Islam's Relationship to Arabic Religion, Judaism, and Christianity

Pre-Islamic Arabian Culture

Sixth-century pre-Islamic Arabia had an animal herding and trading economy. Clans of Bedouins traded camels and other animals with Ethiopia and the Northeastern African regions. There was no central government or law enforcement, so the warring tribes functioned like gangs. Vendettas between clans were commonplace.

Pre-Islamic Arabian Religion

Religion was a mixture of polytheism and animism. Each clan had a patron deity, but everyday affairs were controlled by good and evil spirits called jinn. Jinn also appear in the Qur'an. Popular religion included elements of all tribal religions: divination, magic, exorcisms, sacrifice, and prayer. Natural shrines with sacred stones, trees, and caves speckled the countryside for wandering desert nomads to visit. The deity of Muhammad's clan was the moon god. Thus the moon is an Islamic symbol. A Hadith reports that Muhammad split the moon with his finger.

The central city of Mecca had a large temple and marketplace. In the temple were symbols and statues of every tribal deity for clan members to worship when in Mecca. In Mecca, the warring clans also refrained from fighting one another. Those who ran the temple, made a lucrative business of selling sacrifices and religious paraphernalia to pilgrims. When Muhammad began preaching the existence of only one God he naturally came into conflict with those who financially benefitted from the older religion.

Pre-Islamic Influences on Islam

The Qur'an bears numerous marks of pre-Islamic religion and culture. For example, refraining from fighting during certain holy months was a pre-Islamic tradition retained by Muhammad. Hospitality was a foremost virtue, one that Muhammad continued to uphold (Sura 15:51–60).

The shrine at Mecca contained a huge black stone cube, called the Kaaba. The Kaaba was venerated by pilgrims, probably because it was a meteorite that fell from the sky. Pilgrimage to the Kaaba was part of the pre-Islamic religion. Through Jewish and Christian influence, a pre-Islamic tradition developed that the Kaaba was where God tested Abraham, asking him to sacrifice his son, Ishmael, forefather of the Arabs. Muhammad incorporated this tradition and pilgrimage into the Kaaba and into Islam.

The Hanifs

As in other tribal religions, some believed that above the spirits, gods, and goddesses, there was a higher creator God. They called this God “Allah,” meaning “The God.” Allah seemed inaccessible but some mystics, called hanifs, worshipped Allah exclusively. They did not deny the existence of the other gods but were dedicated to Allah, who was seen as more powerful. Alone in caves, they would pray to Allah. At some point Muhammad became a hanif.

The Satanic Versus

Once he began preaching, Muhammad proclaimed that Allah alone is God, and that the numerous tribal deities were idols. Probably due to threats on his life, at one point, Muhammad conceded the existence of three prominent goddesses as daughters of Allah: “Have ye seen Lāt, and ‘Uzzā,? And another, the third (goddess), Manāt? What! For you the male sex, and for Him, the female? That indeed is an unfair division” (Sura 53:19–21). Here Allah complains that he has only female offspring, these three goddesses. Arabs highly valued male children but devalued female children, a position also preserved in the Qur’an (Sura 16:57, 52:39). Thus Allah is complaining.
Later, Muhammad claimed that these verses came from Satan (Shaytan), but God allowed them in order to test Muhammad: “Never sent We a messenger or a prophet before you but when He recited the message, Satan proposed (opposition) in respect of that which he recited. But Allah abolishes that which Satan proposes. Then Allah establishes His revelations. Allah is knower, wise” (Sura 22:52). For this reason they are known as the “Satanic Verses.” Historically speaking, the different Suras of the Qur’an came at different points in Muhammad’s career, and they reflect the situation of that context. When his life was threatened by those benefitting from Arabic polytheism, Muhammad gave those verses. Later, when the threat was gone, he explained that those verses were inspired by Satan but Allah cancelled them.

The Qur’an and the Bible

Through his career as a camel trader Muhammad met many Jews and Christians. Being illiterate, he learned Bible stories by word of mouth. He also learned apocryphal stories not in the Bible, as well as variants of the stories that do appear in the Bible. Once Muhammad began to preach, he used these stories, but they often differ in details from the biblical versions or are missing from the Bible altogether.

The Qur’an refers to Adam and Eve, Satan, the angel Gabriel, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. The Qur’an contains the stories of Gabriel’s annunciation of Jesus’ birth to Mary, the virgin birth, Jesus’ disciples, public ministry, ascension to heaven, and the second coming.

Qur’anic Divergences from the Bible

The Qur’anic stories tend to diverge in details or are absent from the Bible. For instance, in the Qur’an, Satan fell because he refused to prostrate himself before Adam and Eve, as God commanded. God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Ishmael, not Isaac, at the Kaaba in Mecca, not in Palestine. The Qur’an states that as God’s prophet, Jesus began preaching as an infant. The apocryphal story of Pseudo-Matthew contains a story of the infant Jesus delivering a miraculous speech. An apocryphal Arabic gospel includes an accusation against Mary by her family. The Qur’an combines these two apocryphal stories into one account. The apocryphal Infancy Gospel of Thomas has a story in which Jesus brings clay birds to life by blowing on them. The Qur’an contains a variant of this story.

Biblical Figures as Prophets

Muhammad accepted Old Testament figures like Abraham, Moses, Aaron, and David, as genuine prophets or messengers of God. He claimed that Jesus was God’s prophet—the greatest prophet next to Muhammad—but only a prophet. The Qur’an explains that God gave Moses a book, the Law, and Jesus a book, the Gospel (Injil). The Qur’an says: “Also mention in the Book of Moses: for he was specially chosen, and he was an apostle, a prophet. And we called him from the right side of Mount (Sinai), and made him draw near to us, for mystic (converse). And, out of Our Mercy, We gave him his brother Aaron, a prophet” (Sura 19:51–53). In the Muslim view; however, later Jews and Christians corrupted these books: “There is among them a group who distorts The Book with their tongues. (As they read) you would think it is a part of the Book, but it is no part of the Book; and they say: ‘This is from God’, but it is not from God. It is they who tell a lie against God” (Sura 3:78).

The Qur’an on Jews and Christians

The Qur’an contains positive statements about Jews and Christians, including how they, or at least some Jews, will be saved. For instance: “Those who are Muslims, Jews, Christians and Sabaeans have a reward awaiting them with their Lord and should have no fear or grieve because they believe in Allah, the Last Day and they do what is right” (Sura 2:62) and: “We followed them up with our apostles: We sent after them Jesus, the son of Mary, and bestowed on him, the Gospel; and We ordained in the hearts of those who followed him Compassion and Mercy….We bestowed, on those among them who believed, their reward” (Sura 57:27).

The Qur’an on Jews and Christians (continued)

There are negative statements in the Qur’an about Jews and Christians. Different attitudes in the Qur’an are due to Muhammad’s different relationships with Jews and Christians at various points in his life.
Yet, the Qur’an also contains many negative verses about Jews and Christians, for instance: “They surely disbelieve who say: Lo! Allah is the Messiah, son of Mary. ... for him Allah has forbidden paradise. His abode is the Fire. For evil-doers there will be no helpers” (Sura 5:72) and: “Never will the Jews or Christians be satisfied with you unless you follow their form of religion. Say to them: ‘The Guidance of God—that is the (only) Guidance’. If you follow their desires after the knowledge that has reached you then you will find neither protector nor helper with God” (Sura 2:120).

Again, scholars explain these differences as being due to Muhammad’s positive and negative relationships with Jews and Christians at different times. Early in his career, Muhammad had favorable relations with Jews and Christians, but later, he experienced opposition from them.

Islam on the Trinity and the Deity of Christ

Although heavily influenced by Christianity, Muhammad strongly opposed Christian teachings about the Trinity and Jesus being divine. He argued that God is absolutely one with no distinctions or division, and that it is blasphemous to say God had a son. For example: "Say: He is God, the one and only God, the eternal, absolute; He begets not, nor is He begotten” (Sura 112:1–3) and: “O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion, nor say Of God nothing but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was an apostle of God. . . . Say not ‘Three’: desist . . . For God is One God, Glory be to Him! Far Exalted (is He) above having a son.” (Sura 4:171)

Christian teaching about how Jesus is both God and man were still in dispute at this time, with different factions arguing about these doctrines. Some unorthodox Christian groups existed in Ethiopia and Arabia. Muhammad also evidences inaccurate views of some Christian teachings. For example, the Qur’an presents Christians as making Mary part of the Trinity: “And behold! Allah will say: ‘O Jesus the son of Mary! Didst thou say unto men, “Take me and my mother for two gods beside Allah”?’” (Sura 5:116)

Many argue that one reason for the rapid spread of Islam was that God’s radical unity was simpler to understand and accept than the Trinity and deity of Christ.

Islam on Sin and Jesus’s Crucifixion

Muhammad also found the Christian teaching that Jesus died for others’ sins unjust. This violates God’s justice. Each person is responsible for their own sins and their own good actions. This is also probably why the Qur’an denies that Jesus was crucified, saying: “They said (in boast): ‘We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Apostle of God’. But they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them. . . . They killed him not, No! God raised him up to Himself” (Sura 4:157–58).

Yet, Muslims believe that Jesus will return and will establish a Messianic Kingdom before Judgment Day. The Qur’an says: “When the son of Mary is held up as an example, behold. . . . And (Jesus) shall reign for the hour (of judgment)” (Sura 43:57, 61), and one of the Hadith says: “The Hour will not be established until the son of Mary descends among you as a just ruler; He will break the cross, kill the pigs, and abolish the Jizya tax. Money will be in abundance so that nobody will accept it. A single prostration to Allah in prayer will be better that the whole world and all it contains” (Hadith Sahia al-Bukhari, #656).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Qur'an includes, but also changes and rejects, aspects of pre-Islamic Arabic religion, Judaism and Christianity. Islam today is a distinct world religion that strenuously opposes syncretism. Early Islam, however, is a poignant example of how the boundaries between religions are vague, and how new traditions emerge as composites of earlier traditions. Historically speaking, perhaps Muhammad’s greatest accomplishment was uniting previously warring tribes under one God, to become a formidable socio-political force on the world stage and one of the world’s great religious traditions.