Religion 242 Final Exam

Essay 1

Many religions often face variations in beliefs and traditions within their own religion. These differences are caused by different interpretations of the overarching “parent” religion, and often lead to branching. These smaller groups, though different from each other, still retain major beliefs that keep them classified as one religion. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are examples of religions that have smaller groups that have branched off and formed their own community within the bounds of the main religion. Despite the slight variances of the branches within each religion, they share key beliefs that make them distinguishable from outside religions; therefore, they constitute a single religion.

Judaism’s three main branches are Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Judaism. First, Orthodox Judaism strives to preserve the traditional Judaism beliefs by sticking to the original teachings of the Torah and the Talmud. Although Orthodox Judaism is the fastest-growing branch of Judaism in America, only 10% of American Jews identify with this branch. Second, Conservative Judaism is considered the middle ground between the other two branches because it also recognizes the importance of the Torah and its original Laws; however, it allows the Law to fit present-day circumstances. Today, only 15% of American Jews identify as Conservative, which has declined from 40% in the 1970s; some believe that this decline results from the absence of a middle ground in current social debate topics. Third, Reform Judaism is the progressive form of Judaism that favors the “spirit of Judaism” over the Torah’s original laws and believes that Judaism should adapt as time goes on. Reform Judaism is the largest branch of Judaism in America, making up 35% of American Jews. Each branch’s response to the changing world and how they plan on preserving the traditional religion defines who follows them and how popular they become.

Christianity’s three main branches consist of Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. First, Catholicism follows the beliefs and traditions outlined by the Roman Catholic Church which is ruled by the Pope and has been around for centuries. This branch is more universal than any other Christian church and consists of 50% of Christians. The Roman Catholic Church also runs the world’s largest private social welfare and education network. Second, Eastern Orthodoxy came from a split in the Roman Catholic Church and stresses the importance of both the Divine Liturgy and transcendence of God. Eastern Orthodoxy consists of 11% of Christians (which equates to about 330 million Christians) and is the largest in Eastern Europe and Russia. Likewise, Eastern Orthodoxy was revived in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall and many Evangelical Protestants in the U.S. have converted to Eastern Orthodoxy over time. Third, Protestantism follows the teachings of Martin Luther as well as the Bible. Protestants make up 37% of the Christian population. These three branches resulted from their responses to the Early Church and have been around a long time.

Islam’s two major branches are Sunni and Shia. First, Sunni Islam follows the teachings of the Prophet and his companions and stresses the importance of community. This form of Islam is the most popular, accounting for 85% of the World’s Muslims (1.5 billion people). Second, Shia Islam is the opposite of Sunni Islam in many ways and believes that there should be a visible authority (twelve imams) to help people interpret the Qur’an and that a community is not reliable to depend on. This form of Islam is less popular and makes up 15% of Muslims (240 million people). Because of their polar differences in their response for how to continue the religion after the Prophet, they form a majority and minority in Islam.

The branches of Judaism each have their own certain individual beliefs that differentiate them from the other branches in the religion. Orthodox Judaism believes that the original laws from the Torah should remain true to its original standards, even though the times have changed since the Laws were written. They also believe that the complicated nature of the Torah is significant because it helps people understand the complicated world; people should not shy away from the Torah because it is too difficult to understand and follow. The author Moses Sofer believes that the Torah and God have always been around and have never changed, so why do people want to change things that have stayed the same all the time before? He also believes that the reason ancient Israel was preserved for four centuries was because the Israelites never changed their names or language. On the contrary, Reform Judaism believes that the laws themselves are not the main point, but the essence behind them is. They believe in the faith of the individual over the community and that the rules should change to fit the person’s own faith and their current time period. They think that the Talmud is outdated and is no longer something that pertains to the world today. For example, Samuel Holdheim says, “The Talmud speaks with the ideology of its own time, and for that it was right. I speak from the higher ideology of my time, and for this age I am right.” Lastly, Conservative Judaism believes that people should follow the Torah to the best of their ability. Occasionally the Law needs to be reinterpreted to fit the times and circumstances of the present day. For example, Zecharias Frankel believes that religion is above time, and if rules must change to help an individual take action in their faith, then so be it. Different groups of people following Judaism grapple with their stance concerning tradition; thus, birthing three different branches of Judaism.

Each branch of Christianity is a consequence of the reactions to the Early Church, and the different responses have led to different branches. Catholicism believes in apostolistic succession and in a Pope, that God has absolute power, and that people should help the poor and less fortunate. They believe that since God made everything good, then people should appreciate what God has made, and through that, they can strengthen their faith. For instance, Saint Thomas Aquinas believed that since God made the world then people can find out more about God through the things he created. Next, Eastern Orthodoxy also believes in apostolic succession (however, not in papacy) and that God reveals himself to people through mystery. They also believe icons are portals into the divine world and that when people participate in divine liturgy, they are participating in a small part of heaven. For example, Saint John Chrysostom believes that when people partake in communion, they are actually drinking Christ’s blood and eating his flesh. They also believe that God is above all things and that he cannot be fully comprehended. Lastly, Protestantism does not believe in apostolic succession because they believe everyone is equal before God. They also believe that the best way for people to know God and develop their faith is for people to read the Bible and interpret it for themselves. For example, Martin Luther believes that a person’s faith alone is the key to gaining access into heaven, not good works. He also believes that no person is more divine than any other person. Though each branch is under Christianity, they each have their differences.

The two branches of Islam are starkly different in how they interpret Islam. Sunni Islam believes that people need to have trust in the Islam community, and that sometimes, a little bit of difference in religion is okay. For example, Shah Wali Allah believes that distortion occurs because people may follow someone who is not entirely infallible, and then that person can lead them into misinterpreted or warped versions of Islam. He also believes that sometimes if people take the laws that the law-giver orders too seriously, hair-splitting occurs, and it does more damage than good. The Shia branch of Islam believes communities can be corrupted. As a result, communities are not effective at preserving a religion. They believe that an authoritative figure must be present to help guide the people and interpret the Qur’an correctly. Unlike Sunni Islam, Shia Islam believes there is a twelfth imam and that they are being hidden by God. Moreover, Ibn Babawayh believes that the imams are perfect and that they possess complete knowledge from the beginning to the end of their career. Both branches have different views on authority figures in Islam which creates the barrier between the two.

Overall, although the branches of each religion have their own defining qualities, they still constitute a single religion. For instance, the different branches of Christianity may have beliefs that are unique to its own branch, but they all believe in key factors that make Christianity distinct from other monotheistic religions. For example, all branches of Christianity believe Jesus Christ died and was resurrected and that he was the Son of God, the Bible as the primary text of Christianity, and in the Holy Trinity. Likewise, each branch of Islam also believes in things that make them distinct from both Christianity and Judaism. They believe in the Qur’an, Muhammad, trips to Mecca, and prayer five times a day. These specific beliefs are what categorizes the branches into their respective overarching religions. Although the branches of each religion have differences in their practice and beliefs, they still retain the primary core beliefs and the texts that define their religion.

Essay 2

Mysticism is experienced by people in all religions. It is defined as the “direct, personal, unmediated contact with the divine or transcendent.” In other words, it is when someone has a one-on-one encounter with God or something else that is divine. Because this is a personal connection, mysticism can take on many different forms and can look different from a person-to-person basis. Many people who experience mysticism later use their experience to take action in their faith. Sometimes these actions go against religious norms and challenge the religion’s tradition.

In Judaism, sometimes the sun is used as a metaphor for God. People on earth cannot see God directly just like people cannot look at the sun directly, but they can see the sun (and God) through reflections. Moreover, both the Kabbalah and Hasidism help people try to see those reflections as well as help them come into contact with the divine. The Kabbalah is a series of mystical texts that seek to reveal truths about God. Kabbalists see God as a *sefirot* with the different parts of the body signifying different aspects of God’s relationship to the human world. One of the *sefriah, Shekhinah* is the mediator between God and the world. The *Shekhinah* challenges the norms of Judaism because it is seen as female. Kabbalists believe that God has both male and female sexualities. Next, Hasidism is a movement based on Kabbalism and it believes that with the right guidance, people are still able to encounter the divine energy (left over from God’s creation of the world) which is everywhere. They also believe Hasidic rabbis are mystical leaders that are supposed to guide people towards spirituality and experience with the divine. Hasidic masters believe one should worship God with joy at all times, which reinforces the traditional values of worshipping God with joy. However, Hasidism takes it one step further and believes that even miniscule tasks such as eating and drinking are mystical acts of worship. Both the Hasidic rabbis and Kabbalah texts serve to help people come into contact with the divine.

In Christianity, mysticism is often experienced by an individual who then goes on to interpret and later act on the surprising encounter. Some examples of mysticism include St. Francis of Assisi and Julian of Norwich. St. Francis of Assisi is said to have received the stigmata (the wounds of Christ miraculously bestowed), and he also preached to a group of birds who listened and enjoyed his sermon. His mystical encounter challenges the traditional Christian belief that humans are the superior beings of the earth. On the other hand, Julian of Norwich experienced intense visions of God and even overcame a sickness in which she prayed for to happen. After her experience with mysticism, she viewed God as our Mother. She believed that God was compassionate, loving, wise, and fulfilled the needs of her children, characteristics normally associated with maternity; this idea challenged the norms of Christianity which saw God as a Father.

In Islam, Sufism focuses on how the individual can come into closer contact with God. Many people embark on a spiritual training or Sufi path with a mystical guide that helps them along. Sufi practice believes in going beyond learning about Islam and encourages people to seek personal experiences with God. Sufis can encounter God through dreams and asceticism. Two beliefs that challenge Islam norms are asceticism and the belief that women are channels to the divine. For example, Al-Ghazali left his family and traveled to Damascus to pray in solitude to purify his heart. He pursued asceticism which meant he left his community and family which goes against Islam’s traditional beliefs. Moreover, traditionally, men are considered superior to women but in Sufism, women are given a high status. Therefore, women being leaders in the Sufi community is something that challenges Islam’s traditional norms.

In conclusion, mysticism generally challenges traditional religion. In all three religions, many of the mystical experiences served the individual and opened the religion up to new ideas. For example, in the Kabbalah, the idea that God is both female and male is not an idea in traditional Judaism. Moreover, oftentimes the beliefs of people who have experienced mysticism do not follow the majority of the religion. For example, Sufism has a lot of beliefs that challenge traditional Islam (asceticism and equality of women) and it is only followed by 5% of all Muslims. In addition, the overall impact of mysticism leaves behind movements that challenge instead of reinforce mysticism; the texts are more focused on which belief goes against the traditional belief next than ones that reinforce the tradition. For example, even though Julian of Norwich has many beliefs that reinforce the traditional Christian values, her belief of God as a Mother instead of a Father figure is a focus point for the textbook even though it is not really seen in any of the major branches of Christianity. Overall, the impact of mysticism on a religious group challenges the religion more than it strengthens adherence to it.

Essay 3

Each religion, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have all experienced modernity and have faced a variety of responses towards it. Modernity is defined as “valuing empiricism over deductive logic, individualism over the communal, utilitarianism over absolute ethics, skepticism over faith, and innovation over tradition.” In other words, modernity is when the people of a religion try to adapt to the changing times and with that, they accumulate ideas that are different from what is traditionally believed. Whether they like it or not, the people who follow the religion have an ethnocentric bias which also tunes into their decisions. This bias produces actions and reactions to the ever-changing reality of modernity. Thus, each religions’ encounter with modernity has left an imprint on the religion and has both shaped the religion and affected its followers.

Judaism has had people who reject and people who promote modernity within Judaism. Two movements that embrace modernity are Feminist and Reform Judaism. Reform Judaism embraces the individual over the community and innovation over tradition. They believe that the Torah is not inerrant and that sometimes laws should change if they do not fit the current time period. They believe that religion is not merely following all of the laws in the Torah but experiencing religion for themselves. From Reform Judaism stemmed Feminist Judaism that also believed in innovation over tradition and skepticism over faith. Traditionally, Judaism excluded women from various practices and rituals. Moreover, Judith Plaskow wrote that “Reimagining God as female offers to women a theological opening to redress the religious inferiority… imposes on women.” This theology is more inclusive of women which is not traditionally the case for Judaism. On the other hand, Orthodox Judaism critiques modernity. Orthodox Judaism critiques innovation over faith. Moses Sofer believes that God has preserved Israel for four years because they had not changed their language or names from traditional Jewish names. Orthodox Jews believe that the Talmud and Torah are inerrant, and that religion should not bend to the wills of the people. They also believe that their customs are a part of what makes them a Jew and that people should not change the original language or laws. Both sides have contributed to the division of those who embrace and those who critique modernity.

Christianity, like Judaism, has also faced the problem of dealing with modernity. From the different responses, Liberal Christianity and Conservative Christianity were formed. Liberal Christianity believes in the individual over the community, skepticism over faith, and innovation over tradition. One example is that some churches now accept gay marriage and support climate change efforts. Moreover, Adolf Von Harnack believes that people should not have to look towards the church for approval to do something, they should exist as individuals. He believed that everyone exists at the will of God and that people should trust him and go with the flow. Likewise, Tillich believed that people need to be continuing to question their faith as to show concern. In contrast, Conservative Christianity critiques innovation over tradition and skepticism over faith. For example, Blaise Pascal said that faith is a wager, and ultimately, there is nothing to lose for believing in Christianity. He is critiquing skepticism and stating that people should be firm in their faith because there is no risk to being faithful. Moreover, Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated that the world has dwindled Christianity down to “cheap grace.” He believes that people need to recognize that grace does not come from good works and that people should live lives of discipleship and obedience.

In Islam, the response to other countries’ conquests in Muslim territory sparked very different reactions which contributed to the modernity of Islam. From the West’s invasion of Muslim territories, Feminist Islam and questions about jihad arose within the Muslim community. Feminist Islam embraces innovation over tradition. For instance, many traditions in Islam oppress women and are degrading towards the value of a woman. Feminist Judaism supports women’s education and looks to find new interpretations of the Qur’an. Other Muslims promoted international schools open to both Muslims and non-Muslims. On the contrary, the question of whether or not to fight the West and the reason behind it hung in the air. Moreover, Jihad critiques individualism over community. Jihad is originally meant to signify the internal and external struggle of faith, however; some Islam extremists have twisted its original meaning to back up their war plans. For example, Mahmud Shaltut wrote a text explaining that if one religion is constantly suppressing another, then violence may be necessary. Sayyid Qutb took inspiration from Shaltut and interpreted it as if one religion does not give in to Islam or does not pay the tax, then war is necessary. The modern chaos that erupted in Islam has caused people to react to modernity.

In closing, the relationship between modernity and religion can somewhat be understood by taking a look into ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is “the cultural or ethnic bias—whether conscious or unconscious—in which an individual views the world from the perspective of his or her own group, establishing the in-group as archetypal and rating all other groups with reference to this ideal”. The cultural or ethnic bias can play a big part in why some people respond to modernity negatively. The acceptance of modernity by progressive religious groups is motivated by an ethnocentric bias that assumes that contemporary European and American cultural values must be right. The culture of America has changed overtime, thus changing Christianity’s values as well. People like Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr. have contributed to enact more liberal views on the people of America. So, the acceptance of modernist views (social justice, etc.) by Liberal Christians must have been due to the assumption that those views are correct. For both Islam and Judaism, the ethnocentric bias that American and European cultural values are correct have influenced progressive religions to increase their inclusivity of women. The cultural values of America and Europe paired with ethnocentric biases are what propel progressive groups, most of which are more inclusive and in tune with today's culture.