

Religions of the world jesus mohammed

Religion



Two thousand years have come and gone, but still they remain the unfinished story that refuses to go away. Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew from rural first-century Galilee, and Mohammed from Mecca are without doubt the most famous and most influential human beings who ever walked the face of the earth. Their influence may at present be declining in a few countries of Western Europe and parts of North America, as has from time to time transpired elsewhere.

But the global fact is that the adherents of Jesus and Mohammed are more widespread and more numerous, and make up a greater part of the world's population, than at any time in history. Two billion people identify themselves as Christians; well over a billion Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet of God (Freedman 2001). Unnumbered others identify themselves as know and respect his memory as a wise and holy man. This work begins with tracing the lives of Jesus and Mohammed historically. Then it deals with different aspects of the practice and the teaching of Jesus and Mohammed. How their messages are being carried out in the world today will be considered in the conclusion.

The personality of Mohammed remains obscure in spite of his sayings and the many legends about him. There have been almost as many theories about the Prophet as there are biographers. According to tradition, he was born in A. D. 570, about five years after the death of Justinian, into a cadet branch of one of the leading families of Mecca. His father died before Mohammed was born, and his mother died when he was still a small child. First his grandfather, then an uncle, who was in the caravan trade, reared him.

As a youth in the busy center of Mecca he probably learned to read and write enough to keep commercial accounts; he also heard Jewish and Christian teachers and early became interested in their religious ideas. Mohammed must have suffered, in these early years, from hardships, and he evidently became aware of the misery of many of his fellowmen. These early experiences were later to be the basis of his fervent denunciations of social injustice. At the age of twenty-five, he married a wealthy widow and probably went on some long caravan trips, at least to Syria.

This gave him further contacts with Jewish, Christian, and Persian religious teachers. At the age of forty, after spending much time in fasting and solitary meditation, he heard a voice calling him to proclaim the uniqueness and power of Allah. Mohammed seemingly did not, at first, conceive of himself as the conscious preacher of a new religion. It was only the opposition from those about him at Mecca that drove him on to set up a new religious community with distinctive doctrines and institutions. In 632 Mohammed died, the last of all the founders of great world religions.

Little is known of the early life of Jesus Christ. Born a few years before the year 1 A. D. in Bethlehem of Judaea, he lived in Nazareth, a city of Galilee, until he was about thirty years of age. We have no reason to doubt the tradition that after the death of Joseph, the head of the family, Jesus became the main support of Mary and the younger children. He worked at his trade, that of a carpenter, and lived the life which would be expected of a religiously-minded young Hebrew.

At about the age of thirty Jesus suddenly appeared at the Jordan, where John, a cousin of his, was performing the rite of baptism on those who came

professing a desire to amend their ways and live better lives. Jesus also came and, against the scruples of John, who saw that Jesus was in different case from the others, was baptized. It marked a turning-point, for with the outward ritual act came an inner spiritual experience of profound significance for Jesus. A voice assured him that he was in a unique sense his Father's "beloved Son," in whom he was "well pleased" (Borg 1997). It seems to have been the consummation of his thought and prayer and eager yearning for many years.

He had received his revelation; he would proclaim God as a Father and men as his sons. He was filled with a sense of mission, of having a work to do and a message to deliver, which to the end of his life did not leave him for a moment. He went from place to place in Palestine preaching in the synagogues and out-of-door places wherever the people congregated, and talking to individuals and to groups as they came to him with their questions and problems. He began to gather about him a little company of disciples, which soon grew to twelve and which accompanied him on all his journeys.

He spent much time in giving them instruction and on several occasions sent them out to heal and to preach. Jesus came to establish a kingdom, and this was the burden of his message. But he never forgot that the form of the Kingdom and many things connected with its coming were of lesser significance than the inner meaning and the principles on which it was based. The first of these was man's relationship with God.

Jesus was not only a teacher; he was a worker of miracles. The Gospels tell us that he cured the sick, opened the eyes of the blind, fed the hungry, stilled the storm, and even raised the dead. Much was made of these

wonders by former generations of Christians, who used them as proofs of the divine character of the One who performed them. Such use of these incidents does not produce the effect it once did and is being discarded.

A closer study of the attitude of Jesus toward his own miraculous power clearly indicates that he minimized its significance. He would have men secure a better perspective and realize that moral power was on a higher level than the ability to work marvels. With this in view it scarcely seems congruous to use the miracles in a way which could scarcely be acceptable to Jesus himself. But of all the impressions Jesus made the strongest was that he was in touch with God his Father and that this was the explanation of all the wonderful things about him.

Jesus, however, was not only winning followers and bringing them close to God; he had come into collision with the religious authorities of his people, and in the end lost his life at their hands. They were formalists and as such had not averted the danger of losing sight of the vital principles of their religion. Jesus was an innovator, and felt free to act in accordance with the inner spirit of the old precepts even when by doing so he ran counter to the letter of the law.

When Jesus appeared in Jerusalem at the feast of the Passover, He was seized and, after having had a preliminary hearing before the Jewish high priest and Sanhedrin, was taken before Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator, and was condemned to death. He was crucified, together with two criminals, and died at the end of six hours' agony on the cross. His body was taken down by friends in the early evening and laid in a rock-hewn tomb. The hopes of his disciples were dashed to the ground, and undoubtedly the

Jewish leaders and the Roman authorities thought they had rid themselves of an exceedingly troublesome creature (Allen 1998).

But such was not to be, for a very remarkable thing happened the third day after. To the utter amazement of his disciples, who had not recovered from the paralyzing effect of their grief and disappointment, Jesus appeared to them so unmistakably that they were convinced that death had not been able to hold its victim and that Jesus was alive.

Their new enthusiasm, the founding of the Christian Church on the assurance of the presence of the living Christ, the adoption of the first day of the week as a memorial of the day when Jesus reappeared alive -all these historic facts bear witness to the genuineness of the disciples' testimony that the same Jesus who had journeyed with them, who had died and had been laid away in the tomb, was raised from the dead, their living Master forevermore. They immediately went out to preach " the gospel of the resurrection," and with that the history of the Christian Church was begun.

Mohammed's teaching, from the beginning, shows strong Jewish and Christian influence. Mohammed learned the great stories of the Old Testament; especially was he impressed with the life of Abraham whom he later considered one of his own predecessors and who he claimed had founded the Ka' bah at Mecca. He, likewise, learned of the Christian Trinity whom he understood to be God the Father, Mary the Mother, and Jesus the Son.

He was looking for common ground on which to found a faith for all monotheists. He had a profound respect for Jews and Christians, especially

for the Jews, though when they refused to join him and when later they thwarted him, he attacked them fiercely. Mohammed took from Jewish, Christian, and also Persian teaching only what he wanted, and he combined all he borrowed in a set of ideas that always bore his own mark. In the Koran, for example, he uses the characters of the Bible as successful advocates in the past of the doctrines of Mohammed in the present. Mohammed called the Jews and the Christians the " People of the Book," and he came to believe himself called to give his own people, the Arabs, a book.

Soon after Mohammed's death in 632, a wave of conquest gathered in all of Arabia, Palestine, Syria, Egypt, and part of Persia. In less than a century all of North Africa, Spain, Asia Minor, and Central Asia to the Indus River were swept by the conquering armies of Islam. These conquests were as orderly as they were speedy; little damage seems to have been done, and immediately after the Arab armies entered an area they organized it. The Arab annexation, at first, meant little more than a change of rulers.

Life and social institutions went on as before with little interference and no forced conversions; the conquered peoples could even keep their own religion by paying a tax. The Arab colonies planted in each new territory became the centers from which Islamic religious ideas spread and in which, at the same time, a new culture developed. Not until the new peoples, like the Seljuks, who were outside the Graeco-Roman tradition, were converted to Mohammedanism did Islam become fanatical. Indeed, no such militant intolerance as characterized the Christian attack on paganism was normally shown by the Mohammedans until into the eleventh century.

The reasons for these fantastic conquests were various. To his own people, especially to the desert tribes, Mohammed offered war and booty, and to those who lived in the Arab towns he offered the extension of commerce. Caravans travelled in the midst of the Muslim armies. For those who died, Islam promised a glowing paradise. One drop of blood shed in battle, even a single night spent under arms would count for more than two months of prayer or fasting.

Christianity and Islam have, like every other religion, developed their own mythology. These mythologies are at its height in the beautiful imagery that centers around the festivals of Christmas, Easter and Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha (" Eid" or " Id" means festival). Indeed, there is today a rediscovery of the value of myth in human life. Today Christianity and Islam provide a good framework for the religious life. Some people, possibly lots of people, would claim that if Jesus and Mohammed were wrong, they can no longer be relevant. That claim can probably be disputed on theological grounds (Freedman 2001).

The remarkable 'footprint' of Jesus and Mohammed in history has strangely contradictory implications for an encounter with them today. On the one hand, it means that a true and adequate understanding of the men remains a vital task, even as third millennium has dawned. Just as in the first century Jesus was embraced as Saviour of the world by Jews and Gentiles excluded from religious and political power, so today he is welcomed above all by ordinary, poor and marginalised people - in the west and the east, and especially in the South. Like Paul, they see him, God's gospel, as having the power to liberate them from sin, their personal sins, the socio-political,

cultural and structural sins of their nations, cultures and churches and the unjust economic and technological structures of the so-called 'global village'.

At least in the western world, it remains true that we can understand neither Christian faith nor much of the world around us if we do not come to terms with Jesus of Nazareth and the two millennia of engagement with his heritage. The followers of Jesus and Mohammed live in every country of the globe. They read and speak of these people in a thousand tongues. For them, the world's creation and destiny hold together in their gods, the wholly human and visible icon of the wholly transcendent and invisible God. Jesus and Mohammed animate their cultures, creeds and aspirations.

References

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