

Public Abstract

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Title:The Origins of Muslim Prayer: Sixth and Seventh Century Religious Influences on the Salat Ritual

Most Muslims recognize a divinely-given obligation to pray. The name of the specific ritual prayer that fulfills this duty is salat. While it is clearly a central aspect of Islamic practice, the way the first Muslims developed the prayer has not been widely researched. To fill this academic void and illuminate an area of early Islamic history crucial to a full understanding of the origins of the Muslim faith, this study researches salat and other religious rituals so as to describe, in part, how the Muslim daily prayer was developed.

This study reviews and compiles historical sources and other scholarly work to locate the specific practices and religious traditions that likely influenced the formation of salat. It looks closely at rituals found in the indigenous traditions of the Arabian Peninsula, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Christianity. Applying a set of criteria for determining influence, it takes each religious tradition in turn and analyzes the potential for influence on salat.

Conclusions show that rituals in practice in other religious traditions in and around the Arabian Peninsula during the time of the Muslim prophet Muhammad meet criteria for influence and thus indicate non-Islamic influence on the development of salat. The theory of syncretism – the phenomenon of appropriating one religious element into another religious system – explains how salat developed partly through influence from non-Islamic religious traditions.

These conclusions reveal an important part of early Islamic history, one which has heretofore not been adequately studied. Moreover, previous conclusions on the topic are shown to be shortsighted and in some cases, inaccurate. This study is also important in that it accumulates and analyzes historical information in a new way, which may spur further research in related fields.