

# Origins of monotheistic religions

## Zoroastrianism

### ***Zoroaster***

Zoroaster, the founder of the first modern monotheistic religion, probably lived about 1400 BC in the area lying in the present north-east Iran and south Turkmenistan. According to Gathas, being a part of Avesta, the holy Zoroastrian scripture, the Zoroaster tribe was annihilated as a result of tribal wars, and he alone wandered for a dozen or so years witnessing brutal tribal fights. At the age of thirty Zoroaster had a vision of the angel. The angel told him there was only one true God, Ahura Mazda, and that he was to become his prophet. During the next ten years Zoroaster had other visions in which several archangels of Ahura Mazda appeared and revealed further truths to him.

Zoroaster tried to preach his new faith to his compatriots, however they were not receptive to his teachings and persecuted him. He had to escape to the nearby kingdom of Bactria (present day Afghanistan) where he managed to convert the king Vishtaspa who introduced Zoroastrianism on his lands. Zoroaster became a chief priest and one of the most influential persons in the state.

According with the later tradition, Zoroaster resigned at the end of his life from all positions, wrote Gathas - the Holly Books, and then died through voluntary immersion in icy cold, crystal-clear waters of the Kasaoja lake in the Pamir Mountains in present day Tajikistan

### ***Elements of the Zoroastrian religion***

Zoroastrians believe in one god - Ahura Mazda, who is all-knowing, omnipresent, almighty, unchanging, regarded as the creator of everything, source of happiness and goodness which man cannot comprehend. This is a description of the proto-god accepted through all monotheistic religions, including Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

For evil in this world is responsible Angra Mainyu who lives in Hell. Angra Mainyu is a spirit of destruction, which is responsible for death, illnesses and all what torments us. According to the Zoroastrian beliefs the material world is a battlefield between the good and the evil. The function of man is to help God to remove evil from the

surface of the earth. It is possible to do it through correct behaviour, supporting truth and order. Zoroastrians acknowledge that human nature has both good, as well as bad sides.

Zoroastrians believe that God created at first a spiritual world, and only later a material one. Human beings have a spiritual nature of God and are not born sinners and do not have a tendency to do evil. Man has free will and decides, whether he will go along the rightful road of the divine teaching, or choose evil and be damned. God gave man knowledge, thanks to which he knows how to act, however God did not promise that he would take on his shoulders the sins of his believers.

### ***Afterlife***

Followers of this religion believe that death comes when the soul leaves the body. The soul of the deceased loses its corporeality, until the day of the Last Judgment. It stays on earth after death for three days, and then is led by the protective spirit to the gate of Heaven where Mitra waits for it. Mitra holds the scales of the justice, on which are weighed good and bad deeds, thoughts and words. When the good outweighs the bad in the life of a soul, it goes to Heaven, where it can calmly wait for the Day of Judgment. When the bad outweighs the good, the soul is thrown to Hell, which it will never leave will endure endless agonies. When the scale pans are balanced the soul find its way to purgatory becoming a gray shadow without joy or sadness.

Zoroastrians believe that at the end of a cycle lasting 3000 years, God will destroy powers of evil and will announce the Last Judgment. That day the deceased will arise from their graves and their life will be judged once more. Followers of this religion believe that on the Last Judgment they will receive new young bodies. To secure this, the bodies of the deceased are neither cremated at a funeral pyre, nor buried in earth, but are left on the surface so that vultures could clean the bones, and such skeletons are ready for new bodies.

### ***Comments***

The Zoroastrian religion originated in the areas, where continuous, devastating inter-tribal fighting prevailed. In order to thwart these brutal wars, it was necessary to influence people in such a way which would force them, particularly their leaders, to obey new rules. A new religion, evoking fear of eternal damnation and infernal

tortures had such a power.

Therefore in the Zoroastrian religion for the first time appears Hell as the place of punishment, where souls suffer for the misdeeds committed on earth. Only such a threat could stop rulers and warriors from committing atrocities. Zoroastrianism was accepted because there was needed a faith, that people who could not be punished in their lifetime, would be punished after their death. An important element of this religion is that all people are treated equally and on the Last Judgment day will be assessed without any partiality. The Zoroastrian doctrine was very well thought over and unusually practical.

The Zoroastrian religion is a forerunner of all present monotheistic religions which took from it a notion of an omniscient and almighty God. It also created a new order of the world in which apart from the earthly life exists a rich spiritual world with Heaven and Hell. In this new reality all human deeds are subject to ultimate and irrevocable assessment on the day of judgment. Introduced is an archetype of Satan existing also in Christianity and Islam. Zoroastrianism created a new heavenly hierarchy with angels and archangels, which also became a part of other, later religions.

Zoroastrianism was established in the Persian empire and spread with its conquests. It became the official religion of the Babylonian state after its conquest by the Persians. When Cyrus the Great in the 6th century BC let Jews, after the years in exile return from Babylon to Jerusalem, they brought with them Zoroastrian beliefs and included them in their religion. These beliefs were also later included in the Christian and Muslim religions.

## **Judaism**

### ***Sumerian connections***

Judaism is the only religion having direct connections with the first civilizations, and therefore is closely associated with the religions of Sumer<sup>1</sup> and Egypt. According to

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<sup>1</sup> Sumer belongs to the first civilizations which was located in the present day Iraq. Its beginnings can be traced to about 3000 BC. It had highly developed agriculture and metallurgical industry. In Sumer were established first public schools, libraries and courts of

the Bible, the beginnings of their history are connected with the city of Ur in Sumer, where in about the 21st century BC Abraham lived, the progenitor of the Judaic religion. We could assume that Abraham was familiar with the Sumerian religion and this knowledge influenced the development of Jewish beliefs and traditions.

Affiliation of Judaism with the Sumerian culture is confirmed by the fact that many similarities exist between the descriptions in the Bible and the ancient Sumerian myths. For example, the Hebrew god Yahweh is like the Sumerian god of storms Adad, and what is also interesting is that the Jews, as the Sumerians, consider themselves as the chosen people by God. Many fragments of the Bible are of Sumerian origins, and for example the description of the Creation and the history of the deluge are taken straight from Sumerian mythology. In the biblical story about expelling Adam and Eve from Paradise appears an element of knowledge, as an important aspect of human existence. We know that "knowledge" was an element on the Sumerian list of the most important factors contributing to civilization.

The Bible situates the kingdom of Nimrod, the descendant of Noah in the land of Sumer: According to the Bible Hebrew women still in the 6th century BC bewailed in Jerusalem, the death of the mythological Sumerian king-god Tammuz, and in the Hebrew calendar one month is named after him. The name of the eldest son of Noah - Shem, originates from the ancient name of Sumer.

### ***Egyptian period***

Jews, according to some researchers lived in Egypt for about 400 years and therefore it was a very long and important period which molded Jewish culture. According to the Bible the Hebrews moved to Egypt at the time of Jacob (Genesis 46.26) and were accepted there because they held important official positions. In contemporary Egypt even people of humble origins, due to their abilities, could achieve high government positions and gain wealth. This country attracted Jews, because compared with other lands it was an oasis of peace and plenty and its granaries were full. The Jews were not discriminated against, but they had to however follow religious rules imposed by the state. In Egypt a religion was an

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justice. It was the first society based on justice and humanitarian and democratic principles. We know about Sumer because its writings on clay tablets survived up to the present times.

important state consolidating element, controlled by the pharaoh and priests. In such a situation Jews had to, like it or not, conform to the laws of the land and therefore follow many elements of the Egyptian religion. Connection of the Hebrew beliefs with the Egyptian religion confirms the worship of the sun-god in the Bible, (Ezekiel 8.16) according to which Jews in Jerusalem in the 6th century BC bowed to the Sun. A good knowledge of the religious Egyptian customs confirms the fact, that the size of the Ark of the Covenant built by Moses is almost identical with the internal dimensions of the pharaoh tomb in the Large Pyramid.

### ***Moses***

Historical records of the life of Moses are so fragmentary, that some researchers suggest that Moses never actually existed as a historical figure. Some historians say that Moses was Egyptians of Hebrew origins, received good education and was a high Egyptian priest in Heliopolis. It is possible that Moses was well acquainted with the monotheistic worship of the Egyptian god Aten and this could influence the origin of one God in Judaism.

According to the Bible, Moses was the son of Amram and his wife, Jochebed, a Levite and was brought up in the palace of the pharaoh. When defending a Hebrew he killed an Egyptian and as a result he escaped to the kingdom of Midian. There for the first time on Mount Horeb, Yahweh spoke to him from the burning bush and ordered him to lead the Jews out of Egypt, and take them to the promised land. Moses then led the Israelites through the desert to Mount Sinai where he received the Ten Commandments and other laws. Moses never entered the promised land and died on Mount Nebo.

Moses is regarded as the one who formed the second covenant with God, the liberator of the Israeli people from Egyptian slavery and the builder of the Jewish national awareness.

### ***Basis of Judaism***

As a result of the centuries-old accumulation of diverse beliefs, the religion of Israeli tribes was a mixture of various rituals and ceremonies. Moses rejected old beliefs and established new canons of Judaism which were based on the following:

- faith in one and only God,
- confidence and faith in the religious mission of Jews as the nation chosen by God.

Although Moses is the progenitor of Judaism, two main monotheistic religions: Christianity and Islam have its roots in Judaism and adopted the similar image of God. Therefore one should regard Moses as the father of contemporary monotheistic religions.

The Torah, which according to the Hebrew tradition, was given Moses by God is the most holy Jewish scripture. It contains 5 Moses books, because their authorship is attributed to him. Principles of the Jewish religion, being at the same time strictly obeyed laws, are provided by the Talmud which was written down between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century. The Talmud includes 613 rules and interdictions determining in every detail behaviour of the faithful. Judaism is a very practical religion and directs not only a religious, but also everyday life in all its aspects, including what food one is allowed to eat and how it should be prepared.

Provisions of the Talmud require that faithful should look after the poor, widows and orphans. Every God-fearing Jew must hand over about 10 percent of his income to the community which distributes it among the needy. Charity belongs to one of the most important foundations of Judaism and originates from the humanitarian principles of the Sumerian and Egyptian civilizations.

### ***Covenant***

Abiding to the rules of the Talmud is not based on fear of eternal damnation, but on the covenant between God and the faithful. It is a type of contract: God will look after and will protect his people from misfortune and calamities, will provide them with necessary provisions, and in return they will obey Him and will not have any other Gods.

At the beginning God made a promise to Abraham, that he will have a male successor and promised him land. In exchange Abraham should believe and obey one God. Descendants of Abraham followed this covenant and circumcision symbolized the sealing of the agreement. Abraham moved at first from Ur to the land of Canaan (present day Lebanon and Palestine), where his son Isaac was born. This way Yahweh redeemed his promises.

This agreement served very well during stormy and difficult periods of Jewish history, but in the times of stability and prosperity in the 2nd century BC this doctrine came close to collapse. At that time new elements entered into the Jewish beliefs and the faith in the Last Judgment and afterlife appeared.

## **Christianity**

### ***Beliefs in the Greco-Roman civilization***

Roman empire in the first and second century BC included about 60 million people and was stretching from Spain and France in the west up to Syria and Palestine in the east, spreading through some parts of North Africa, including Egypt.

From the times of Alexander the Great the eastern part of the later Roman empire, including Greece, Asia Minor, Syria and Palestine, was dominated by the Greek cultural and religious influences. The Greek religion was very different from Judaism and was rather a collection of myths and beliefs reflecting human nature rather than the laws given by God.

The Olympian gods did not guarantee the existence of justice, morality and honesty. These immoral beings had been provoking conflicts in the world causing chaos in the everyday life of people. They were capricious and broke human laws without justified reasons, instead of giving an example which man should follow. They did not help to spread moral principles and did not provide spiritual peace for their believers. The believers would not look for the support in gods they could not trust.

The religious rites of Dionysus covered in mystery induced their participants into the state of ecstasy. With the help of singing, dancing, sexual excesses and alcohol, people united with their god. This was the religion of joy, of freedom from everyday problems, giving believers rich experiences, and because it guaranteed immortality of the soul, it found many supporters in the Hellenistic world. This cult had not demanded the observation of high moral standards or the following of an appropriate behaviour, and its believers could also worship other gods.

The Romans also had a rich pantheon of gods and goddesses, which in the majority of cases were borrowed from the Greeks. The Roman mythology narrative was not as rich in stories as the Greek one, and their gods led less eventful lives than their

Greek counterparts. The Roman as well as the Greek religions did not impose moral behaviour upon believers and they played a secondary part in their lives, therefore the Romans tolerated and easily adopted foreign faiths, provided that they did not undermine the power of the emperor.

It appears that the Greco-Roman civilization did not have a strong religion which would explicitly show people how they should live, how to develop spiritually in order to achieve a higher level of awareness. Although high organizational, artistic and intellectual standards were achieved, in the sphere of human relationships it was still a barbaric civilization, in which the humanitarian and charitable elements were missing and the value of the individual man's life was not appreciated. It was a very heartless society, in which women were treated as inferior beings and had no rights, and slaves were treated exceptionally brutally. In the largest, at that time civilization in the world existed an enormous gap between the material and spiritual values and there was a danger that the development of mankind in this part of the world would go in the wrong direction.

Therefore there was a need for a strong religion which would establish a new direction for the spiritual development of man in a state inhabited by so many different ethnic, religious and cultural groups of people. It became necessary to introduce a new code of behaviour similar to the ten commandments followed by the believers of Judaism, so it was logical and desirable that a new prophet should come from them. This new teacher was Jesus Christ.

### ***Stages of the implementation of Christianity***

Implementing a new religion in such a large area was not a simple matter. It took place in three independent stages. Each stage was carried out by a different leader best suitable for the required task.

Introduction of the teachings and creating foundations of the new religion was the purpose of the first leader, Christ. Christ and his apostles functioned as a part of the Judaic Church, and more precisely they created one of its many sects. In such a situation there was no chance that Christ's teachings could reach beyond the narrow circle of the Hebrew believers. Therefore someone who would pass them over to mankind was needed, or at least to the Greco-Roman civilization.



Such a person was Saint Paul, who in practice single handed built the Christian Church. At this stage many congregations were formed in different parts of the Roman empire. Structures of the church organization and administration were established. The Gospels were written and the main theological foundations of the religion were laid out. However, Christianity could not proliferate because its followers were persecuted by many Roman emperors. So the next, third stage, consisted of the official acceptance of the new religion.

The emperor Constantine the Great was responsible for the most important breakthrough by recognizing Christianity as a national religion. From his times started a period of mass conversion of the Roman population and of unchecked development of Christianity in the world. Owing to these three outstanding individuals, mankind has got to know and has accepted the most important commandments in its contemporary history.

### ***Revolutionary teachings of Christ***

Although the teachings of Christ are largely based on the canons included in the Jewish holy book Torah and on the Moses ten commandments, his interpretation goes much farther and deeper than of any earlier Jewish prophets and priests. The main canons of his teaching are given in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5.1-42). Christ demanded high standards regarding the telling of truth. One should not swear on the Bible, God, on the life of a mother, or own life, but one should simply tell the truth. It is interesting, that even at present in the Christian world, at courts of justice, these teachings are ignored and the pagan ritual of taking an oath is still carried out.

One of the most controversial teachings is command that one should not resist people doing us a great harm: "But I say to you. Resist no evil; when someone slaps your right cheek, turn to him the other also"(Matthew 5.39). This is a calling to be passive, to surrender to the perpetrator and it seems very difficult to be accepted by most people. Even more revolutionary is the directive: "But I say unto you: love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." (Matthew 5.44). Loving those who wish us well is not difficult and it does not require any effort, but in order to love enemies a great deal of will power and work on oneself is needed. These teachings

have a very deep psychological insight. If we do not forgive the perpetrator, this our hatred, could destroy our own soul, our being.

To the most important commandments without any doubt belongs an imperative : “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”. It is possible to reach a conclusion that many other laws result from it, even ones like “do not kill ” or “do not steal” .

At the present times, after 2000 years of the existence of Christianity, these teachings do not make a great impression on us, because they became an indelible part of our culture in which we grew up and which we regard as normal. But in the age, in which the law “eye for eye” ruled, when human life had no value, when wars were conducted in a very cruel and brutal way, and the most bestial murders aroused no moral oppositions, these teachings were truly revolutionary. They were misunderstood by contemporary people and they were ahead of their times because they were regarded as unacceptable and unfeasible to follow, which is not surprising if we consider, that for many people they are still incomprehensible to this day.

### ***St Paul***

Christ lived and taught amongst the Jewish believers and was regarded by his followers as a Messiah announced by the Jewish prophets. After his death, his sect called later Nazarenes, led by his brother James the Just, worked mainly amongst the Jews who still followed the rules given by the Torah. Obeying as many as 613 rules and restrictions included in the Torah, celebrating Sabbath and observing a special kosher diet could not be accepted by the Greco-Roman world and therefore it was very unlikely that the teachings of Christ would spread throughout the Roman empire. An individual was needed who could pass these difficult and unique teachings to a non Jewish circle of recipients. This chosen messenger was St Paul.

Saul, who later assumed name Paul, was born about 5-10 AD in a Hellenistic Jewish family, in the town of Tarsus, in the present south-east Turkey. Owing to the services of his family he had Roman citizenship and could travel freely all over the entire empire. From The Acts of the Apostles we learn that about 35 AD on the road to Damascus he experienced a mystical apparition of Jesus which changed his life. His mission became the spreading of a new religion, in which Christ was the centre character. St Paul probably knew less about Jesus than we know at present,

because he never met him. He was not familiar with Jesus teachings, because the Gospels had not been written yet and he had a very limited contact with Christ's followers.

The doctrines propagated by St Paul differed very much from the teachings of Christ and his apostles. Because he broke completely with the Jewish tradition, his missionary work found a good reception in the Hellenistic society. He introduced in his teachings the Greek elements of the dying and rising from the dead god, as in popular worships of Dionysus, Mithras and Isis. Resurrection of Christ becomes the pivotal canon in his teachings and the most important dogma of the new religion. For the first time appears an image of Christ as the Saviour dying on the cross in order to redeem the sins of man. St Paul does not talk much about the life and teachings of the real Jesus - mainly underlining his personal mystical experiencing of Christ who speaks through him. He claimed that the apparition, during which Christ passed to him a significant knowledge, rather than what Jesus taught during his lifetime, constituted the main foundation of the new religion. One of the main advantages of this religion was a promise of eternal life after deaths given to everyone who believed in Christ. This religion treated everyone equally, regardless of race, social status and gender, which was also revolutionary for the contemporary times.

St Paul had a new approach to Judaism and announced that teachings of Christ superseded all Jewish laws, therefore there was no need to obey the Torah rules. It was a very controversial interpretation, which could not be accepted by the followers of traditional Judaism, therefore St Paul's teachings were met with hostility by both the members of the sect of Jesus, as well as of the orthodox Jews.

St Paul in the forties, fiftieth and sixtieth years AD, did three long missionary journeys in Asia Minor, Turkey, Syria and Greece, preaching, converting and establishing Christian congregations, which he guided later by letters. In 60 AD St Paul was under arrest in Jerusalem and sent to Caesarea. After spending two years in the local prison, as a result of the appeal to the emperor, he was sent to Rome. After being freed he ran further missionary activities in Rome, Spain, Macedonia and on Crete. He was murdered in Rome about 67 AD, in the period of persecution of Christians by the emperor Nero.

Thanks to St Paul the new religion spread in a large part of the Roman empire and

congregations established by him became the foundation for the Christian Church. These congregations were able to function and grow after his death.

### ***Emperor Constantine the Great***

The new religion was becoming increasingly common in the Roman empire, due to the intensive missionary work of the faithful. The church organization was created and a good communication existed among various congregations scattered all over the empire. The new religion had two problems hindering its further development. Persecutions by the emperors and Roman authorities resulted in the death of many thousands of the faithful, and they discouraged people to join the Christian communities, because of that time it was very dangerous to be a Christian. The second problem was arising inside the Church, where lack of uniform theology caused splitting of the congregations into many sects.

So a new champion was needed who would solve these problems and secure further development for Christianity. It turned out to be the emperor Constantine the Great who came to power in 306 AD. According to Constantine himself, before the deciding battle against Maxentius in 312 AD, he saw in his sleep the cross with the inscription “in this sign you conquer”. After the victory he announced in 313 AD in Milan an edict which he granted Christians, as well as others faiths, freedom to exercise their religion. Extolled for his piety by the sycophants, in reality Constantine belonged to brutal rulers and even did not hesitate to murder his close family, including his wife and son, close friends and potential competitors for power. However he fulfilled an important part, because during his reign he was deeply interested in spreading and strengthening Christianity. Owing to him the Christian Church started to grow, to accumulate riches and to gain political influences. Constantine saw the Church as an ally which was supposed to help him to rule and strengthen his multi ethnic and religiously and culturally diversified empire. He needed a strong religion, uniting people around common values, contributing to keeping an order and harmony in the state. He gave the Church dignitaries financial benefits and power, but in exchange he demanded obedience and supports for his often ruthless political activities.

Constantine's most important contribution to the shaping of Christian theology was the implementation of a dogma about the equality of Christ to the God Father. Constantine aspired to the religious harmony in the state for political reasons and

therefore quickly suppressed opposition, however he did not care about the doctrinal truth, but about the views of the majority. He needed a strong and monolithic religion, whereas disputes and schisms would weaken its influences. Uncompromising hostility between the Donatists in North Africa and the adherents of Arius<sup>2</sup> in the Eastern part of the empires made him aware, that in order to create a strong, united religion persuasion on its own would not be enough. Wanting to solve disputes around views promoted by Arius, he convened in 325 AD in Nicaea, (located in present-day north-western Turkey), first in the history of the Church general Council. Constantine, although had not been baptized yet, chaired the Council and led the discussions. Out of 1800 bishops in the Church at the synod only about 250 arrived, but only 6 from the West, and the Pope Sylvester I was not even invited. So the Council did not represent the entire Church, but this did not prevent that under Constantine's pressure it established that Jesus Christ is not only God, but that he is equal to God the Father and comes from the same substance. Bishops intimidated by the emperor, with the exception of only two, put their signatures under this new Creed, and many did it contrary to their own beliefs. The emperor who was behind the council decrees awarded the obedient with riches and power, and the opponents of the doctrine were imprisoned. In this way a major split in the Christian religion was averted and the foundations of the Catholic Church were created.

After the death of Constantine, in 337 AD , during the reign of Julian Apostate between 355-363 AD dawned a difficult period for the Christians when the pagan gods came back into favor. Only in 380 AD , after Theodosius I became an emperor Christianity was recognized as the official religion of the empire. The Church became a political organization, backing aggressive actions of the emperor. Theodosius announced the Edict of Thessalonica, in which he ordered all the subjects to profess the orthodox Christian faith and everybody else was regarded as a heretic.

As we can see the process of introducing and of consolidating the new religion in the Roman empire was not simple and would not end with success, if not for the work of three outstanding individuals: Jesus, St Paul and the emperor Constantine the Great.

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<sup>2</sup> Arians was a Christian movement started in the 4th century by Arius from Alexandria, who denied Jesus Christ divinity. Arius taught that God had not been born and did not have beginning. The Son was born by the will of the Father and did not exist from eternity, therefore cannot be equal to God.

# Islam

## ***Pre-Islamic Arabia***

Before the arising of Islam in the 6th century the area of today's Arab Peninsula was inhabited by the nomadic Arab tribes, who did not create a single state. A leader of the tribe was a sheik chosen out of the members of one clan by the council of elders. Religion of the Arabs was polytheistic, although there were groups practicing monotheistic religions, such as Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism. At that time Arabia was a place of escape for persecuted Jews and of non orthodox Christians who formed all sorts of sects. The spreading of Christianity in Arabia was not successful for political reasons. The Arabs were hostile towards Christian Ethiopia which was a vassal of the Byzantine emperor and because of that they resisted all missionary attempts.

At this time Arab world went through period of breakdown of the primeval communities. This crisis created favorable conditions for the appearance of various preachers, trying to change the existing order. One of them was Muhammad who played the decisive part in the history of his people.

## ***Muhammad***

Muhammad was born in the year 570 AD in Mecca. He was orphaned at an early age and brought up under the care of his uncle Abu Talib. Already during the early periods he had many various mystic experiences which directed him towards seeking God and a new religion. At the age of 25 he married a rich widow and engaged in trade. His trade journeys to Syria helped him to establish contact with Jews and Christians. A good financial situation allowed Muhammad to spend time on studying teachings of monotheistic religious sects which existed in Arabia. He spent time in a secluded spot in a cave on Mount Hira near Mecca, where he contemplated and tried to understand, why people believed in so many different gods and idols. According to Muslim tradition, when he was about 40 years old, during one of these meditations he had a vision of the angel Gabriel who commanded him to recite and in spite of his resistance words came out from his mouth. After the first apparition came more sessions and in this way arose the Quran, the holy book of Muslims containing the core of Muhammad's teachings.

Since we have a significant amount of well substantiated information concerning the beginnings of Islam, there is no doubt that it arose as a result of the revelations received by Muhammad. At first he did not accept messages received from above because he suspected that had lost his mind and considered even, whether to commit suicide. Muhammad could not alone write the Quran, since the text was completely different from the style which the prophet usually used. This book is characterized by rhythms and rhymes unknown then in Arabic literature. Soon Muhammad started preaching and converting others to the new faith.

His faith was based on a strong conviction, that if God exists, it is the same for Jews, Christians and of all other religions. Therefore the false idols which were worshipped in Mecca should be removed. This attitude encountered a hostile response from the local population who were gaining financial benefits from the religious ceremonies in Mecca. In the end Muhammad, in the year 622 had to escape to Medina. This year became the beginning of the Hegira calendar.

In Medina the first Islamic religious commune came into existence, which was joined by many emigrants supporting the new religion. Soon a period of religious Islamic wars started. In spite of much smaller resources the Muslims were getting the upper hand over the pagans, in the end capturing Mecca in the year 630. Muhammad turned out to be an effective diplomat signing peace treaties with the local tribes who pledged to support him. When he died in the year 632 he did not leave a male descendant and the closest male relatives was Ali bin Abi Talib, his cousin and son-in-law.

### ***Development of Islam***

Muhammad had not decided who should become his successor, what led to a schism in Islam. During a crisis or a war Arabs chose a person of outstanding military and leadership abilities. Abu Bakr, who forced local tribes to recognize Muhammad's authority, became his successor and during the following two years the Arabian Peninsula came under his control. In the year 634 Umar, who conquered Persia, Egypt and North Africa, and won Syria, Lebanon and Palestine from the Byzantine Empire became a caliph. During the next one hundred years Islam spread from the Atlantic Ocean to the borders of China.

During peace periods Arab leaders were chosen on the principle of succession, according to which the successor to Muhammad should be his cousin Ali bin Abi Talib. The party supporting his leadership caused in Islam a schism forming the Shi'a sect. Although Ali in the end became the fourth caliph (657-661), he did not manage to stay in power and since then the Sunni Muslims became the next caliphs.

Although all Muslims follow the principles of the Quran, the rules included in this book are not unambiguous and require explanations by religious leaders -- Imams, and many of them made their own interpretation of the Quran, contributing to further splits in Islam. In the end both the Shia and Sunni Muslims were divided into many sects.

### ***The principles of Islam***

The corner-stone of Islam is the faith in only one God -- Allah, who decides about the fate of every man. The duty of the faithful is to submit to God's will. It is possible to become a follower of Islam by saying with sincere intention a formula: "There is no God apart from Allah, and Muhammad is his Prophet" and accepting duties resulting from the Quran, the laws and the tradition.

The religious doctrine of Islam could be summarized as follows:

- Faith in one and only God - Allah. God of Islam is the only creator of all things and creatures, the judge of all people. Almighty and omniscient, he exists beyond understanding of the human mind, and his being does not have an end.
- Faith in the mission of the prophet Muhammad, the messenger of God.
- Faith in life after death and the Last Judgment, the heaven and hell.
- Faith in angels, devils, demons and Jinns.

There are five pillars of Islam which define the duties of Muslims:

- profession of faith in one God
- prayers five times every day
- fast in the month Ramadan
- giving charity to poor



- pilgrimage to Mecca

Muhammad created a religion which referred to the traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism. Jewish prophets including Abraham, as well as Jesus Christ along with Mary, the Mother of God have a special, honorable place in Islam.

Studying different religious doctrines Muhammad drew from the Torah and the Talmud traditions, but above all he simplified theology of Islam in comparison with the complicated Christian religious system, and this contributed to fast growth of a number of its followers. According to Muhammad, Jesus was one of the prophets, not the Son of God. Islam forbids visualization of God and does not worship saints as in the Catholic Church. Descriptions of Heaven and Hell are taken from the Zoroastrian religion and find good response in society expecting simple rules concerning crime and punishment.

The Muslim religion demands from the believers total compliance and obedience. Islam unlike Christianity is not a religion based only on faith. Muslims have no choice to observe some and reject other, less comfortable rules. In this context Islam is more similar to the Jewish customs and traditions than to Christianity. Such a conduct of Muslims attests to their deep belief in God, because if we really have faith, what is more important than to comply with His will. What worldly matters have priority over God and his commandments? It is also true that in general people needs a strong religion, such as Judaism or Islam. They want to receive clear instructions concerning appropriate behaviour, because they are not able alone to interpret religious commandments. In Islam and Judaism the faithful are judged by their acts, such as the care of poor and charitable activity. Therefore every Muslim is obliged to give back, usually about 2.5 percent of his income, for the needs of the poor and to support his congregation.