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REL 101

**Locked on Mecca**

Islamic culture is normally associated with gruesome images and terrorism commonly portrayed in American media. However, the culture holds many similarities to Christianity because of its primarily locative visions on traditions within the culture. J. Z. Smith defines locative and utopian visions as being the essential factors that define and differentiate religions. Islamic culture is predominantly a locative religion because of the praying rituals, geographic location of most Muslims, and pilgrimage to Mecca.

Islamic praying practices, or Salah, is a tradition that relies on place to be completed, and is locative. Muslims are expected to pray five times a day toward Qiblah, a sacred mosque in Mecca, and for most Muslims in North America this is facing east. If performed in the morning when the sun is rising, it is very enlightening and holds many parallels to praying towards a God with light surrounding him. Place is so important that failure to pray towards Mecca is considered a blamable sin. If there were no locative ties to this tradition, then there wouldn’t be any importance in praying towards Mecca, or any direction for that matter. There are time specifications for the five prayers, being the morning, noon, afternoon, evening, and night prayers. Islamic praying rituals are very time and place specific.

Unlike most religions like Christianity, Islam isn’t spread throughout the world. Muslims are very concentrated to one area, with 50 Muslim-majority countries worldwide. All of these countries are located in North Africa, Asia, or the Middle East, with the four sects of Islam differing from country to country. If you follow Islam, then chances are that you are from this area of the world. Religions that are utopian are spread around the world fairly evenly because they don’t rely on place, making Islam a stronger case for being a predominant locative religion. All of these countries are located in North Africa, Asia, or the Middle East; with the four sects of Islam differing from country to country. Sunni is the largest sect of Islam, making up seventy-five to ninety percent of all Muslims. Sunnis believe that the four caliphs were the rulers after the prophet and felt a linkage to the original land, therefore keeping them in the same geographic area throughout time. This makes this specific sect extremely locative because they have stayed in the same place for so long. Also, you don’t normally follow Sunni traditions unless you were born in the area. The Shias are another geographic locative sect and compose around ten to twenty percent of all Islam’s. They reside mostly in Iran and Iraq, and were the first to break away from the Sunnis. This made the Shias sedentary as a sect, and kept the Shias concentrated in that area.

What makes Islam mostly locative is the Hajj, a pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. It is a necessary adventure that must be taken by every Muslim at least once in their lifetime when they can afford it. Everything surrounding the Hajj depends on place, and has a very locative backbone. The fact that there is only one place in the world that this pilgrimage can be performed is not just place specific, but relies on that place to be in existence for the entire span that there are followers of Islam. Rituals once you are in pilgrimage are also very locative. The pilgrim has to enter the mosque with their right foot first while reciting a prayer, which is a symbol of unity and is oriented in the direction of the Ka’aba. The pilgrim then performs the sa’i. During this event, the pilgrim runs seven times in between two hills near the Ka’aba called Safa and Marwah. If this had utopian influences, then one can perform the run between any two hills, even in America, to complete this part of the Hajj. Less specific, if it were utopian, one could complete the Hajj at any mosque, and it wouldn’t be as big of a deal for a pilgrim to perform it in Mecca. If this place didn’t exist, then the entire culture would have to change its practices, and it wouldn’t be as strongly defined as a locative tradition.

Place in time is also very important for the religion, as the hajj begins on the eighth day of Dhul-Hijjah, during the twelfth month of the Muslim calendar. This event falls eleven days earlier each year than the year before it, being very time specific. The days of the pilgrimage are all named, and have different places the pilgrims must be, along with rituals to be performed during those days. Emphasizing time so much to place names on each day in relation to Dhul-Hijjah is very place dependent. The day of Arafah is the second day of Hajj and is spent in an empty plain in Arafah. On the next day they return to Mina, and throw seven pebbles at a pillar. This symbolizes Satan’s temptation of Abraham, and is not just any old pillar found on your typical Egyptian architecture styled building. These rituals cannot be performed anywhere else or during any other place in time, making them rely heavily on place for the Hajj to be completed. As stated before, if these sites were destroyed, then the Hajj wouldn’t be as special to a follower of Islam.

When place is emphasized heavily in anything, it makes going there for an enthusiast very special and nostalgic because of the history accumulated there through the ages. For instance, in golf, Augusta national is a very sacred place to play golf. It is the site of the Masters tournament every year, and because it is a major tournament on the PGA tour, it has attracted the best golfers every year since 1934. This tournament has seen some of the best rivalries between championship golfers played out, and any enthusiast considers it to be on top of their places to go. This concept can be applied to why pilgrims consider Mecca as such a significant site. Every Muslim has always gone there, and so you know that when you step on the grounds that every other pilgrim before you has completed the journey that you are about to embark on, just as any legendary golfer before you has played on the same 18 holes you are about to compete on. This nostalgia makes the Hajj increasingly locative as time progresses.

Muslims must demonstrate submission to one God by serving and following his commands, which requires an extreme amount of discipline through passed down traditions and a huge community effort. The fact that it is so locative helps preserve the disciplines and rituals throughout time, and I don’t think it was this way by chance. With the ingraining of Mecca as being the only place that one can perform Hajj and where every Muslim must face when praying preserves the religion and hinders free thought against it. Also, the followers are all majorly located in one area, creating the bystander effect from each other to think within the discipline. The locative vision distances themselves from other religions, and keeps out other thoughts that might be harmful to changing the religion from leaking in.

Islamic culture is a locative tradition because of its pilgrimage, prayers, and where Muslims are concentrated. With the stress on Mecca in everything they do, ranging from a life journey to where they face while they pray, the religion relies heavily on place. The religion can be argued as Utopian due to the other pillars not relying on place, but the importance of the locative traditions overrule the possible vision of it being a utopian religion.