limited, territorial nation state with the traditional doctrine of the *umma* as single, universal, and unitary.

The Five Pillars of Islam

The five primary duties of the Muslim (the "Five Pillars of Islam") were first the acknowledgment of the one God and Muhammad as his prophet, followed by the duties of prayer, fasting, almsgiving and, circumstances permitting, a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a believer's lifetime. There also were elaborate ceremonial requirements. Prayers were to be performed five times a day, strict fast was to be observed during the month of Ramadan, and ceremonial purity was to be maintained. Captives were to be ransomed and the poor fed. Pork and certain kinds of seafood could not be eaten, and food, generally, was not to be prepared in an unclean way (e.g., by infidels, or nonbelievers, or menstruating women). Gambling and the use of intoxicants—anything which confused the mind—were the "works of Satan" (*Quran* 5.90). The sacred and geographical center of the Islamic world, which eventually would include all of Earth, was Mecca. Unlike Christianity, there was in Islam an essential association of land, religion, and people. Once a land had been conquered it became an inseparable part of Dar al-Islam, the Realm of Islam. There was a special, though subordinate, place in Islam for Jews and Christians, the "People of the Book." This consideration was later extended to Zoroastrians and Hindus.

Jihad of the Sword: The Sixth Pillar of Islam

The origin of Islam amid perpetually warring tribes; the command of God to Muhammad to bring all the world to the truth of Islam; the inseparability of state and religion; the division of the world into the Realm of Islam and the Realm of War, and the history of successful military conquest, all contributed to making the question of war an essential element in Islamic theology and jurisprudence.

Jihad was a religious obligation to wage war on infidels and apostates. Under the doctrine of jihad, the Islamic community had a duty to expand the territory of Islam so that eventually all unbelief would be extirpated and the whole world brought to the religion of Allah: "Fight them until there is no seduction and the only religion is Allah's" (2:193). One of the ten duties of the Caliph was to wage war or conduct raids at least once a year. In early times jihad had a primarily military meaning as the overwhelming majority of the sources, citing the relevant passages from the *Quran*, make clear. In subsequent centuries the Jihad of the Sword was expanded to include a Jihad of the Heart, a war of the individual against his own carnal inclinations towards evil, but there were other forms of jihad such as *jihad al-tarbiya* (educational jihad), *jihad al-qualam* (jihad of the pen or speech), and *jihad al-da'wa* (jihad by way of argument or proof).

The first discussions in the *Quran* of the legitimate use of violence are circumspect, deriving from the time when the Muslim community was still weak and in the process of establishing itself at Medina. Probably the earliest comment in the *Quran* on the use of force is found in *Quran* 22:39: "Permission is given to fight to those upon whom war is made because they are wronged." Eventually, how-

ever, the mandate for the use of violence was broadened considerably: "[K]ill them wherever you find them… Slay the idolaters… take them captives and besiege them and lie in wait for them in every ambush" (*Quran* 2:191; 9:5). In traditional Muslim jurisprudence these later commands were thought to have abrogated all earlier limitations on the use of violence against unbelievers.

Jihad was a collective obligation in times of offensive warfare, and an individual one when Muslim lands were themselves endangered. Conflict between the Realm of Islam and the Realm of War was seen as continuous and could be suspended only by temporary armistices or truces but never ended except by submission. While it was legitimate, indeed a duty, for Muslims to conquer others because by so doing they conferred a benefit on those conquered, the opposite—Muslims becoming the subjects of infidels—was not the case. It was a crime and a sin to conquer or lead astray Muslims. As the *Quran* puts it, Satan is a seducer "who whispers in the hearts of men" (114.4–5). Apostates from Islam were to be treated as renegades. They were traitors and sinners who had once known the true faith and abandoned it. Male apostates were to be killed; female apostates were to be flogged and imprisoned. Because commitment to Islam was irrevocable, secession by communities or parts of communities was to be put down by force.

The Expansion of Islam

War as Self-Sacrifice

Liberation from intertribal warfare allowed the successors of Muhammad to direct the warlike energies of the now united Arabic tribes outward. Arab armies were infused not just with warlike spirit, however, but also with high levels of religious enthusiasm. The waging of war was not only a matter of raiding for booty but also an act of consecration and self-sacrifice. To die in the "Path of God" was the highest ideal and was rewarded with everlasting life. The professional forces of the eastern Roman Empire, the Byzantines, and the feudal levies of the Persians were able to offer little effective resistance to the religiously inspired and booty-seeking armies of Islam. In any case, the expansion of Islam found both Byzantines and Persians exhausted after centuries of warfare with each other. Their indigenous populations were alienated from their governments as a result of fiscal and religious oppression. The Monophysite and Nestorian Christians of the Middle East had no love for their Byzantine masters, and the ancient heartland of Christianity—Syria, Palestine, parts of Iraq, Egypt and north Africa—fell to the Arab invaders without a struggle. The inhabitants of these regions did not immediately convert to Islam but remained, as did the peasants of Mesopotamia, as a separate category of second class citizens and subordinate taxpayers.

Islamic Conquests

The Muslim conquests of the seventh and early eighth centuries A.D. were among the largest, most rapid, and most permanent in history (see map). Syria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt fell by the mid-seventh century, and Arab armies moved across north Africa to Spain where they easily destroyed the Germanic Visigothic king-

dom in A.D. 712. Rome was sacked, Sicily occupied, and raids conducted regularly throughout Italy. Arab advance was finally stopped in central France by the Germanic Franks at the battle of Tours or Poitiers in A.D. 732.

In the east, Muslim armies were equally successful. The Persian kingdom of Iran was destroyed by A.D. 644, and the conquerors moved on into what is today Pakistan. By A.D. 715, some eighty years after the death of Muhammad, the Islamic world stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Chinese frontier. The only places where Arab armies and navies were unsuccessful were in Asia Minor where the Byzantines held out against them, and in Nubia (modern Sudan). Two major attacks by sea and land on Constantinople in A.D. 674–678 and 717–718 were defeated with great loss. For the next seven hundred years the Byzantine Empire remained the principal—and sometimes the only—obstacle to Islamic penetration of Europe. Unrelenting pressures, however, continued on the borders of the Islamic world. In the fourteenth century much of the Balkans was occupied and Constantinople fell in A.D. 1453 to the Ottoman Turks. As late as A.D. 1683 Muslim armies were besieging Vienna, the capital of the Habsburg Empire, in the heart of Europe; they almost succeeded in capturing it. Meanwhile Muslim naval forces raided as far north as Ireland, England, and even Iceland. In the A.D. 1750s Muslim Tatar (Mongol) forces from the Crimea khanate sought slaves and booty in Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Russia.

Aggressive jihad was not limited to Europe and the west. The eastern borders of Islam abutted India, and from the tenth century onward successive waves of Muslim, mostly Turkish, armies invaded northern India. After the capture of Delhi in A.D. 1193, a powerful sultanate was established there which eventually incorporated most of India except for a small region in the extreme south. The sultanate survived in various forms until, in its final form as the Mughal Empire, it fell to the British and was formally ended by an act of the British parliament in A.D. 1856.

4. "THE WAY:" SOCIAL COHESION IN JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

All three of the monotheistic religions promised their followers a comprehensive way of life. Each possessed its own scriptures, elaborate oral traditions, and methods of interpretation. Building on these sources, the three faiths developed distinctive forms of culture and society that have endured to the present. Although the focus of this chapter is Islam, it is difficult to get an understanding of the character of **sharia** (literally *way* or *path*), Islam's manner of life and its legal system without first understanding how Jews and Christians arrived at their versions of "The Way."

Judaism and the Jewish Way

The Law: The Emergence of Rabbinic Judaism
The challenge for Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple in A.D. 70 was to determine what it meant to be a Jew in a community that had lost its principal place and act of worship, the Temple, as well as all semblance of political inde-

The Conquests of Islam

pendence. Was it even possible for Judaism to be the religion of Yahweh without the sacrifices which, according to the Torah, could only be offered in the Temple at Jerusalem?

For the survivors of the catastrophe of A.D. 70, however, the answer was, in part, already at hand. Five centuries earlier the Judeans—the people of Yahweh—found themselves in a similar predicament when Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple were destroyed by the Babylonians and the survivors deported to Mesopotamia. During the exile the priestly and scribal leaders of Judean community responded to the loss of the Temple by developing a comprehensive charter for a reformed ethical and religious way of life. They also retained a seemingly distant hope of returning to Judea and rebuilding the Temple. Communal prayer and fasting replaced sacrifice. The ancient historical, legal, liturgical and prophetic traditions were systematically compiled and edited. Collectively these works constituted the principal parts of what was to become the Hebrew Bible, the *Tanakh*.

One of the main aims behind this latter endeavor was to answer the vital question of why Yahweh had permitted the exile and the destruction of Jerusalem. The answer that was devised by the authors of the Deuteronomic History (see ch. 4.2) was that the exiles and their forefathers—especially their kings—had failed time and again to live up to the terms of the Mosaic covenant. The reformers concluded that the remedy for this backsliding was to make unmistakably clear what God required of his people. The terms of the Sinai Covenant which were originally understood as descriptions of communal and personal relationships with God were rewritten as specific ethical and ritual requirements. Emphasis was now placed on

The Mosaic Charter According to Deuteronomy

Anonymous historians known as the "Deuteronomists" (so-called after the Book of Deuteronomy in the Torah) assembled and edited a history of Israel from the occupation of Canaan to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587/586 B.C. The Deuteronomic history comprises the books of the bible from Joshua to 2 Kings. The theology behind this history claims that Israel's faithfulness to Yahweh led to success while apostasy led to disaster. Exact observance of the clearly defined terms of the Sinai Covenant was therefore essential for the survival and prosperity of Israel. This reforming viewpoint is expressed as a series of farewell speeches put in the mouth of Moses by the Deuteronomic authors. Moses is portrayed as foreseeing the scattering of the people of Israel to the ends of the earth and as mandating observance of the law—the way—as the only way of being reconciled to God.

See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse—the blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you today, the curse if you disobey the commands of the Lord your God.… When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the Lord your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the Lord your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the Lord you God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord you God will gather you and bring you back…. The Lord will again delight in you and make you prosperous, just as he delighted in your fathers, if you obey the Lord your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law….

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess

—*Deuteronomy* 11.26-27; 30.11-16, NIV tr.).

law and law-abidingness. The Mosaic covenant came to resemble, in the words of one scholar, a constitution or legal charter of positive law. In practice, this meant the people of Yahweh needed well-schooled interpreters of the law of Moses—lawyers—rather than charismatic prophets whose pronouncements lacked sufficient specificity. With this shift in emphasis, the age of the great prophets came to an end. Priests and legal experts became the leaders of the newly constituted community of Yahweh.

After the destruction of the Second Temple in A.D. 70 a similar, but even more complete response was developed that led to the emergence of normative or rabbinic Judaism. The canon of the *Tanakh* was finalized and the oral Torah which complemented the written Torah was put in writing, first in the *Mishnah* (ca. A.D. 200), and subsequently in the Palestinian and Babylonian *Talmuds* (ca A.D. 300–500). This activity reinforced the need for legal experts and textual specialists who were adept at applying the precepts of the law to daily life and making persuasive arguments in the case of disputed interpretations of the law. In the absence of the Temple, the role of public ritual and the priesthood vanished. It was this kind of rabbinic Judaism that Muhammad encountered in Arabia.

Christianity and the Christian Way

For early Christians, the legacy of Jesus presented many challenges. Was this radical Jewish sect just one sect among many in Judaism, or was it something new? What form of worship was it to have? How was it to be organized?

In some respects the nascent church seemed closer to Second Temple Judaism than to the kind of rabbinic Judaism that emerged at the same time (in the first century A.D.). The centrality of the Temple tradition of sacrifice was maintained by Christians in their central, ritualized reenactment of the death of Jesus in the Eucharist. The Jewish scriptures were kept in their Greek form, the Septuagint translation, so that the early Christians needed leaders who were interpreters of scripture as well as sacrificing priests. Because there were requirements of governance in the early church, these same leaders needed also to be competent administrators.

The Need for Theology

Christian leaders had to undertake one further responsibility not prominent in either Judaism or later in Islam. This was the development of a theology that would give them a way of thinking and speaking about Jesus, the central figure of their religion. Christians could not avoid answering questions about the inner nature of God (the Trinity), the nature of Christ, sin and salvation (Christological and soteriological doctrines). These were essential parts and impositions of their tradition and scriptures. The sophisticated, literate Greco-Roman society in which the church emerged demanded reflection and comment on these doctrines. A consequence of this was that theology and doctrinal orthodoxy were elevated over jurisprudence, and theologians came to occupy a more important place in the church's early days than lawyers. In later centuries, however, as the Roman Empire faded the task of incorporating Roman law into church administrative practices saw the appearance of a class of lawyers—called canon lawyers—that sometimes challenged theologians in importance.

The Christian Priesthood and Sacrifice

The collective needs of the Christian religion led to the emergence in the early church community of a self-coopting priesthood whose candidates were not appointed because of their legal knowledge, as was the case with rabbis, but were chosen, as Christians believed, by the Holy Spirit. These leaders were priests

because the central act of the Christian community, the Eucharist, was a sacrificial act which required for its performance priests who acted in the name of Christ. Because Christ was male and throughout antiquity all sacrifice was performed by males, Christian priests had to be males.

The leaders of the churches, the bishops, became at one and the same time administrators, priests, theologians, and scriptural exegetes. By the third century A.D., Christian communities with strong leaders, defined sacred scriptures, and a distinctive culture could be found from Spain to the Persian Gulf, both inside and outside the Roman Empire. This was the Christianity Muslims encountered (and conquered) when they emerged from Arabia in the seventh century.

The Muslim Way

After Muhammad, What?

Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity both evolved practically invisibly in the firmly established political order of the Roman Empire. Neither had a role in public life—political, religious, or otherwise—and were free to concentrate wholly on the religious, social, and cultural affairs of their individual communities. Not so the Muslim community. The death of Muhammad presented Muslims with a crisis. They had to face the immense task of finding a replacement not just for a major religious leader, but for a head of state and a supreme military commander. As the last of the prophets sent by God, Muhammad could not, of course, be replaced. However, successors, the Caliphs, were found—though not without difficulty—for the Prophet's other roles.

More complicated was how Muhammad's religious legacy was to be handled. The text of the *Quran*, God's final and definitive word to humanity, had to be compiled. Then there was the challenging question of who was competent to interpret the *Quran* itself and who had the authority to answer the inevitable questions that arose that the *Quran* did not answer. How was the Muslim community, the *umma*, to be administered and how was it to maintain its unity in a huge empire where Muslims, at least initially, were a minority? Were Muslims to have a monarchical priesthood along the lines of their Christian subjects, or teachers and legal scholars as was the case in the Jewish communities they also ruled? Because sacrifice did not perform the central role it did in Christianity, Islam had no need of a sacrificial priesthood. Islam did, however, have a sacred text and a sacred law which needed definition and elaboration, so from the beginning it was clear that lawyers would have an important role in the new religion. That left the question of what kind of lawyers Muslim religious lawyers would be.

Other than the appointment of the Caliphs, whose job it was to govern and extend the Islamic empire, we know little in detail of how the other great challenges were met in the generation after the death of Muhammad. Compared to the way the canons of the *Tanakh* and the Christian Scriptures were compiled, the history of the compilation of the *Quran* is opaque. However, by the eighth century a final version of the *Quran* had been compiled and the questions of religious interpretation were settled in creative ways that led to the establishment of a stable

Islamic social and cultural order, one that remains in effect to the present day, at least in the Realm of Islam.[1]

Sharia

The social function and leadership roles played by the priesthood in Christian societies and by rabbis in the Jewish community were early filled in Islamic society by a body of scholars and teachers known collectively as the **ulema**. These scholars, like Jewish rabbis, were primarily jurisprudents who were experts in the interpretation of the *Quran* and the huge body of oral **hadith,** that is, the stories or reports told about the sayings and actions of Muhammad, and handed down from one authoritative source to another. By the ninth century, a well-established body of laws and traditions was in place based on the *Quran*, the *hadith*, and the *sunnah*, or customs of the Prophet. This body of laws, known as *sharia*, pervaded every aspect of daily life from diet and dress, religious prescriptions and economics to the nature of authority and the duties of rulers and subjects. Those individuals among the *ulema* who provided opinions on legal matters were known as **muftis,** but their opinions—**fatwas**—enjoyed only as much authority as the individuals who issued them.

As scholars, the *ulema*, however, did not relish the task of actually applying their knowledge of *sharia* to the supervision of the daily life of the Muslim community. Functionally this task would have compromised their independent under-

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The Way: A Comprehensive Manner of Life

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam subscribed to the belief that God had revealed his way of life for humanity. Although the term "Way" in the scriptures of the three faiths is often translated as "law." "statute." or "command," it is better understood as a comprehensive manner of life permeating every aspect of society, culture and politics, public life as well as private life. The religion of early Christians was often referred to as "The Way."

The *Tanakh*

He made known his Ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel…. The Lord will establish you as his holy people as he promised you on oath if you keep the commands of the Lord your god and walk in his Ways….His works are perfect and all of his Ways are just (*Psalm* 103.7; *Deuteronomy* 28.9; 32.4).

The *New Testament*

Jesus: I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life (*John* 14.6).

Paul (defending himself before a Roman governor): I admit that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of The Way which they call a sect…. Then Felix (the Roman governor), who was acquainted with The Way, adjourned the proceedings (*Acts* 24.14, 22)

The *Quran*

We gave you a Way (*sharia*) in religion, so follow it; do not follow the passions of those who do not know (*Quran* 45: 18).

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[1] The great puzzle of the modern era for the millions of Muslims who have chosen voluntarily to live in the West is how they are to conduct themselves in the Realm of War. Classical sharia does not provide an answer to that question.

standing of *sharia* and their ability to give authoritative interpretations. The task of passing judgment in court fell to the *quadi*, or judges appointed by the Caliph in individual provinces of the Islamic empire.

The Quadi

Quadi were less interested in what individual Muslims believed than in their behavior. For them, **orthopraxy** prevailed over orthodoxy. The *quadi* were administrators of the law in the sense that their job was to respond to cases brought to them by plaintiffs, but they were not in control of the law itself which remained within the purview of the *ulema*. For the most part, the *quadi* and muftis performed their duties without reference to the formal political authorities above them, whether governors, Caliphs or Sultans. Together they complemented each other and provided a secure basis for the cohesion of Muslim society in the Dar al-Islam, the Realm of Islam. As a result, Islamic society was able to maintain its stability even during periods of governmental upheaval and misrule. The *quadi*, and even more so the *ulema*, were regarded as the natural leaders of local communities. Muslims felt they lived more under the authority of *sharia* than that of the often distant state. While this allowed Muslims to ignore to a large extent the comings and goings of governments, one of the side effects was to create among them a suspicion of higher political authority and to encourage them to place greater reliance on family and kindred.

6. GRECO-ROMAN LEGACIES

East and West

The conquest of the homeland of Christianity—Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and north Africa—by Islam represents the last act of a thousand years of interaction between east and west. In both east and west, cosmopolitan religions of eastern origin became the dominant forms of culture. Both Christianity and Islam were the inheritors of Greek and Roman culture, political, legal, and administrative traditions. Each religion, however, interacted in very different ways with this cultural legacy. Judaism, the earliest of the three Abrahamic religions, was also cosmopolitan in principle but was not evangelical as were the other two. In the Hellenistic period, it withdrew into itself and remained a minority religion from that time onward.

Contrasting Origins

The way Christianity and Islam responded to the Greco-Roman cultural world in which they found themselves profoundly influenced their subsequent histories down to the present day. Christianity's origins were, in many respects, the mirror image of Islam's beginnings. Christianity got its start in a minor province of the Roman Empire at a time when Rome's power was undisputed. Jesus, the Suffering Savior, put to death ignominiously by the Romans, was in stark contrast to the figure of the victorious warrior-prophet Muhammad, whose armies conquered first Arabia and then, under his successors, a large portion of the known world.

Church and State: Distinct Institutions

In the Roman Empire, Christians were, at least initially, at the lower (though not the lowest) end of the social spectrum and suffered centuries of on-again, off-again persecution before finally finding themselves in a position of power. By then the traditions of the relationship between the Christian Church and the Roman imperial administration, and between Christian and pagan cultures, had been well established. Church and state constituted distinct though similarly organized hierarchical institutions, each in possession of a fundamentally different base of legitimacy and authority. For the Christian hierarchy this was the mission of Christ expressed in the doctrine of apostolic succession by means of which legitimate rule within the Church was determined. The words of Christ in the Gospel of Matthew, "Render under Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:21), were taken as the classic source of the distinction between secular and religious authority. No such tradition is found in Islam. By contrast, in the formative period of Islam, Muslims had no protracted experience of living under the crushing power of an alien, all-powerful state, no experience of persecution, and consequently no need to develop traditions of resistance or accommodation. From the start and for centuries thereafter, Muslims were led by triumphant military leaders, beginning with Muhammad himself. The proof of the truth of the claims of Islam was validated by consistent military supremacy and victory in war.

The Roman state of the late Empire still harkened back to the civic traditions of the free Republic for its authority, even as its emperors conducted themselves with greater and greater absolutism. In the eastern Roman Empire, however, the relationship between civic and religious authorities was much more firmly cemented than in the west. In the east the Emperor was a permanent resident of Constantinople, and a major share of his legitimacy derived from the degree of support he received from the Church in the person of the Bishop or Patriarch of Constantinople. While the bishop of Rome claimed to be the successor of Saint Peter, the western Roman Emperor was almost never in Rome, and his actual power was intimately tied up with the army, not the Church. Thus, when the civil and military government of the west collapsed, the Church was left as the only recognizable source of legitimate authority apart from the anarchic and fleeting power of individual barbarian kings.

The Goodness of the Material World

In cultural terms, these first centuries also saw the absorption of much of Greco-Roman culture by Christians. Christian theology of the Incarnation—the taking on by God of human flesh—had a powerful influence on the evolution of Church culture because it affirmed at a very basic level the essential goodness of the material world. God, after all, could not have become man had the material world been fundamentally evil. There was thus a strong readiness on the part of Christians to find good in the material universe and in the achievements of all of humanity. There were no restrictions on artistic expression and no dietary regulations. Thus, while Christians were forced by their weak political circumstances to enter into

dialogue with pagans in areas such as art, literature, philosophy, and politics, they were ideologically well equipped to do so. The Christian scriptures (the *New Testament*) were composed and written in Greek, the language of the dominant culture, and were quickly translated into Latin, the language of the ruling power. There was thus no built-in linguistic confrontation between the secular establishment and Christian culture. Christian doctrine was subsequently shaped by centuries of Christian thinkers applying Greek philosophic and linguistic conventions to the religion of Jesus. Educated pagan converts attempted to translate the message of Christianity into a language and a form compatible with their traditional cultural conventions. Roman law and political and organizational principles were, in turn, absorbed by the nascent Church and became part of its administrative structure.

No Need of Accommodation

Because Islam arrived as a conquering religion and culture it had no need of any of these accommodations. Arab masters formed an elite over their Greco–Roman and Persian subjects whether they were pagan, Jewish, Christian, or Zoroastrian. They had no need to interact with them other than as their subjects. Those things that were serviceable and compatible with Islam, the conquerors took; what was not they discarded. Arabic, not Greek or Latin, was the language of the Prophet, of the sacred scriptures of Islam and of the ruling elite. What was thought useful in any of the conquered peoples' languages had to be translated into the language of the rulers. Insofar as politics was concerned, Islam assumed from the start a seamless relationship between state and religion; the two were, in essence, inseparable. The state was God's state, the law was God's law, the army was God's army, Islam's enemies were God's enemies. The Law of God was also the law of the state. There was no secular as distinct from religious authority. The Islamic community, the *umma,* was one and indivisible in all respects.

Treasure or Threat?

For both Christianity and Islam, the cultural legacy of the Greco–Roman world represented a treasure trove and a threat. Based on the abundance of the classical sources, Muslims by and large limited themselves to translating Greek works on science and philosophy, many of which they found had already been translated previously into Syriac (a language close to Arabic) by Christians. This amounted to a "technology transfer on a massive scale, [the] passage of the intellectual goods of one culture into the quite different idiom of another."[2] There was a parallel absorption from India and Persia. These borrowings became the foundation for the enormously important and original contributions made to the development of science and philosophy during the ninth and tenth centuries A.D. in the Islamic world. Greek literary work was ignored as was Greek art where it involved the representation of the human body. Greek architectural traditions, however, formed the basis of Islamic developments in that field.

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[2] F. E. Peters, *The Monotheists: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conflict and Competition,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2003), 2.220

Rationalism's Challenge

The tradition of Greek philosophic and scientific rationalism posed as serious a challenge to Christianity and Islam as it did to the ancient civic religions of the Mediterranean world. It was a potent solvent of religious belief, and in many respects it was the most threatening aspect of the pagan legacy of the Greco–Roman world. In both Christianity and Islam, some thought that it was possible to reconcile faith and reason, but resistance was also strong when it came to mixing the two too closely. Mainstream Christianity on the whole tended to assume the compatibility of faith and reason and came early to recognize the legitimate use of philosophy to explore and express its doctrinal beliefs. In the Islamic world, after embracing many aspects of Hellenic philosophy and science in its early years, a reaction grew to both. A suspicion developed that reason was being given an improper priority over revelation.

The important Muslim thinker **Al-Ghazali** (A.D. 1058–1111) criticized philosophy in a number of influential works. One of these, titled *The Incoherence of the Philosophers,* pointed to the inadequacy of reason and the necessity for revelation and mystical knowledge for a full human life. Al-Ghazali's skepticism was widely shared, and since the eleventh century A.D. the prevailing tendency in Islam has been to give priority to revelation over reason. In the Christian west, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment were quintessentially movements that grew organically out of the dual legacy of the Christian and Greco-Roman past. However, these movements passed unnoticed in the Islamic world. Since the fifteenth century, the Christian world has been grappling in one form or another with the challenge of modernity. In Islam the process began much later. Both cultures—Christian and Islamic—today confront the radical consequences of the trajectory of their individual historical developments.

EPILOGUE

While the Arab conquests ended the dominance of Rome in the Mediterranean, Roman rule continued in Greece and Asia Minor until the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in A.D. 1453. In the west during this period, the story is more complicated. City life did not entirely vanish with the fall of the western Empire, but it no longer had anything like the importance it had for the Romans. Roman law and administrative techniques were used by German kings alongside their own customary legal and administrative systems. Classical culture and many of its values survived, but in very different ways. A major Romanized and Hellenized institution, the Church, was a common meeting ground of Romans and Germans and constituted a useful kind of cultural bridge between the two peoples and their idiosyncratic cultures.

Old Barriers Fall

Until the fifth century A.D., there had always been a well-defined, if fluid, boundary between the distinctively European north and the Mediterranean south: the north represented by Germanic and other indigenous European peoples who resisted

urbanization and the formation of the state, and the south by peoples who were, in varying degrees of willingness, prepared to accept these forms of social and political organization. For centuries Rome had promoted state and urban culture. It had coerced Celtic, Germanic, and other native European peoples who lived within the borders of the Empire into abandoning their old forms of social and political organization and accepting those of the Roman state. Archaeologically it is possible to trace the abandonment in Western Europe of pre-Roman hilltop fortresses for towns and cities built on the plains. Yet, paradoxically, once the frontier along the Rhine and Danube was removed, the Germanic peoples who settled within the old boundaries of the Empire, especially the Franks, *voluntarily* accepted a form of the state and began to extend it eastward into old "free" pre-state Germany. Northern Europe at this point began to abandon the chiefdom, which had characterized its political, social, and cultural life since the Bronze Age. This was a decisive break with the past. Only Celtic fringe areas, such as Ireland and Scotland, continued to resist more developed state forms of government. In this sense, the fifth century A.D. can stand for the final period in the elimination of barriers between northern and southern, eastern and western, European and Mediterranean forms of culture.

East and West: A Cultural Dialogue

Looking back, the whole of ancient Middle Eastern, Mediterranean and European history can be seen as a long dialogue—sometimes violent, sometimes peaceful—between east and west. The city and the state and all their attendant technologies were pioneered in the Middle East. Subsequently, southern Europeans, the Greeks first, then the Etruscans, Latins, and others, succumbed to the allures of the more complex and rewarding kind of society and created the *polis* as their own special form of this community. It was within the context of the *polis* that all subsequent Mediterranean history took place, even during the Roman Empire, when the Romans came up with the unique idea of making all peoples in the Empire citizens of their city.

The east was to be heard from again, this time in the form of a powerful religious movement. In the remarkable centuries between A.D. 200 and 500, Greeks and Romans struggled to make this strange new phenomenon of Christianity their own, much as their ancestors centuries before had wrestled with and domesticated the concept of the city and the state. If east and west could be said to have come to an accomodation, it was during this last, dramatic process of adaptation. Like many cultural amalgams, however, the synthesis of Middle Eastern biblical traditions and Greek and Roman culture was incomplete and ultimately failed to hold together. Since the dawning of the modern age, a new era of experimentation as radical as that of the early *polis* age (800–500 B.C.) or of the late Empire (A.D. 200–500) has been underway. Among the driving forces are many of the same ones that made those earlier periods so exciting, creative, and ultimately successful.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In what century do Arabs first make their appearance? What ancient sources provide that information?
2. Analyze and discuss the historical sources for Muhammad and early Islam. What sources are contemporaneous with these events?
3. What does "supersessionist religion" mean?
4. How do Muslims justify their claim that Abraham was the "First Muslim?"
5. What message was the Dome of the Rock mosque intended to convey? What was the significance of the Dome's inscription?
6. What do the terms *Dar-al-Islam* and *Dar-al-Harb* mean?
7. What does the term *umma* mean?
8. Discuss the different meanings of the term *jihad*.
9. What role did Constantinople play in the years of Islamic expansion?
10. Compare and contrast the different understanding of the term "Way" by the monotheistic faiths.
11. Who were the *quadi* and *ulema*? What roles did they play in Muslim societies?
12. Christians and Muslims approached the legacies of Greece and Rome in very different ways. Discuss and analyze.
13. Who was Al-Ghazali and what was his significance?
14. Explain how the centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire in the west saw a melding of eastern and western cultures.