

How Do Religions Modernize?  
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Religions can modernize. When we explore the history of how human beings coped with fear, disasters both natural and man-made, fertility, and death, we see great changes to the religions of our most ancient ancestors.

\342\200\242 Pantheism. Our ancestors invented systems for coping with existential fears. They saw the divine all around them: initially as forces to be placated, but also to be honored and celebrated. The ancient Greeks, for example, modernized their earlier pantheism (the divine living in each stream, tree, animal) by imagining polytheism, an entire panoply of gods and goddesses who conducted their lives like Greek aristocracy, except that they did not die. These deities also had favorites among human beings, whom they helped at times of crisis. Think of Odysseus and his patroness Athena, the virgin goddess of wisdom.

\342\200\242 Polytheism. Polytheism lost its appeal during the collapse of the Roman Empire, replaced by the offspring of an ancient Jewish cult, which, itself, had evolved from primitive beginnings.

\342\200\242 Henotheism to Monotheism. Judaism began as henotheism, believing in one god for themselves, but forbidding worship of any other gods (considered real). Monotheism came during the Babylonian captivity, when the Jews had contact with Persian Zoroastrianism, and the Jewish God became the Western World's God of the universe. Christianity, the offspring of Judaism, took the one-god idea beyond Judaism by adopting some of the ancient world's mythology: the virgin mother of a hero; angels, devils, and saints; and a trinity of power father, son, holy spirit. These changes enabled primitive polytheists (barbarian hordes) to come comfortably into the new cult.

\342\200\242 Islam. Islam, which began as an offshoot of its fellow Semitic Jewish faith, became a major force of its own, and immediately embraced imperial ambitions modeled on their first conquest, Persia. A relatively brief age of enlightenment (80 years in Baghdad and the same in Spain) was snuffed out by events they could not control: the Mongol invasions, Ottoman Turkish conquest, the Black Death, and finally the revival of learning and power in the Christian world.

For the next five centuries (1200 to 1700), Islam was on a trajectory of failure. The golden age was gone, the Turks kept order but added nothing culturally or intellectually, and the West was not only developing light years beyond them, but was eating pieces of the Muslim world in a sweep of colonialism. Although modern Islamists complain bitterly about European colonialism, they forget what monstrous colonizers they themselves had been during the initial spread of Islam and then under the Ottoman Turks.

\342\200\242 Islamo-Fascism. Today, Islam has begun the process of modernizing. Quietly and with little publicity, educated Muslims in the West are beginning to model after the values of their new homes. Muslim women are protesting being forced to worship at the back of the Mosque (problems resolved when Judaism and Christianity modernized). Some erudite Muslim Atheists (See Ali A. Rizvi's blog) want to celebrate the community aspects of Islam without the belief system, as do many Jews and Christians today in their lives. But there is one bad fairy at the party: a strain of militant Islam that has old grandiose dreams of violently retaking empire. This movement arose from the Nazi influence over early 20th century Islam that fell on fertile ground.

Thomas Jefferson, when Ambassador to France, spoke with Tripoli's envoy to London in 1786 and was given this view of Islam: .it was written in their Koran, that all nations who should not have answered their authority were sinners, that it was their right and duty to make war upon them wherever they could be found, and to make

slaves of all they could take as prisoners, and that every Mussulman who should be slain in battle was sure to go to Paradise.\342\200\235

There is nothing new in hearing the same from Al Qaeda and the Taliban; their grievance was not caused by Israel or the United States, by drones, or by any other excuse. It was the internalization of a religio-political ideology. This is old poisonous stuff must be discarded if they are to modernize and survive.

680 words

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