

Religious Identity Paper

Jordan Wheeler

Nebraska Wesleyan University

jwheeler@nebrwesleyan.edu

For Christians and Muslims, even the most personal, individual religious identities are historically shaped by at least three related themes: scripture and tradition, authority and worship, and ethics and politics.

These two religions use scripture and tradition to help form their religious identity. Christianity uses multiple scriptures that shape their identity. The different interpretations of scripture form the denominations amongst Christians. In the second century, Origen, a theologian, said there were three main ways of interpreting the scriptures: literal, lesson and spiritual. Origen believed that the scriptures should not all be taken literal and that within each scripture, there is an "inner" meaning. Hundreds of years later, Martin Luther, in the sixteenth century, wanted change the way Christians interpreted the bible. He wanted Christians to forget about the illogical things. Furthermore he wanted to mainly focus on the Gospel of John and Paul's letters; he thought that they were more true than other scriptures. These two styles of interpretation formed what is now the Eastern Orthodox Roman Catholic and the Protestant denominations, respectively. Even though there are denominations within Christianity, they all still believe in one God, which is mentioned throughout the New Testament.

Islam used the idea that the world was corrupt and that it could be fixed by the formation of Islam. The Quran was sent down to Muhammad in the seventh century. The Quran then became the scripture and aided in the identity of Muslims. Unlike Christianity, Muslims do not have different interpretation of the Quran. The Quran is interpreted by reciting the Suras and taking the scriptures literally. Muslims believe that there is strictly one God, which comes from the Quran as each Sura starts with: "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful." Also, The Fiqh Akbar II, written in the tenth century, states that "Allah has not created things from a pre-existent thing... Allah created the creatures free from unbelief and from belief." God is above everything and these statements are used widely amongst Muslims to teach the oneness of God.

The formation of individuals' beliefs about the meaning of scripture and the idea of a monotheistic God are actually not as personal as it may seem. Christians and Muslims get these beliefs, and other beliefs, from a long line of descent of interpretations of scriptures and traditions.

With scripture and tradition, these two religions also use authority and worship to help form identity. Christianity is divided into four different authorities: Apostolic Succession, Papal, Biblical and Pentecostal (Holy Spirit). These au-

thorities branch to different worship styles, focuses and goals. Stated earlier, there are different denominations within Christianity. The Eastern Orthodox Roman Catholic denomination is associated with the first two types of authority and the Protestant denomination is associated with the last two authorities. These different authorities and denominations have different focuses and goals while worshipping. As seen in videos in class, Eastern Orthodox Roman Catholic focus on the Eucharist and uses strict rules during services, where as Protestants do not focus on communion. Protestants focus on the sermon and scriptures and use singing as a strong contributor to worship.

In comparison to Christianity, Muslims disagree about the historic leadership of Islam, which causes two major groups: Sunni and Shia. This disagreement, however, does not affect their rituals, worships, focuses and goals, as both groups share the same five pillars. One of these pillars is Salat, which are required prayers that all Muslims must do five times a day. Another one of these pillars is Shahadah, a statement of belief, saying "There is only one God and Mohammed is His messenger." The other three pillars, Zakat, a required donation, Hajj, a highly recommended trip to Mecca, and fasting during Ramadan are also share amongst all Muslims. Since the Quran prescribes the five pillars to Muslims, both Sunni and Shia, have to perform these rituals and worships.

Christianity's expressions during rituals and worship are not decided by each individual but are handed down from the authority of each denomination. Islam's expressions during rituals and worship is also not decided by each individual but is rather prescribed to all from the Quran.

Lastly, ethics and politics also play a role in the identity making of each of these religions. Found through many documents in class, ethics and politics have an inverse relationship. Christianity started with idealized ethics because they had no power, in fact it was illegal at first. The ideal ethics are seen in the New Testament, especially in Paul's letter. Paul writes that, "Our salvation is even nearer? no drunken orgies, no promiscuity or licentiousness, and no wrangling or jealousy." Paul thinks Jesus will return for judgment soon and sets high ideals because Christians should not sin if Jesus is coming soon for judgment. Once becoming legalized and gaining political power, the ethics become less idealistic and more flexible. In the fourth century, Augustine creates the idea of Original Sin, which means no one is born perfect, creating Christianity's sliding scale. Augustine wants Christians to be forgiven for sins, making their ethics more flexible.

Unlike Christianity, Islam started with political power, meaning their ethics began more flexible. In Islam "the sphere of prohibited things is very small, while that of permissible things is extremely vast." Islam starts out being realistic and flexible. Islam also becomes more flexible by having the five major levels that Muslims are supposed to follow. The first level is required, which consists of the five pillars. The last level is the forbidden, which is a very small

amount of things. The middle three levels are recommended but if you do not do them you will not be punished in the afterlife. The required and forbidden works are very small compared to everything in the middle levels, which do not affect Muslims' afterlife. However, in relatively recent years, Islam has lost political power causing different responses and ethics. Two of the responses are Islamicist and fundamentalist. These two both believe that the world can be fixed by Islamic values, meaning that Muslims in these groups have higher standards in Islamic value and ethics, which causes them to be more idealistic.

Christians and Muslims' ethics have changed throughout history, which also causes them to change their identity. The ethics that have shaped Christians' identities is because of the historic gain in political power Christianity had in the fourth century. The ethics that Muslims and their change in identity are due to the response of a loss in political power. Both these religions have had three main historic themes: scripture and tradition, authority and worship, and ethics and politics, that has helped shape each individual's identity amongst the group.