Religions and Cultures of the Middle East

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A Word About Religion

• We often think of religion as:
  – Divisive, cause of conflict
  – Irrational
  – Prone to fanaticism
  – Apart from the rest of life
    • Sacred vs. secular
A Word About Religion

• Religion = re-connect
  – Puts life back together.
A Word About Religion

• Religion = re-connect
  – Puts life back together.

• How?
  – Makes sense of things.
  – Finds meaning in life.
  – Brings us together.
A Word About Religion

• Religion is inseparable from the larger culture.
  – Deals with life as a whole.
  – Gets us through the day.
Middle Eastern Religions

- Zoroastrianism
- Judaism
- Christianity
- Islam
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- Zoroastrianism
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Abrahamic religions
Middle Eastern Religions

- Zoroastrianism
- Judaism
- Christianity
- Islam
  - Sunni, Shia, Sufi
  - Everyday life
  - Recent events

Focus on these
Zoroaster

- Zarathustra (Persian)
- One of the world’s most influential figures.
  - Lived about 1200 BCE in Persia.
Zoroaster

• Key ideas:
  – Cosmic battle between good and evil.
    • We must take sides.
  – Reward and punishment in the afterlife.
  – Concept of history.
Zoroaster

• Good vs. evil.
  – Good: Ahura Mazda.
    • The stronger god, object of worship.
  – Evil: Ahriman.
    • Solves theodicy problem (existence of evil).
The Origin and Meaning of “Mazda”

The company’s name, “Mazda,” derives from Ahura Mazda, a god of the earliest civilizations in western Asia. We have interpreted Ahura Mazda, the god of wisdom, intelligence and harmony, as a symbol of the origin of both Eastern and Western civilizations, and also as a symbol of automotive culture. It incorporates a desire to achieve world peace and the development of the automobile manufacturing industry. It also derives from the name of our founder, Jujiro Matsuda.
Zoroaster

- Zoroastrianism in popular culture.

“The Force” vs. Darth Vader

Luke Skywalker sides with the Force
Zoroaster

• Zoroastrianism in popular culture.

Musical theme:
Also Sprach Zarathustra, by Richard Strauss
Zoroaster

• Zoroastrianism in popular culture

Struggle against Sauron, Lord of the Rings

Inspiration for early video game, Dungeons and Dragons
Secularism

- Characteristic of Abrahamic traditions.
- Possibly symbolized by the Burning Bush.
    - “God said to Moses, “I am who I am [איה אשר איה]. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I am has sent me to you.’”
    - Similar story in Qur’an (20:10-48), without the “I am.”
Secularism

• One interpretation:
  – Yahweh refuses to give a name.
  – Calling one’s name exerts power over him/her.
  – Traditional practice of invoking spirits in nature by calling their names.
    • Practice survives in exorcism (“calling out”).
  – Yahweh is not a spirit in nature, but transcendent godhead.
  – “Disenchantment of nature” (Max Weber).
Secularism

- We are in charge of the world down here.
- Result: science and technology.
  - Compensate with romanticism, wilderness values.

Yosemite Valley (Ansel Adams)
Secularism

• Result: Regular prayer to maintain contact with the Holy.
  – Jewish: 3 prayer services per day *(Shacharit, Mincha, Ma’ariv)*
  – Muslim: 5 prayers per day
    • Following Zoroaster
  – Christian: “Pray without ceasing”
    • St. Paul

*Tallit* (prayer shawl)
Secularism

• Result: Regular holy day
  • *Shabbat* (Jewish Sabbath)
  • Christian holy day (Sunday)
  • Muslim holy day (Friday).

*Muslims leaving Friday prayer service*
Islam

• Founded by the Prophet Muhammad in 622 ce.
  – Born in Mecca.
  – Traveled to Levant
  – Impressed by monotheism of Judaism, Christianity
Islam

- Founded by the Prophet Muhammad in 622 ce.
  - Received revelation at age 40.
  - Dictated it to followers.
  - *Qu’ran* = dictation
Islam

• Founded by the Prophet Muhammad in 622 ce.
  – Migrated to Medina to escape persecution.
  – Conquered Mecca 2 years before his death.

Prophet’s Mosque, Medina, Saudi Arabia
Pillars of Islam

- Faith
- Prayer
- Alms (Zakat)
- Fast during month of Ramadan
- Pilgrimage (Hajj) to Mecca
Pillars of Islam

• Faith.
  – The *Shahadah*:
    *La ilaha illa ‘Llah*
    There is no god but *the* God (*al Lah = Allah)*;
    *Muhammadun rasulu’Llah*
    Muhammad is the messenger of God.
Pillars of Islam

- *Qur’an* recognizes Jewish & Christian traditions
  - Abraham (*Ibrahim*), Moses (*Musa*)
  - Jesus (*Isa*), Mary (*Miriam*)

- “People of the Book”
  - Jews, Christians, Sabians
  - Zoroastrians (in Iran)
Pillars of Islam

• Prayer.
  – 5 times a day (dawn, noon, midafternoon, sunset, night)
  – Prayer calls from mosque.
Pillars of Islam

• *Zakat* (alms)
  – All possessions belong to God.
  – We must set aside 2.5% for those in need.
  – This is justice, not pity or charity.
Pillars of Islam

• Fast during month of Ramadan
  – 9th month of Muslim lunar calendar
  – Abstain from food, drink and sex during daylight hours.
    • Various exceptions.
  – In 2013 (1434),
    \( Ramadan = \)
    July 9 – Aug 7.
Pillars of Islam

• Pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to Mecca
  – Those who are physically and financially able

Grand Mosque (*Al-Masjid al-Haram*), surrounding the *Kaaba*
Islam

• Essence of Islam:
  – It is a faith of austere simplicity.
  – The Qur’an is the only authority.
  – Allah provides rock-solid security in an unpredictable world.
  – We live in a secular world, a moral testing ground.
  – Islam has parallels with conservative Protestant Christianity.
Jihad

• What is *jihad*?
  – Literally, effort or struggle.
    • Similarly, *crusade* (from “cross”) need not be a military action.
  – However, *jihad* has historically referred to military struggle at times.
    • The “lesser jihad.”
    • *Qur’an* instructs Muslims to convert infidels by force if necessary (9:29).
Dietary Laws

• Dietary laws
  – Influenced by Jewish *Kashrut* (Kosher)
  – *Haram* (forbidden):
    • Pork, blood products
    • Carnivorous animals, reptiles, insects
    • Animals improperly slaughtered
    • Alcohol and other intoxicating drugs
Hadiths

• Temporal side of Islam
  – The *Hadiths* contain additional rules of conduct that vary according to local tradition.

Grand Mosque,
Bur Dubai
The Sunni - Shi’ite split reflects an early power struggle.

- **Sunni** is from the Sunna
  - Body of law used by Sunni
  - Caliphs recognized as temporal leaders.

- **Shi’ite** is from Shia Ali, party of Ali
  - Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law.
Sunni/Shia

• Sunni Muslims leave interpretation of scripture up to the individual.
  – With assistance of imams (priests) and the ulema (scholars).
    • The ulema deal primarily with moral law, not theology.
  – Sunnis are the majority sect outside of Iran & parts of Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain.
Sunni/Shia

- Shia Muslims recognize religious leaders.
  - Such as Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani of Iraq.
Sunni/Shia

– Twelvers (primarily in Iran) recognize 12 imams who descend from Ali.
  • The last imam (Muhammad al Mahdi) is hidden and will return at some point.

Mosque of the 12th Imam (Jamkaran Mosque), near Qom, Iran.
– Seveners (India, Pakistan, etc.), a sect of Ismailites, recognize seven Imams.
  • Named for Ismail ibn Jafar, 6th Imam.
  • Druze are historically related to Ismailites.
  • Note: *imam* in Shia Islam ≠ *imam* in Sunni Islam

Prince Karim al-Hussaini,
4th Aga Khan,
Leader of Nizari Ismailites
Sunni/Shia

• Shia do not traditionally recognize clerical government.
  – Current government of Iran is an exception.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini
1902-1989
Leader of 1979 Iranian Revolution
Sufism

• Mystical branch of Islam.
  – Adherents seek to transform inner consciousness.
  – May become ascetics.

Al-Ghazali
Sufi theologian
Persia, 11th c.

Rumi (Mevlana)
Sufi poet
Afghanistan, 13th c.
Sufism

– Aim is to transform consciousness.
  • As opposed to strict lifestyle regulations of mainstream Islam.

Dervishes (Turkey)

Mevlevi Order, founded by Rumi

Dervish = Doorway (to spiritual life)
Sufism

• A Sufi Muslim in the news.
  – Imam Abdul Rauf
    • Force behind “Ground Zero Mosque”
      – Park51 Islamic Community Center
    • Proponent of interfaith cooperation.
    • Served as emissary for US State Dept.
Gulf States

- Sunni Islam
  - Majority expat population
  - Very prosperous

Burj Khalifa, Dubai
World’s tallest building
Gulf States

- Life is family-oriented.
  - Family outings.
  - Shopping
Gulf States

Restaurants typically have a family section.
Gulf States

Shopping malls may have a family day
Gulf States

– Outside the family, typically segregated by gender.

Women at shopping mall, wearing abayamas

Qur’an does not require women to wear head or face covering
Gulf States

Arab men (wearing thobes)
pass time chatting at Starbucks

Middle East: origin of *machismo*
Gulf States

- Segregation by gender need not imply different status.
  - Women are active in business, politics.
  - Equal status in Koran.
    - Equal property, inheritance rights.
    - Women retain their family name.
    - Muhammad’s wife was a businesswoman, supported family.
    - Policy on divorce is unequal but misunderstood.
Gulf States

Prayer room at shopping mall
Gulf States

• No liquor, gambling.
  – Liquor stores illegal, except perhaps for Western expats.

Birj al-Arab Hotel, Dubai. No casino here, but…
Friday – Mosque day
- Morning – Sleep in. Streets deserted.
- Noon – Attend service at mosque.
- Afternoon – Family meal prepared by live-in Filipino maids.
- Evening – Shop until you drop.
  Traffic jams.

Inside Grand Mosque
Muscat, Oman
Gulf States

Mall traffic

Dubai
Gulf States

• Ramadan
  – No eating, drinking, smoking, or sex until sundown.
  – Restaurants closed by law.
  – Time of *iftar* (breaking of fast) available on web, smart phones.
  – Begin by eating dates.
Gulf States

- Many sleep most of the day, stay up all night.
  - *Iftar* banquets.
  - Or family meal.
    - Tough time for maids.
  - Tendency to gain weight during month of fasting.

Company-sponsored *iftar* banquet, Kuwait
Gulf States

– Charitable causes & religious programs.

Free *iftar* meals ready for distribution by a charitable foundation, Dubai
Eid al-Fitr

- After Ramadan – *Eid al-Fitr*
  - Huge holiday.
  - Prayers.
  - Parties.
    - Luscious desserts.

*Eid al-Fitr* prayers, Oman
Eid al-Fitr

Eid al-Fitr prayers, Ahmedabad, India
Arab Dinner Party

• You are invited to a private home.
  – Men enter by front entrance, women by rear.
  – Men and women do not associate during the entire evening.

• Men gather in large parlor, sit on sofas arranged around the walls.
  – On entering, move counterclockwise around the room, greeting & shaking hands.
Arab Dinner Party

• For men only…
• Have a seat.
  – Servant will bring bitter herb tea.
  – Drink it quickly.
  – Shake the empty cup to indicate you are ready for the servant to take it.
  – Don’t discuss politics or religion.
Arab Dinner Party

• When it’s time for dinner, you will line up at wash basin.
• Men go outside to tent (*majlis*) for meal.
  – In summer, tent will be air conditioned.
Arab Dinner Party

• Sit on cushions around food.
  – Tray may contain roast lamb, surrounded by rice, hard-boiled eggs, etc.
  – There are no utensils; use fingers to take meat, etc.
  – Scoop up rice with fingers and push into your mouth with thumb.
Arab Dinner Party

- After meal, return to wash basin in the house.
- Move into parlor for dessert and after-dinner conversation.
- At close of evening, make the rounds counter-clockwise to say *massalama*. 
Saudi Arabia
Saudi Arabia

• **Strict observance**
  – Men & women segregated.
  – Women not allowed to drive.
  – Dinner party.

Al Munirah Mosque
Dharan, Saudi Arabia
Saudi Arabia

- **Strict observance**
  - Shops close for prayers.
  - Home of Wahhabi faith (to be discussed later).
Saudi Arabia

• **Strict observance**
  – No coed universities.
  – Prayer rugs in university hallways.
  – Male comradeship.

King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals
Dhahran
Saudi Arabia

• Predominately Sunni
  – Dhahran is heavily Shia.
  – Causeway connects to Bahrain, scene of Shia/Sunni conflict

Causeway from Dhahran to Bahrain
Turkey

Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia, İstanbul
Turkey

Interior of Blue Mosque, İstanbul
Turkey

Süleymaniya Camii, İstanbul
Turkey

• A moderate form of Islam
  – Modern state founded with secular government.
    • Religion largely a matter of ethnic identity (as in much of Middle East)

*Mustafa Kemal Atatürk on Turkish banknote (before currency reform)*
Turkic Peoples

Azerbaijan
Kazakhstan
Kyrgyzstan
Turkey
Turkmenistan
Uzbekistan

Russia: Balkars, Bashkirs, Chuvash, Karachai, Crimean Tatars, Tuvans

Moldova: Gagauz

China: Xinjiang Province

Cyprus: Turkish Cypriots
Turkey

• Ramadan not so strictly observed
  – Turks love their cigarettes and *raki*.
Turkey

• Ramadan not so strictly observed
  – After Ramadan, Şeker Bayramı
  – “Sweet holiday”
  – Visit relatives
  – Prepare food for neighbors

Candy store in Turkey
Turkey

• Now inching toward an Islamic government

Abdullah Gül
President of Turkey

Moderate Islamist

With his wife
Turkey

- Islamist / secular split

Girls with head covering

Girls without head covering at Bilkent University
Iran

- Two traditions
  - Persian
  - Islamic

World’s first empire. 580-486 BCE
Controlled by Cyrus the Great.
Gave Zoroastrian ideas to the West via Jewish Exile
Location of Modern Iran
Iran

- Persian tradition
  - Identified with political right

Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani

Mir-Hossein Mousavi

Shah Reza Pahlavi
Installed after CIA-led coup against Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh
Iran

- Islamic tradition (Shia)
  - Ayatollahs traditionally don’t run the government

*President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad*
Traffic engineer by training

*Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei*
Supreme leader of Iran
Iran

- Islamist / secular rift in society

Many young people attracted by justice agenda of Ahmadinejad

Others want to Westernize as fast as possible
Iran

Young people participate in symbolic self-flagellation during Ashura (Hussein’s Day) celebration, Teheran
Syria

- Sunni majority
- Alawite Shia minority is politically dominant
  - A formula for trouble

Bashar al-Assad
President of Syria
Member of Alawite sect
Syria

- **Alawite sect**
  - Twelver Shia Muslims
    - Alawite = Ali - ite
  - More ethnic identity than religious doctrine
    - As is common in Middle East
Syria

• Hafez al-Assad
  – Took power 1970
  – Hama Massacre, 1982
    • Suppressed rebellion of Muslim Brotherhood (Sunni)
      – 10,000-25,000 killed, mostly civilians
    • Helps fuel civil war today

*Hafez al-Assad
1930-2000*
Questions?
Comments?