**Another Voice Podcast with Eric Nelson**

**to accompany Strayer/Nelson, *Ways of the World*, Third Edition**

**The Emergence of Islam in Context (Chapter 9)**

**SLIDE 9.1**

Islam was a relative late comer to the rich tradition of monotheistic faiths in southwest Asia, which raises the question: “What was Islam’s relationship to these older traditions and especially another relative newcomer Christianity?”

**SLIDE 9.2 [Map: Arabia at the Time of Muhammad]**

At the time of Muhammad’s revelations, the religious landscape of southwest Asia and much of the Mediterranean comprised a patchwork of monotheistic faiths. Older religions like Zoroastrianism and Judaism coexisted—sometimes peacefully, sometimes not—with newer faiths like Christianity and Manichaeism. But even this description is too simple, because major divisions within faiths further divided the landscape.

**SLIDE 9.3 [Image: Muslims, Jews, and Christians]**

From the start Muhammad placed his revelations firmly in the tradition of Jewish and Christian predecessors. According to the *Quran* Muhammad was the last great prophet of this shared monotheistic faith. Passages from the *Quran* recognize the Jewish Torah and Psalms along with the Christian Gospels as texts with important teachings for believers. The *Quran* instructs Muslims to “Make no distinction between any of God’s messengers; for they all say, ‘We have heard and we pay heed.’” The special status within the Muslim world for peoples of the book—that is Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians—reflected this close relationship between Islam and other monotheistic faiths. Because they worshipped the same God, Muslims felt that these groups had to be tolerated and even respected in society, albeit with a second class status and the requirement to pay a tax.

**SLIDE 9.4 [Image: Muhammad and the Archangel Gabriel]**

Muhammad’s revelations actively engaged with topics that were subjects of controversy within other faiths. Debates over the teachings and nature of Jesus are a good example of this. Jesus is referred to in ninety three verses of the Quran, many of which affirm passages from the Gospels as genuine revelations. But Muhammad and his early followers firmly rejected the belief held by many Christians—including the Roman and Greek Orthodox traditions—that Jesus was God or in any way divine. They viewed this idea as running counter to the oneness of God, a central pillar of Muhammad’s teachings. Instead early Muslims viewed Jesus as a prophet like Muhammad.

Early Muslims were not alone in advocating alternative understandings of Jesus’s nature. Some Jewish groups viewed Jesus as a teacher but not divine. Arian, Monophysite, Jacobite and Nestorian Christians also advocated their own alternative understandings of Jesus’s divine nature that were rejected by the Roman and Greek Orthodox Christian traditions. Indeed, this issue was one of the most contentious in the Christian world, which had led to significant divisions in the faith. Thus, Muhammad’s revelations about the oneness of God engaged with topics of debate current in Christian communities across the region.

**SLIDE 9.5 [Image: The Growing World of Islam 900-1500]**

Islam’s status as a distinct religion within a broader southwest Asian monotheistic tradition was established early in its history. The growing Arab empire facilitated this, securing Islam’s official status as an established faith in most of the region. Regulations associated with the status of peoples of the book also contributed to a clearly defined separation of Islam from related faiths. In the coming centuries, Muhammad’s teachings spread far beyond southwest Asia converting peoples from other religious traditions and forming a new world religion with over a billion followers today.

Despite these later developments, it’s important to remember that Islam emerged in a region of established monotheistic religions and that Muhammad and his early followers engaged with issues important to many faiths across the region. In this way, Muhammad’s teaching mission paralleled that of Jesus a half a millennium earlier, as both presented their teachings in the context of established traditions in the region. While neither of these teachers intended to create a new religion, history decided otherwise, as it so often does.