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# A Reflection: *The New Introduction to Islam*

SETH ROLLINS

REL 2040: The Bible, Qur'an, and Western Culture, Fall 2016

Nominated by: Dr. Sharon Showman

Seth is a psychology major in the College of Science and Mathematics at the WSU Lake Campus. After graduation, he plans to earn a Master's Degree in Clinical Mental Health Counseling and to pursue a career in the counseling field.

## **Seth Notes:**

Writing this paper was a great opportunity for me. It helped me better understand the religion of Islam, which I previously knew very little about. In doing so, it also helped me to see that people with different views are more similar to me than I had ever realized. I hope this paper will help audiences better understand the religion of Islam.

## **Dr. Showman notes:**

One of the hallmarks of Seth's paper is his honesty about what he does not know which leads him to select a book that will offer him detailed information about Islam's history and its place among the Western Religions. His intellectual openness to a religion that is not well understood or accepted in the geographical area that Seth is from and currently lives in speaks of his academic willingness to take a "risk" with the religious unknown. Another hallmark is his ability to make connections between his understandings of the Bible as it relates to the Jewish faith and the Christian faith with his developing understanding of Islam. Rather than boycotting or dismissing his new discoveries of the ties and connections between these various religious traditions, the reader can see that Seth is "fascinated" by what he has discovered. In reading Seth's paper it is clear that the material and his reflections upon that material has had a profound effect which he shares with conviction in his paper which is academically based and personally rooted.

I knew little about Islam. It seemed like a very foreign religion. One that developed from Middle Eastern customs and was entirely different from the Christian religion I had grown up with. However, after reading the book *New Introduction to Islam* by Daniel W. Brown, I gained new insights into Islam. Specifically, this book showed me that Islam is more similar to religions I was already familiar with, such as Christianity and Judaism, than I had previously realized.

While reading this book, the first aspect of Islam that stuck out to me was the atmosphere in which Islam developed. While Islam developed in Arabia, it was greatly influenced by the culture of the Near East, an area just north of Arabia. One of the driving forces of Near Eastern culture was the Byzantine Empire, whose major religion was Christianity (Brown, 2009). Christianity had an impact on the area in which Islam would develop, but as Brown (2009) notes, “Christianity dominated the Near Eastern religious patchwork, but it was a Christianity divided into three large pieces, and countless smaller ones” (pg. 34). The three major Christian sects referred to here are: the Nestorians, who believed that Jesus’s mother was a human and therefore Jesus could not be divine; the Monophysites, who believed that Jesus was fully divine; and the Orthodox Chalcedonians, who believed in the ruling of the council at Chalcedon that Jesus was both fully God and fully man (Brown, 2009).

Although the Byzantine Empire adopted the ruling of the Council at Chalcedon as their official doctrine, the teachings of Nestorians and Monophysites still had a major effect in other areas. In fact, the controversy over which sect was correct eventually divided the Christian church, with different areas aligning with the sect that most supported their beliefs (Brown, 2009). It is essential to note this struggle because it had a great impact on the culture of the Near East. The debate over which view of Christianity was correct was a major topic among thinkers and theologians at that time. Islam would be impacted also by this debate. We can even see this impact in the Qurán, which comments on some of the issues being discussed (Brown, 2009).

Even though the Near East has been presented as a region dominated by Christianity and Zoroastrianism, Judaism still had a key place in the region and was able to spread many of its own ideas. Indeed, many of these Jewish ideas would have an impact on the formation of Islam (Brown, 2009). One of the Jewish ideas that Islam heavily picked up on was the idea of dual revelation. Dual revelation states that God sends a written law, but he

also sends an oral tradition that is passed down by teachers of the religion. In Jewish tradition this written law is known as the Torah, while the oral traditions are written down in the Talmud. In Islamic tradition, the written law is known as the Qurán, and the oral traditions are written down in the Sunna of the Prophet (Brown, 2009).

I have been a Christian my entire life, so I was familiar with Christian teachings and knew a little about Jewish customs from studying the Old Testament (Jewish Scriptures). In contrast, Islam was a religion I knew very little about, and this made the religion seem foreign to me. However, learning more about this religion changed my perception of it. Seeing that Islam grew up in an environment that was heavily influenced by Christian and Jewish ideas made me feel as if Islam was actually connected to the religions I was used to. I now see that Islam is closely tied to both Christianity and Judaism, borrowing many ideas and customs from these religions.

Another item that really fascinated me as I read *A New Introduction to Islam* was its account on the life of Muhammad. The story of Muhammad showed that he had many ties to both Christianity and Judaism. These ties can be seen in the revelation that began Muhammad's ministry. For instance, Muhammad first learned that he was to be a prophet of God from the angel Gabriel (Brown, 2009). Islamic tradition says that one night while Muhammad was at Mount Hira, the angel Gabriel came to him and commanded him to read. When Muhammad said that he could not read, the angel pressed in on him with a great weight. This happened three times, and after the third time, the angel gave Muhammad words to recite to the people. The words given to Muhammad that night would later form the beginning of Sura 96 in the Qurán (Brown, 2009).

At first, Muhammad was terrified by this vision and was not sure if he was supposed to spread the revelations given to him. However, his wife Khadijah and her Christian cousin Waraqa had a very different reaction. As Brown (2009) recalls, "Waraqa, in particular, was ecstatic at the news and assured Khadijah that Muhammad had been visited by the great Namus, the very same being who had visited Moses, and that he would be the prophet of his people" (pg. 55).

Another story of God's revelation to Muhammad also links the Prophet back to Christianity and Judaism. Islamic tradition tells of a night in which Muhammad was taken to Jerusalem with the angel, Gabriel. In Jerusalem, Muhammad met and prayed with the prophets Abraham, Moses,

and Jesus (Brown, 2009). During this trip, Muhammad was also given a view of Hell and a tour of Heaven. While he was in Heaven, he met with other prophets, including Adam, Jesus's cousin John, and Moses' brother Aaron (Brown, 2009). It was during this visit to Heaven that God commanded Muhammad that Muslims should pray fifty times a day, a number which Muhammad was able to negotiate down to the five prayers a day that Muslims observe today (Brown, 2009).

I had always assumed that Muhammad was just an Arabian prophet who spread religious ideas that he had made up himself. However, seeing that his revelations came from the angel Gabriel, an angel I was familiar with from Christian teachings, drastically changed my view. In addition, seeing that the story of Muhammad's trip to Heaven included several references to characters from Christian and Jewish teachings made it seem as if he was connected to the God I worship in my Christian faith. I do not know if I will ever believe that Muhammad's teachings actually came from God. Despite this, after learning more about him I now view him not as someone who came up with an entirely new religion, but as someone offering a different approach to the God of Jews and Christians.

Another way *A New Introduction to Islam* taught me was by giving me much more insight into the Islamic holy book, the Qurán. According to Muslim tradition, Muhammad's followers wrote the Qurán. The followers took the revelations that Muhammad preached to them, wrote them down, and made a book out of them (Brown, 2009). Muslim tradition says the Qurán was canonized 40 years after Muhammad's death, although new evidence suggests that it may have been canonized closer to 200 years after Muhammad's death. Either way, once the Qurán was written it was revised very little in the following years. The Qurán Muslims read today is very similar to the original (Brown, 2009).

The Qurán fascinated me because of its many ties to Christianity and Judaism. As Brown (2009) notes, "If we place the Qurán in seventh-century Arabia, we can only make sense of its origins by importing significant Jewish and Christian influences into the Hijaz (an area of Arabia)" (pg. 75). The author uses this quote to suggest that the Qurán may not have been formed in Arabia, but rather in a Near Eastern area such as Syria or Palestine. Despite this, the quote still illustrates the significant impact that Christian and Jewish teachings had on the Qurán. The Qurán mentions multiple characters from Jewish tradition, such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Solomon (Brown, 2009). In addition, the Qurán mentions Jesus numerous times and

provides a lot of information about him. The Qurán differs from most Christian teachings by saying that Jesus was just a messenger of God, not the son of God. Yet, even this was not an entirely Islamic idea. A small Christian sect at this time, known as Manichaeism, also taught that Jesus was just a prophet (Brown, 2009). Therefore, this idea may not have been something that Islam developed, but rather a product of the diverse religious background in which Islam began (Brown, 2009).

While these references to characters from the Bible made the Qurán seem more familiar to me, the overall message of the Qurán also seemed very similar to the Christian teachings I grew up with. The overall message of the Qurán is that there is one God, that we are to worship him, and that even though we sometimes mess up and do not give our full attention to him, he is merciful. This mercy is shown through God's prophets and the scriptures God gives us to remind us to worship him (Brown, 2009). These ideas seem very close to the Christian ideas that God created the world, that man sinned and was separated from him, and that God has mercy on us. In the case of Christianity, this mercy is shown by God sending his Son to die for us so that we can have a relationship with him.

I always thought that Islam was a religion that was entirely different from Christianity. However, reading *A New Introduction to Islam* changed this view. This book showed me that Islam grew up in an environment which had a strong Christian influence. It also revealed to me that the revelations given to Islam's leading prophet, Muhammad, are not exclusive to Islam, but actually have many ties to Christianity. In addition, it made me realize that the Islamic holy book, the Qurán, was actually shaped by many Christian texts. Overall, learning more about Islam made me view Muslims not as a group of people practicing a faith utterly different from my own, but as a group of people who are trying to form their own understanding of the same God I worship.

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## References

Brown, D. W. (2009). *A new introduction to Islam* (2nd ed.). Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub.