

# THE MIRACULOUS BIRTH OF ISLAM

Muhammad H.I. Dobinson

Dr Desmond Morris, the well-known British social-anthropologist, has said of religion:

“Religious Displays, as distinct from religious beliefs, are submissive acts performed towards dominant individuals called gods. The acts themselves include various forms of body-lowering, such as kneeling, bowing, kowtowing, salaaming, and prostrating ; also chanting and rituals of debasement and sacrifice ; the offering of gifts to the gods and the making of symbolic gestures of allegiance.

“The function of these acts is to appease the super-dominant beings and thereby obtain favours or avoid punishments. There is nothing unusual about this behaviour in itself. Subordinates throughout the animal world subject themselves to their most powerful companions in a similar way. But the strange feature of these human submissive actions, as we encounter them today, is that they are performed towards a dominant figure, or figures who are never present in person. Instead, they are represented by images and artifacts and operate entirely through agents called holy men or priests. These middlemen enjoy a position of social influence and respect because some of the powers of the gods rub off on them. It is therefore extremely important to the holy man to keep the worshippers permanently obedient to the super-dominant figures, and this is done in several ways:

“1. They encourage the social rejection of worshippers of rival deities. This pressure ranges from mild disapproval to scorn and anger, and often to severe persecution. Whether or not they preach social tolerance, many

religions have practised intolerance. This is part of the role they play as cultural isolating mechanisms., The loyalty to the locally shared god-figure demands social separation from those who worship in a different way. It creates sects and breeds sectarian violence.

“2. They frequently construct convincing evidence that the deities can hurt the non-submissive. In the past, any natural disaster—flood, disease, famine, or fire—is explained as a token of the deities’ anger, sent to punish insubordinate behaviour. They exploit coincidences that have given rise to superstitions, and they play on the suggestibility of the worshippers.

“3. They invent an after-world where the subordinates who obey them will be rewarded, and those who do not will suffer torment. There is evidence that belief in an after-life existed many thousands of years ago. Ancient burial occurred with ‘grave-goods,’ supplied for the corpse’s journey to the other world. This practice dates back to the Stone Age and has continued with little change over the millennia.

“It is surprising that otherwise intelligent men have succumbed to these pressures and fears in so many different cultures and in so many epochs. There appear to be several features aiding the agents of the gods.

“First, and perhaps the most important, is the acquisition by our early ancestors of a sense of time. Other species can communicate with information about the present—about the moods they are in at the moment of communicating—but they cannot consider the future. Man can contemplate his own mortality, and finds the thought intolerable. Any animal will struggle to protect itself from a threat of death. There are many self-protecting mechanisms, but they will occur as a response to an immediate danger. When man contemplates his future death, it is as if, by thinking of it, he renders it immediate. His defence is to deny it. He cannot deny that his body will die and rot—the evidence is too strong for that ; so he solves the problem by the invention of an immortal soul—a soul that is more 'him' than

even his physical body is 'him'. If this soul can survive in an after-life, then he has successfully defended himself against the threatened attack on his life.

“This gives the agents of the gods a powerful area of support. All they need to do is to remind their followers constantly of their immortality and to convince them that after-life itself is under the personal management of the particular gods they are promoting. The self-protecting urges of their worshippers will do the rest.

“Secondly, the holy men are aided by man’s neotony. Neotony is a biological condition found in certain species in which the juvenile form of the animal becomes increasingly adult, or, to put it another way, the adults become increasingly juvenile. It is the 'Peter Pan' syndrome—the case of a species that never grows up, but starts to reproduce while still in the juvenile state. In many ways, man is a neotonous ape. He has the curiosity and playfulness of a young ape. When the ape becomes mature, he loses his infantile playfulness ; but man never loses it.

“Man’s evolution as a neotonous ape has put him in a similar position to the dog’s. He becomes sexually mature and yet he still needs a parent—a super-parent, one as impressive to him as man must be to a dog. The answer was to invent a god—either a female super-parent in the shape of a Mother Goddess, or a male god in the shape of God the Father, or perhaps even a whole family of gods. Like real parents, they would protect, punish, and be obeyed.

“Thirdly, the holy men are aided by man’s highly evolved co-operativeness. When our ancient ancestors became hunters, they were forced to co-operate with one another to a much greater degree than ever before. A leader had to rely on his companions for active co-operation, not merely passive submission. If they were to show initiative there was a danger that they would lack the blind, unquestioning allegiance to their leader or to their tribe. The intelligent co-operation that was desperately needed by the hunting group could easily work against the equally necessary group cohesion. How

could a leader command both blind faith and questioning intelligence? The answer was to enlist the aid of a super-leader—a god-figure—to take care of the blind faith and to bind the group together in a common purpose, while leaving the members of the group free to exercise intelligent co-operation amongst themselves.

“These, then, are the three main factors helping the holy men in their successful promotion of god-figures and religious behaviour: man’s need to protect himself from the threat of death; man’s need for a super-parent; and man’s need for a super-leader. A god that offers an after-life in another world, that protects his ‘children’ regardless of their age, and that offers them devotion to a grand cause and a socially unifying purpose, triggers off a powerful reaction in the human animal.”<sup>6</sup>

E.E. Kellett says of the nature and origin of religion:

“A precise definition of religion is probably impossible. Matthew Arnold’s attempt is well known: religion in his view was ‘morality touched with emotion’. Other definitions are ‘Anything that lifts man above the realities of this material life is religion’; ‘the essence of religion is authority and obedience’; and ‘it is a feeling of absolute dependence’. Unfortunately, in almost all nations, until comparatively recent times, that which all are agreed to call religion had little or nothing to do with morality: and often the first step in the construction of ethical systems was to denounce the current religion as at best non-moral. The great teachers, for example, alike in Palestine and Greece, those men whose doctrines form the basis of modern ‘religion,’ are conspicuous for the vigour with which they combated the religion of their times. If we go back earlier, the divorce between religion and morality becomes, if possible, still clearer. ‘Divorce,’ however, is the wrong word, for the two have never been united. Religion was a series of external actions, or of abstentions from actions, intended to propitiate the

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<sup>6</sup> Dr. Desmond Morris, *Manwatching*, pp. 148-52.

supernatural powers: it said nothing about what we today call 'good conduct,' and if purity of heart existed, it existed almost in spite of religious taboos...

"The more deeply we probe into early religion, the more clearly we perceive how little it has to do with the morality of which Arnold speaks, however strongly it might be touched with emotion, and at that, although sometimes the emotion of hope, far more often the emotion of fear. And, looking again, we discover that the second element entering into it was, strange as it may seem, an infantile and elementary, but none the less genuine, physical science. Surrounded by unknown influences, tormented by terrors of ghosts, demons, spirits, of all kinds, men searched, timidly and hesitatingly, into the causes of these plagues, and leapt eagerly at the first possibilities that presented themselves for avoiding or mitigating them. Like our own people during Black Deaths and other catastrophes, they ran after everyone who could promise them immunity, and seized greedily upon any talisman that happened to have been worn by someone who had himself escaped. The antagonism between physics and religion, that has filled so great a space in modern history, did not exist in early times: on the contrary, religion was the natural development of physics, and without physics could scarcely have arisen. The priest was in fact the professor, and the minister was the medicine-man. People went to him for explanations of natural phenomena, and for the relief from the fears that those phenomena aroused. Out of his esoteric knowledge, such as it was, he prescribed for their diseases and dispelled their anxieties. 'Do this or that', he said to them, 'and those terrors will vanish.'

"Thus, while not every philosophy is a religion, every religion is a philosophy. Religion, to be worth anything at all, must cast out fears, allay bewilderment, solve perplexities: and this cannot be done without the formation of theories, that is, without philosophizing. No one can conceive an object of worship, however crude or loathe-some, unless he has first reflected on the 'cause of things' and without such reflection he will be the

victim of 'terror and insane distress,' of which he can hardly imagine even the least advanced of human beings to rid himself."<sup>7</sup>

It was with the coming of Neanderthal man that a first glimpse is caught of man's innermost thoughts. In some caves the skulls of bears were carefully arranged and stored, perhaps providing a shrine or talisman for the hunt. The dead too were often carefully buried in a foetal position with weapons, in such a way as to leave little doubt that Neanderthal man had some hope of or belief in survival after death. These people lived in Europe for 100,000 years, and then, 30,000 years or so ago, they became extinct.

The Neanderthalers were replaced by the Cro-Magnon race. The culture of Cro-Magnon man was distinctive for he buried his dead with reverence and ceremony and ornament. One tomb of twenty individuals is known in which the bodies are flanked with carefully arranged mammoth bones. The skeletons of the dead were often adorned with necklaces of shells and fossils and coloured with red ochre. With this reverence for death went a zest for life. Cave paintings of great beauty and sensitivity are known from Russia to the Pyrenees, and with these things a great landmark is reached in the history of mankind, for here is the end of the evolution of man the animal, and the dawn of man the unique—a self-conscious, rationalising, artistic, worshipping creation.

The rise of an advanced civilisation in Egypt is one of the most fascinating developments in the history of human societies. The simple neolithic farmers of the fifth millennium B.C. gave way to more advanced predynastic cultures when village life developed, pottery became more refined, and the communities became more artistically conscious as witnessed by their ivory spoons, bracelets, and combs, and the many beautiful vases they shaped from local stone. Many burials of these ancient Egyptians have been found, crouched and waiting for rebirth in a spirit world with pottery

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<sup>7</sup> E.E. Kellett, *A Short History of Religions*, pp, 10-12.

and other items beside them, presumably to help them on their journey into the next life. Religion and mythology were certainly playing an increasingly important part in their lives.

Crete lies in the southern Mediterranean between the mainland of Greece and Egypt. It is a fertile and well-watered island and a flourishing culture developed there. From this there emerged about 2000 B.C. a highly organised civilization based on large palace complexes, quite different from the civilizations of the Near East with their overpowering and conventionalised cities. The Cretan civilization was named Minoan by Sir Arthur Evans who began excavations at Knossos in 1899 and identified it with the seat of King Minos of Greek legend.

The many small shrines of Minoan religion contrast sharply with the great temples of the contemporary Near East. Some were within the palaces, but others were in caves where numerous votive offerings were left. Scenes on seals suggest that there were also small outdoor shrines, with a pillar or sacred tree. Sacred symbols, like the double axe and “horns of consecration” were always associated with the Cretan Great Goddess. A male deity rarely appears, although a young god, always smaller and subordinate to the goddess, may have been her consort. The Cretans buried their dead in caves or in collective tombs above or below ground level. There are no royal tombs with rich grave goods.

Evidence of Mycenaean religion comes from finds of figurines, scenes, on seal-stones, and from the Linear B tablets at Pylos, which list offerings to different deities. The names of the twelve Olympian gods and goddesses of later Greece appear in the tablets, possibly arising as different aspects of the Cretan Great Goddess and her male consort. But in contrast to Minoan religion, the male element dominates the female, the god Poseidon, whose name means “earth husband,” being the most revered of all deities. Unlike the Minoans, the Mycenaeans made life-size statues of their gods. But despite such divergencies, the Mycenaean religion was derived from the Minoan,

sharing its preference for small shrines, its use of identical ritual vessels and symbols such as the double axe, and reverence for the snake. Mycenaean deities and cult centres survived into Classical Greek times, and the four great sanctuaries of Delphi, Olympia, Eleusis, and Delos all had Mycenaean origin.

The Mycenaeans were an Indo-European people who came into Greece around 2000 to 1700 B.c., probably from Iran via northern Anatolia. Mycenaean Greece reached the height of its power between 1500 and 1300 B.c., but its decline after this was accelerated by the Trojan War which probably took place about 1250 B.C.

Unlike animal rituals, those of humans rarely relate to pressing biological needs, but they are types of community signals nevertheless. Human rituals are in fact stereotype behaviour patterns, consciously enacted by the individuals in a group, and with set words and actions. The meaning for such activity is not easy to analyse, but there seems little doubt that the development of hominid ritual is bound up with the perpetuation of certain kinds of knowledge of long-term survival value to the community. In other words, it is another kind of language that can be interpreted only within the particular social context. It has been suggested that ritual was somewhat earlier in hominid cultural evolution than language, a first means as it were to take note of human achievements. With the advent of language and later of writing, myths were developed as an attempt to record some of the ritual content of a community.

Where rituals bind the community together as a whole, they might be regarded as religious. The more communal effort and skill is needed in performing these religious functions, the more the individuals in the group are likely to feel a closeness with their fellows. This is by no means the only interpretation that can be given, and Dr Desmond Morris, for example, sees religious activities as a coming together of large groups of people to perform repeated and prolonged submissive displays to appease a dominant



individual. But religion clearly has far more to it than that. We have only to think of the Ten Commandments to appreciate that religion also emphasises worthwhile laws in a society.

Religion, like other major aspects of human society, has adaptive value as it helps man to come to grips with his fellow-men and the world around him. Whether magic witchcraft, ancestor worship, or reverence for high gods, it is a part of the struggle for existence and part of the survival plan for each community. Of course, myths and rituals may be carried through the generations long after they cease to serve a useful purpose, but this does not alter the fact that they initially developed in a society to fulfil a need. The major religions—Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, etc.—are not so easy to analyse as are those of so-called “primitive” societies because they have, developed into large and complex philosophies of life that now cut across various societies in various countries. At times, however, remarkable similarities in action and human response can be seen even when comparing aspects of “primitive” and “advanced” religion.

Basic to all religious activity is really man’s awareness of the uncertainties of the universe around him—and even today science by no means knows all the answers ! When this sensitivity to the unknown evolved in the hominids we do not know. Certainly half a million years ago our brain size might have permitted the beginnings of doubts and fears beyond those experienced by other mammals, but concrete evidence is not forthcoming until the ritual burials of Upper Pleistocene times.

Primates such as chimpanzees have been observed to show considerable distress and even long-term depression as a result of the death of a close relative, but man alone has contemplated death and reacted to it at a religious level. Burial customs certainly go back at least forty, thousand years, some Neanderthals having been buried with great ceremony. It is a short step between thinking of the recently dead and those remembered from long ago, and ancestor worship has provided further ritual behaviour that clearly had

value in binding the group together, There is thus in rituals—even those that at first sight seem exotic and valueless—a strong underlying factor of reason that is geared to the well-being of the group as a whole.

To quote E.E. Kellett again:

“Whether early man ever hit on the idea of a Supreme Being, in anything approaching our sense of the word—whether he conceived of God, as distinct from a multitude of gods—this is one of the questions, so easy, to put, that might never be solved. It is the theory of some, especially of those who take a strict view of the revelations of Scripture, or of those who regard the great religions of the Far East to have been originally monotheistic, that mankind was also originally monotheistic, and that polytheism is a corruption of a purer religion. To them, the evidence seems to point to the fact that men, so far from having, more or less steadily, struggled upwards from savagery, have declined from a state of moral and mental enlightenment. Alike in men’s behaviour and in their conception of the Deity, the first ages were the best, and we have by no means recovered the Paradise that we have lost.

“This is a theory worthy of all respect ; it was held by the great ancients who believed in a Golden Age ; it was held by the Hebrews and the early Christians ; and it is still a basic conception of Catholicism. In any case, it is fairly certain that early man had no idea of God in any way approaching the abstract and refined conceptions of modern philosophers. The definition of Him as 'an Infinite and Eternal Spirit,' set forth in so many catechisms, would have been far beyond the profoundest Palaeolithic thinker, although demons of the stone, the wood, or the stream I think it not improbable that they had.

“It seems to me that the idea of God is of slow growth, and that by very gradual steps are His cruder anthropomorphic characters stripped from Him. It was very timidly and imperfectly that even the Jews advanced towards monolatry, or the conception of one God to one country ; more gradual and

more tentative still was it that their great thinkers—religious geniuses of the highest order—went forward to proclaim the doctrine of a God ruling the whole earth, the heavens, and Sheol under the earth. In many countries, philosophic minds may have contrived to reconcile monotheism with the prevalent polytheism by picking out, more or less arbitrarily, one god, out of the vast number of possible candidates, to be the elect of the hierarchy.

“In any case, whether or not early men ever reached the idea of a Supreme Being, it is certain that they, like the majority of their descendants to the present hour, paid comparatively little attention to Him. He was 'too far from every one of us' and had to be approached, if at all, through intermediaries. The services offered to Zeus in Greece were few compared with those offered to nymphs, heroes, demigods, and the spirits inhabiting trees, fountains, and stones. It has been well remarked that the supreme divinity of the Romans was not Jupiter Optimus Maximus, but the Eternal City itself—a sort of anticipation of the Hegelian goddess, the State, who played so great a part in German history during the last century. In India, for one prayer to Brahma there are perhaps millions paid to the fertility-images that are so visible in every street. In the less enlightened parts of the Catholic world, even today, it is the saints who receive the adoration ; God the Father is a vague Personage in the background ; precisely as if we are to believe the Prophets, the people of Israel neglected Yahweh and worshipped their local Baals and Astartes under every green tree and on every high hill. There is no reason to think that 'primitive' man acted otherwise.

“The worship was a ritual consisting rather in a series of symbolic acts, and the crooning of incantations, than in prayer: although prayer was not entirely absent—at least if we count flattery and cajolery as forms of supplication. But the ritual almost always included some offering that would titillate the senses, or satisfy the appetite, of the god. The best must be given to him—one must not, like Prometheus, offer the least tasty or digestible portions of the victim. In many cases, the god was known to prefer blood to any other drink—and plenty was given to him ! In the early days, even of

Judaism, he claimed every first-born, whether of man or of beast, and human sacrifices were freely offered... .

“There is an astonishing likeness. amid trifling differences, in the rituals of all nations, in all parts of the world, at certain stages of their religious development. The ritual, once established, displays an obstinate tenacity, and is often not driven out save by foreign conquest and the forcible imposition of a new cult. Even then, it may continue an underground existence, as the worship of the Horned God went on in Europe for centuries despite clerical denunciations of Satanism, and despite all the terrors of the Inquisition...

“.. natural science is one of the chief elements of early religion. But it is the characteristic of science to be progressive, whereas, in comparison, religion is almost stationary. The physicist asks questions that go to the root of the religious organism, and the answers he gets are such as seriously to shake it...

“Men arise to whom ritual is not only useless and based on scientific error, but positively repugnant; who cannot abide vain oblations, and who detest the priest ; who demand right conduct rather than sacrifices, and purity of heart rather than corroborations or ceremonial cleanliness. Such men were the Jewish prophets, who were in perpetual hostilities with the priests of Bethel and Dan ; and such are those today who dislike institutional and sacramental religion, and tend to regard true worship as a matter between the individual and the Deity. Some of these men have become solitaries or mystics: some, like Milton, absent themselves from public worship altogether; others, like Micah, openly announce that God cares nothing for ceremonies, and desires merely the doing of justice, the love of mercy, and a humble walk.

“Many institutional religions have found it possible to make room for the solitary, the prophet, and the mystic: others have contrived a compromise with physical science; and no great religion today divorces itself from morality. On the contrary, the claim of most is that true morality is

inseparable from religion ; many theologians will assert that the truest morality is only to be found in their religion, that any goodness to be detected outside it is either derived from that religion or a poor mockery of it. Perhaps the most important revolution in history is this annexation of morality by a system that once had nothing to do with it.”<sup>8</sup>

The unique and distinctive contribution Islam made to religion was the Doctrine of Unity; the unity of God, man, and the universe; the interrelationship, communion, and communication between the Supreme Deity (the One God, Allah), mankind, and the rest of Creation being the unique and universal meaning of the Holy Qur’ān and the Message of Islam.

With the mission in the seventh century C.E. of the Holy Prophet Muhammad and the revelation of the final Great Word of God enshrined in the sacred text of the Holy Qur’ān, a system of morality, natural philosophy and natural science, social, economic and political justice, the equality of man, the sanctity of life and domestic values, the true emancipation of women, the protection and safeguarding of the rights of widows, children, orphans and slaves (prisoners of war), a penal code, obligatory charity, and laws of inheritance was instituted. Polytheism, idolatry, sacrifices to idols, unlimited polygamy, polyandry, usury, the partaking of intoxicating beverages and narcotic drugs, the eating of unwholesome food (e.g pig’s flesh), gambling and games-of-chance, divination by arrows, false oaths, priesthood and the priestly class, monasticism, meaningless ritual, witchcraft and sorcery and superstition were either abolished or condemned. Relations between the sexes were strictly regulated, and the family made the basic unit of Muslim society. Thus did Islam eliminate the undesirable elements in the older religions and strengthen the desirable ones, at the same time introducing desirable elements unique to itself.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 29-36.

Islam is the natural and rational religion and way of him for mankind, of God and from God, and in the very nature of man himself. It is in the great Prophetic Tradition having been taught by all the true Prophets of God from Adam (the first modern man and the first of the human species *Homo-sapiens sapiens*) through Abraham, Noah, Moses, Jesus, and finally Muhammad, the Holy Prophet of Islam and the “Seal of the Prophets,” all peoples in all times having had their own prophets preach to them. The Word was the same, only the Law (*Shari’ah*) differed to suit different peoples, times and circumstances. Islam, therefore, is the oldest, yet, paradoxically, the youngest of the great religious systems of the world. It is the very perfection of religion and the final and ultimate stage in the evolution of religious systems, universal and suitable for all men for all times past, present and future ; and the Muslims (vide the Holy Qur’an, iii. 110) are “the best of peoples ; evolved for mankind ; enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong”.

As E. E. Kellett says

“We shall be able to trace, almost without exception, these elements of ritual, prophethood, priesthood, philosophy, mysticism, practicality, ethics, in each of the religions we are about to study (the religions of the ancient Romans and Greeks, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, Confucianism, and Taoism). They will be present in differing degrees and in varying proportions, but they will be there. We shall also often trace a kind of circular movement in the process; sacerdotalism yielding to mysticism and reasserting itself after a total or partial eclipse; institutionalism giving way to personal religion, and then returning; morality asserting itself against ritual, and then retiring into the background. Jupiter may depose his father, but ‘redeunt Saturnia regna’; Paul may outshine Peter, but Peter recovers his prestige; a Reformation comes, but a counter-Reformation follows, to be succeeded by another counter-Reformation. The tide advances, and seems irresistible; but it declines, and the sands reappear,

to be covered again when the time comes... Whatever happens, it [Islam] will always remain one of the wonders of the world.”<sup>9</sup>

The Revelations of the Holy Qur’ān vouchsafed to the Holy Prophet Muhammad were indeed veritable miracles of the highest order (if not the very greatest!) in the long history of the evolution of mankind and have stood the test of time and adverse circumstances, and the way in Which Islam and the Muslims have endured due to their God-given inborn strength and vitality is indeed another miracle of human history. Let the Muslims of the world today, and their successors, continue to endure, as their predecessors did, by all means at their disposal by striving to maintain the purity of their Faith and bring about another great miracle of human history.

The very survival and future evolution of the human race utterly depend upon this!

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 36.