

THE ORIGINS OF MUSLIM PRAYER: SIXTH AND SEVENTH CENTURY RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES ON THE SALAT RITUAL

Justin Hienz

Dr. Robert Baum, Thesis Advisor

ABSTRACT

While salat is a central aspect of Islamic practice, the way the first Muslims developed the prayer ritual has not been widely researched. This study employs the theory of syncretism to show that religious rituals practiced in Jewish traditions, Zoroastrian traditions, Christian traditions and traditions indigenous to the Arabian Peninsula influenced how the Muslim daily prayer was developed.

Four aspects of salat are considered: washing before prayer, prostration, direction faced during prayer and number of times prayer is performed throughout the day. A set of criteria for potential syncretic influence is applied to historical evidence of religious practice in specific communities in the Northeast Africa, Southwest Asia region in the sixth and seventh centuries. The criteria are similarity in practice, contact between early Muslims and other religious individuals or groups, and the extent of that contact. When these criteria are met, possible syncretic influence is indicated.

Conclusions reached indicate that ritual washing was influenced by Jewish and Zoroastrian practice. Prostration was likely an influence from indigenous Arabian traditions and not from Jewish and Christian traditions, as previous studies have concluded. Direction faced during prayer was an influence stemming from the Jewish tradition. Number of times prayer is performed throughout the day was primarily a Zoroastrian influence, while other traditions also likely had some influence.