

Religion and belief

Religion



According to Hector Avalos, religions might preach peace, love, and harmony, but establishing a textual canon or sacred site which only some have privileged access to also establishes an illusory "scarcity" which causes people to fight. This is the intent of religious leaders, but it's an inevitable outgrowth of their actions — and we can see this occurring in the context of Islam with its holy sites and cities: Mecca, Medina, the Dome of the Rock, Hebron, and so on. Each city is holy to Muslims, but while Muslims focus on what they regard as the positive aspects, they cannot pretend that the negative aspects don't exist.

Moreover, even the positive aspects can be criticized as often inaccurate. The holiness of each site is associated with violence against other religions or against other Muslims and their importance has been as dependent on politics as religion, a sign of the degree to which political ideologies and parties make use of the religious concept of "holiness" to further their own agendas. Mecca Islam's holiest site, Mecca, is where Muhammad was born. During his exile in Medina, Muhammad had his followers pray in the direction of Mecca instead of Jerusalem which was the original orientation site.

Going on a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a person's life is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. Mecca is closed to non-Muslims because of a revelation Muhammad allegedly received from God, but some outsiders have entered while disguised as Muslims. Even before Muhammad, Mecca was a pilgrimage site for pagan polytheists and some argue that the Muslim practice of pilgrimage was borrowed from those ancient rituals. Some scholars argue that because Jews and Christians rejected Muhammad's

message, ancient pagan practices had to be incorporated into Islam in order to more easily capture the allegiance of local polytheists.

Christianity did much the same throughout Europe in order to convert pagans there. Located in the courtyard of the Great Mosque in Mecca is a windowless cube known as the Kaaba, believed by Muslims to have been built by the prophet Abraham. In the southeastern corner of the Kaaba is the "Black Stone," an object which Muslims believe was given to Abraham by the angel Gabriel. Reports of local pagans worshipping gods in the form of stones go back centuries and Muhammad probably incorporated this practice through the Kaaba itself.

Pagan rituals were thus re-told through the lives of biblical characters and so that local practices could continue under the guise of Muslim tradition. Medina is where Muhammad was exiled after he found little support for his ideas in his home city of Mecca, making it the second holiest site in Islam. There was a large Jewish community in Medina which Muhammad had hoped to convert, but his failure eventually led him to banish, enslave, or kill every Jew in the area. The presence of non-believers was at first an affront to Muhammad's claims that his religion superseded theirs; later, it was an affront to the holiness of the place.

Medina was also the capital of the Muslim empire until 661 when it was moved to Damascus. Despite its religious status, this loss of political power caused the city to decline precipitously and it had little influence during the Middle Ages. Medina's modern rise to prominence was again due to politics, not religion: after Britain occupied Egypt, the Ottoman occupiers of the region funneled communications through Medina, transforming it into a

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major transportation and communication center. Thus the importance, decline, and growth of Medina was always dependent upon the political situation, not on religion or religious beliefs.

Dome of the Rock The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is a Muslim shrine which stands where the first Jewish temple is believed to have stood, where Abraham tried to sacrifice his son to God, and where Muhammad ascended into heaven in order to receive God's commandments. For Muslims this is the third holiest site for pilgrimage, after Mecca and Medina. It may be the oldest surviving example of early Islamic architecture and is modeled after the Christian Church of the Holy Sepulchre, located nearby. Control of the site is a hotly contested issue for Muslims and Jews.

Many devout Jews would like to see the mosques torn down and the Temple reconstructed in their place, but this would destroy one of the holiest sites of Islam and lead to a religious war of unprecedented proportions. True Believers have gathered together in a variety of Third Temple societies in active preparation, even going so far as to prepare the precise clothing, coinage, and sacrificial implements needed for use in a rebuilt Temple. Stories have spread among Muslims that the creation of Israel was the first step in an apocalyptic process which will culminate in the total triumph of Islam over all the world.

The Dome of the Rock is thus one of the best examples of Avalos' argument about how religions create false scarcities which encourage violence. There are no natural resources on this site which humans might be expected to fight over — no oil, water, gold, etc. Instead, people are willing to launch an apocalyptic war simply because they all believe that the site is "holy" to

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them and, therefore, that only they should be allowed to control and build upon it. Hebron The city of Hebron is holy for both Muslims and Jews because it contains the "Cave of the Patriarchs," supposedly a tomb for Abraham and his family.

During the Six Day War of June, 1967, Israel seized Hebron along with the rest of the West Bank. After this war, hundreds of Israelis settled in the area, creating conflict with thousands of Palestinian neighbors. Because of this, Hebron has become a symbol of Israeli-Palestinian hostilities — and thus of interreligious strife, suspicion, and violence. It's not possible for both Jews and Muslims to have exclusive control of Hebron and neither group is willing to share control. It's only because of the insistence of both that the city is "holy" that they fight over it at all, though.

Mashhad Mashhad, Iran, is the site for the burial places and shrines for all twelve of the imams revered by the Twelver Shia Muslims. These holy men, believed to be a source of sanctity, are all martyrs because they were murdered, poisoned, or otherwise persecuted. It wasn't Christians or Jews who did this, though, but other Muslims. These shrines to the early imams are treated by Shia Muslims today as religious symbols, but if anything they are symbols for the ability of religion, including Islam, to encourage violence, brutality, and division among believers. Qom

Qom, Iran, is an important pilgrimage site for the Shi'a because of the burial sites of numerous shahs. The Borujerdi mosque is opened and closed each day by government guards who praise Iran's Islamic government. It is also the site of Shia theology training — and thus also of Shia political activism. When the Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran from exile, his first stop was <https://assignbuster.com/religion-and-belief/>

Qom. The city is thus as much a political shrine as it is a religious one, a monument to authoritarian politics and the authoritarian religion which provides politics with existential justification. -->