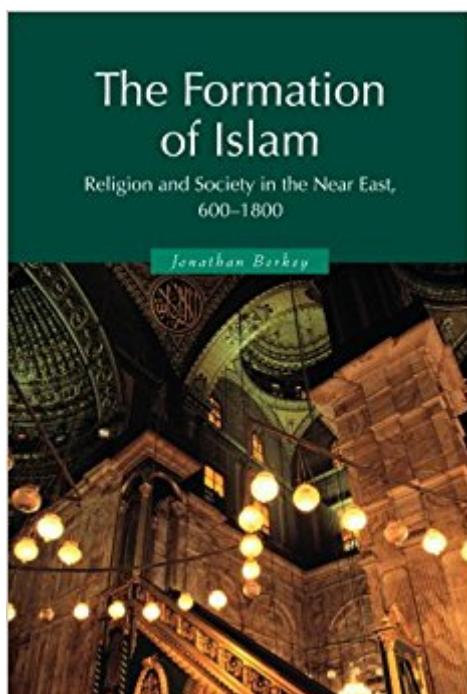


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The Formation Of Islam: Religion And Society In The Near East, 600-1800 (Themes In Islamic History)



Synopsis

Jonathan Berkey surveys the religious history of the peoples of the Near East from approximately 600 to 1800 c.e. After examining the religious scene in the Near East in late antiquity, he investigates Islam's first century, the "classical" period from the accession of the Abbasids to the rise of the Buyid amirs. He then traces the emergence of new forms of Islam in the middle period, deftly showing how Islam emerged slowly as part of a prolonged process.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Berkey provides a well-synthesized basis for the understanding of Islamic history on a broad basis. He has drawn on a significant range of scholarship and has provided extensive footnotes which will help students in their research work in secondary sources." Canadian Journal of History "...a vital aid to academics and advanced students alike." American Historical Review "A well-written and insightful presentation of Islam's historical development...Highly recommended." Choice

Jonathan Berkey's book surveys the religious history of the peoples of the Near East from roughly 600 to 1800 CE. The opening chapter examines the religious scene in the Near East in late antiquity. Subsequent chapters investigate Islam's first century, the 'classical' period from the accession of the Abbasids to the rise of the Buyid amirs, and thereafter the emergence of new forms of Islam in the middle period. The book stresses that Islam did not appear all at once, but emerged slowly, as part of a prolonged process.

Refreshingly, this is history, undiluted by tradition. The book does an excellent job of developing the history of Islam within the context of other contemporaneous faith traditions. (I wish it hadn't taken me nearly a dozen other books to get here.) This is not a "fast read"

I felt this book provided an excellent over-view of the evolution of Islam and, for me, a better understanding of the underlying political and theological issues facing the Middle East today. Unfortunately, I found the Kindle version very disappointing and certainly not worth the price. The only font available was the one used in the original paper version which appeared on the Kindle as if it were a photo copy made on a machine low on ink, all of which made it very difficult on the eyes. Furthermore, there is no way you can recall your the notes and hi-lighting on the Kindle (I am using the newest version 3 of the Paperwhite); however, I am able to do so on my iPad with the Kindle app - go figure. Bottom line is I highly recommend the book, but be sure to purchase it in paperback.

This book argues that the development of a distinctly Islamic religious and social identity took years, if not centuries to develop. It did not spring full blown from the mind of Mohammed. While the thesis of the book is stated initially, the development of the argument is too often interrupted by frequent modifiers or asides, which interrupt the thread or flow of the argument. A chronological ordering of events would be a great help. It would also be helpful if Arabic words or phrases were translated parenthetically in the text or in a footnote. The above critique makes this book a difficult read.

Jonathan Berkey's book describes the social and religious development of Islam from its inception to 1500. Berkey uses an analytical approach rather than a narrative one to portray the religion as being in a state of constant development during these years. His work highlights the diversity contained within Islam. Indeed, the book might have been entitled THE FORMATION OF ISLAMS. In describing Islam's formation, Berkey divides his book into four broad sections: "The Near East before Islam;" "The Emergence of Islam, 600--750;" "The Consolidation of Islam, 750--1000;" and "Medieval Islam, 1000--1500." In the first section, Berkey describes the late antique milieu that produced Islam. The areas of the Fertile Crescent and the Arabian Peninsula were politically unstable because of Byzantine and the Sassanid influences in these areas. Both in politics and religion, Berkey feels that Islam followed patterns of what came before it, while incorporating particularly Arabian elements such as an emphasis on tribal identity. In the second section, Berkey analyzes the early years of the Islamic movement. He portrays the new religion's earliest years as a time of flux, and he asserts that the movement had a long process of maturation. Muhammad did

not present the Arabs with a crystalline theology and polity; rather, the Islam developed in relationship to its political and religious context. Berkey portrays Islam as having a high level of religious indeterminacy during this period, while simultaneously being prone to sectarianism. In his third section, Berkey explores the crystallizing that occurred in the Islamic traditions. Politically, the Abbasids adopted the trappings of an imperial court, demonstrating continuity with what came before. Berkey asserts, however, that the real force in Islam at the time was the urban middle class and that the Caliph failed to wield real religious power. Shia disappointment concerning the Abbasid caliphs caused that movement to further define itself, but in doing so also caused further fracturing. Berkey explains the fascinating development of Twelver Shiism, as well as the Ismaili Shiism of the Fatimids. During this period of Islamic history, the broader Muslim community began to define what it meant to be Muslim. This form of Islam would become known as Sunnism, based on sunna which means way of life. This branch of Islam relied heavily on the consensus of the community (umma). The Sharia became the manifestation of the community's will and its traditions, and the jurists (ulama) became the custodians of those traditions. This role of tradition, as well as that of the jurists, became a means to maintain unity in the Islamic world, in spite of the fractious nature of the successive political regimes that arrived in the Middle Period. In the fourth section of this book, Berkey investigates what he apologetically calls "Medieval Islam." During this period, the Islamic areas were ruled by "alien" regimes, many of which were Turkic. Berkey suggests that these regimes relied heavily on the jurists and traditional Sunnism because of the "otherness" of the ruling class. This common bond proved beneficial in light of the area's political fragmentation.

I'm a biology major who read this book as part of a history course I took to fulfill a history requirement. As such I found it to provide a great base of knowledge. It mixes in a healthy amount of narrative style that makes it easier reading than other books of similar subjects that I've read. I say its for the "enthusiastic newcomer to the subject" because though this book is easier reading than others it did come from academia, and thus can occasionally be slightly thick reading, but in my opinion is well worth it. In short, if you're really interested in the history of Islam, this is a great book, but if you're looking for some casual reading you might want to look elsewhere.

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