

# Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Their Religions

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**ABSTRACT** *Depending on the context, Christians, Muslims and Jews have constructed their own religion, perceived the religions of others, and articulated relations between religions in different ways. This paper examines the rise in history of the three communities, which came to identify themselves through their religions and have been highly sensitive to differences. It indicates common features and parallels of which adherents may have been more or less conscious. The central question in such research is what persons and groups mean in particular situations when they call themselves Christian, Muslim or Jewish. The variety of personal and group identities in the three religious communities has been concealed partly by religious leaderships concerned with the survival of their flocks, and partly by the use of the general concepts of Christianity, Islam and Judaism with which believers have been called to identify. These concepts have shut people into separate religious pigeonholes and could thus be used to support ethnic, social and other rivalries. This pigeonholing has also confronted more spiritually-oriented people with problems of social identity, religious belonging and spiritual authenticity.*

In this essay I would like to make some remarks on the relations between Christians, Muslims and Jews. Given the immensity of the subject, I want to limit myself to relationships between their three religions, but not only as historical traditions. I also want to examine how the people concerned consider and construct their own religion as well as the two other ‘prophetic’ religions. I shall first present some historical and comparative observations on the three religions and then a few recent intellectual voices from the communities concerned that deal with the relationships between these religions. I shall conclude with some observations on much-needed research on relationships between Christians, Muslims and Jews in history and at the present time. Their own ideas about these religions play a pivotal role in articulating these relationships. I hope that my suggestions will encourage others too, to explore new paths and find new kinds of minesweepers in the political minefield of Christian–Muslim–Jewish relationships.

### **The Beginnings: new identities**

How did these three communities perceive and judge the arrival of a new religious community that also claimed to have received a divine revelation? Or the other way around, how did a new community perceive and judge the existence of previous religious communities claiming to possess divine revelation?

In a certain way, it was easiest for the *Jews*. Besides the temple cult, they had their religion in its rabbinical form and had preached monotheism in important centers of the Hellenistic world, that is to say the Roman Empire, and this message attracted attention. Then Christianity appeared—first what may be called the Jesus movement, then the preaching of his resurrection with the communal life of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and some other places. The Christians claimed that the Messiah had arrived. However, since, as far as the Jews were concerned, hardly anything had changed and certainly nothing favorable to the Jews, they dismissed the Messianic claim. Christians were considered a sect and were persecuted. In Jewish eyes, the hoped-for Messianic era had not yet arrived.

Some five centuries later, Islam appeared. The Muslim community claimed that a new and final prophet had emerged in Arabia. However, the Jews felt the prophetic age had been closed and that they had no need of a new prophet. Maybe Muhammad was sent as a prophet to the Arabs, but the Jews could not recognize him as the prophet he claimed to be. Moreover, their distancing themselves from Muhammad also had political implications when fighting broke out between the Muslim community in Medina and the Meccans. The Muslims and Jews living in Medina became estranged and in the end the latter were driven out or killed. However, Muhammad concluded a treaty with the Jews of Khaibar, who from then on were treated as *dhimmi*s, like the Jews in other territories the Arabs conquered.

I would say that the Jews remained rather indifferent to the rise of these two religions and their religious claims. They did not remain indifferent, however, to the rise of Christian communities in the Roman empire, insofar as these tried to make converts among the Jews, tended to compete with the Jews for positions in society, and especially later increased their anti-Jewish discourse and started persecutions. Historically, Muslims treated Jews less harshly than did the Christians.

Seen from the Jewish tradition, Christianity and Islam are children of Judaism; but the rabbis see them as illegitimate children. They deny the claims of churches and tend to consider their spiritualization of religion as an escape from the realities of life. They reject the claims of Islam even if they appreciate its monotheistic message and its rejection of the human inclination to idolatry. Rabbinical Judaism is seen as the legitimate continuation of the biblical prophets and what we are used to calling the religion of ancient Israel.

The situation was more complicated in the case of the *Christians*. The first Christians were Jews and Christianity could very well have remained a Jewish sect. It took a little time before the preaching of Jesus as the Messiah extended to the *goyim* (non-Jews). But this was crowned with success, so that after a

century almost all the Christians were 'pagan' converts and their descendants. The Christian communities crystallized around the four patriarchal sees of Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria and Rome.

Attitudes to Judaism varied, but on the whole they developed negatively. Many Christians were disappointed and disturbed that only a small number of Jews became Christians. All the Jews should have recognized Jesus as the Messiah, but instead, converted Jews suffered persecution by Jewish authorities, at least in Jerusalem. Even before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, the Jewish Christians had left the city, were dispersed, and practically disappeared without leaving a written trace. Throughout the Empire rivalries arose between Christians and Jews who had established themselves earlier. The fact that the Christians and not the Jews were persecuted in the Empire added to existing irritations and when Christianity became the state religion in the fourth century CE, anti-Judaism developed further and led to increasing social and religious discrimination against the Jews.

Attitudes toward Islam also varied. Christians everywhere were much concerned about the Arab conquests of territories where churches were flourishing. Although Christian communities in the Near East had sometimes welcomed the Arabs as in some sense liberators from the pressures of Greek political and ecclesiastical domination, Islam turned out to be a new burden upon them. Christians had rejected the idea that Muhammad could be a prophet; for them there was no need of any revelation after Jesus, once he had been recognized as the Messiah (Christ). Christians outside the Caliphate saw the Arabs and Islam as an aggressive enemy against which all defenses had to be mobilized. Christians living within the Caliphate started to lose their old privileged position by the end of the seventh century CE, and a slowly growing number of them converted to Islam, especially in the cities. From the mid-ninth century on, Muslims made a concerted effort to bring them to Islam, not without success.

From the outset, Christianity has seen itself as a religion of salvation. In fact, the Christian Church has always proclaimed a particular message of salvation to the world. The Church has always measured and judged other orientations, worldviews, ideologies, and religions according to this particular message, even though its 'christocentric' view of religions such as Judaism and Islam has undergone theological variations. This self-interpretation and claim of the Church to prescribe the true social order and open access to the eternal destiny and salvation of the whole of humanity could not be accepted by Judaism and Islam.

The case of the *Muslims*, as I see it, was less complex than that of the Jews and the Christians. Islam arose outside the power sphere of the great states of the time, the Christian East Roman Empire and the Zoroastrian Sassanid Persian empire. It rested on the conviction that, after a range of prophets who had preceded him, Muhammad was the last prophet. He was sent to the Arabs but with a universal message contained in the Qur'ān, which was regarded as God's words, and establishing a social order to be expanded to the conquered and eventually converted territories. Compared with the Jews and the Christians, who had both suffered from foreign domination and various forms of oppression, Muslims seemed to have a 'success religion'. Their self-confidence was en-

hanced by the conviction that existing Judaism and Christianity, as well as other religions, were incomplete if not perverted, whereas Islam, as strict monotheism, was the true religion of the one and only God. And it received an enormous boost through the military successes of the Arabs throughout the Middle East and North Africa, the Mediterranean, Spain, and southern France and Italy—leaving aside the territories east of present-day Iran.

Muslim attitudes to Jews, after a positive start immediately after the Hijra, soon deteriorated in Medina, not only because the Jews refused to recognize Muhammad as a prophet and made their own claims, but also because they did not support what may be called the Muslim war against Mecca. Although they were then persecuted in Medina, such persecution stopped when Jews surrendered and entered into a treaty with the conquering Muslims, as happened in Khaibar, and when they behaved according to the rules imposed upon *dhimmīs*. As such, they were in a slightly better position than Christian *dhimmīs*, who were easily suspected of constituting a fifth column in the wars between the Caliphate and the Byzantine Empire and later the crusaders.

Muslim attitudes to Christians were different. Apparently, during most of his life Muhammad was sensitive to the religious life and practice of Christians as he saw it in Arabia. However, certainly in the war situation against Christian tribes in northwestern Arabia but already from the outset of his preaching and public activity, he clearly rejected all that seemed to contradict strict monotheism as he saw it. As a consequence, the Qur'ān denies such Christian doctrines as the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, or the Trinity and the incarnation of God. Christian *dhimmīs* living in Muslim territories, like Jewish ones, enjoyed a protected status as 'People with a Scripture' (*ahl al-kitāb*). Though not usually persecuted, they lived under pressure and were in fact treated as second-class citizens and distrusted in cases of war with the Byzantines and the Latin Franks.

Seen from a Muslim perspective, Judaism and Christianity were in a sense predecessors of Islam. In the Muslim view, Moses and Jesus brought fundamentally the same message as Muhammad, that is to say a radical monotheism. However, the Muslim tradition reproaches Judaism and Christianity for not maintaining this postulated monotheistic outlook of their prophets, so that they cannot be called 'true' predecessors of Islam. It contrasts a Muslim universalism with Jewish particularism and the self-absolutization of the Christian churches. Muslims claim the indisputable absolute character of their own religion. For them it is the absolute religion that has existed since creation, was affirmed by the prophets, and has to be followed by humanity as a sign of submission to God.

### **Distinct Features of the Religions: further distinctive identity construction**

From the outset of their encounters, these communities stressed the originality of their own religions and their own religious identity in contrast to each other. In present-day terms, no syncretism was officially allowed.

Seen in a historical perspective, the three religions have indeed certain distinct features. The communities themselves stress these features as what constitutes

their specific identity and as what distinguishes each one fundamentally from the others. The main features are the following.

In *Judaism*, the gift of the Torah as a religious rule of life distinguishes the community from other people(s). It is a sign of election, but conveys in return a specific responsibility. It gives the community a religious status that implies a liberation from the burden of both human tyranny and religious idolatry. The Torah, supplemented by the oral tradition, is recognized as guaranteeing to the community the correct knowledge of the true rules of life. Throughout history, the longing for the Messianic era at the end of time, in the face of the hardships of life, including dispersion (*galût*), oppression, and persecution, has strengthened communal efforts to endure. The religious ideal is to transform the world in the sense of justice and peace as meant by its Creator. Jewish identity has both ethnic, social and religious aspects.

In *Christianity*, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are viewed as the most crucial event in history, inaugurating the arrival of another kind of order (Kingdom). He should be recognized as the Messiah ('Christ') and followed. This leads to a liberation from the forces of the world, a redemption of humankind from evil, and eternal salvation for the faithful. Christians are held to constitute a redeemed community of mutual love, with the task of conveying the message of liberation and salvation in word and deed to other people and the world. Salvation implies a liberation both from the burden of the Law in religion and from the oppression of the powers in the world. Christianity sees this world in the light of a new creation to be proclaimed and furthered. The community is organized through the institution of churches, whose nature, task and organization have been a long-standing subject of debate. A certain separation of Church and State, as spiritual and political realms respectively, is in practice accepted. This does not exclude interaction, and the churches, consequently, have been involved in politics. The Christian identity has strong spiritual as well as social aspects.

In *Islam*, the notion of an absolute monotheism is fundamental; any form of idolatry is rejected. Islam is held to contain the principles of a universally valid social order. The verses of the Qur'ān are considered to have been directly revealed through an intermediate angelic figure. They enjoy absolute authority and are held to constitute a definite and final revelation for humankind. As religious law, the Sharī'a is held to contain the rules for communal and personal life to be practised in Muslim communities. At the end of time, all people will be submitted to a final judgment for their eternal destiny. The Muslim identity has both religious and social aspects.

Much more could be said about what I have described here as the distinctive features of the three religions. In each one, a number of particular structures have developed in the course of history. In this way, the three religions were 'constructed'.

These communities each developed a particular consciousness of their own history conceived in different ways as valid 'tradition'. Such a tradition was considered to go back to the earliest beginnings of the community, and a continuity of this tradition was assumed. Besides their various scriptures, these various traditions have been a source which a community could fall back upon

and a means by which it constructed its distinctive identity. In practice, it was not only distinctive features in matters of law and doctrine, religious practice, and life style, but also the canonization of a particular scripture, the construction of a homogeneous tradition, and the use of certain rules of interpretation that became the backbone of the three communities, giving them their distinctive identity.

### **Historical Variety: neglected sub-traditions**

Historically speaking, however, the respective traditions, including those about the beginnings of each religion, were not as homogeneous and linear as they were presented within and to the communities themselves. They were in fact constructions made in later times that gave to the adherents the idea of historical continuity and even of linear development. The historical reality of the three communities and their religions was far more complex than the later presentation of an unbroken tradition suggests.

In all three cases, almost from the beginning there were different 'sub-traditions' resulting from debates between different points of view taken by different groups in the community. In a number of cases, such different views led to enduring tensions. Especially when questions of leadership, authority and power were involved, such tensions contributed to conflicts. These were sometimes solved through compromise, but in other cases led to separations, or in the worst cases suppression and elimination. The official traditions in all three religions hardly speak of the dissenters who raised their voice but who were marginalized and could be simply forgotten. The fact that they arose and found adherents cannot be denied, however, and shows that the historical reality of the communities of these three religions has been much richer and much more varied than the official tradition could admit. In other words, the construction of what are assumed to be the distinctive features and the authoritative traditions of the three religions does not correspond with the empirical social and historical reality of the religious communities concerned. They are rather normative schemes that were developed in these communities and later imposed on what had been the people's lived reality.

Let me give some examples of the great number of various orientations that developed in the three religions and brought about their astonishing diversity and complexity at the present time.

First, certain new fundamental religious constructions should be mentioned that had a profound impact on the three communities and their further history. In *Judaism*, I notice the rise of synagogal communities with what is called rabbinical Judaism devoted to the study of the Torah, and also the development of various kinds of messianism and religious Zionism throughout the history of the diaspora. In *Christianity*, I think of the broad range of interpretations and practical applications of God's Kingdom, including the idea of the community of saints and the establishment of the monastic orders. I also notice the gradual development of a kind of ecclesiastical order in terms of a spiritual empire—an alternative to existing political empires. It increasingly demanded complete obedience, claiming to be a guarantee of salvation. Throughout history, there

have been a number of chiliastic and spiritual movements often considered heretical, and in the twentieth century an ecumenical movement has taken off, relativizing existing ecclesiastical structures. *Islam* developed a nostalgia for a pure, paradigmatic religious community that supposedly existed under the first four caliphs. Besides the spirituality of the *ṭarīqas* and its various sectarian movements, Islam developed a variety of ideas about the just society and the ideal Islamic state, with claims of universal validity. Throughout the twentieth century, Islam has been increasingly ideologized in connection with the social and political contexts in which Muslim communities find themselves.

In all three communities, moreover, there arose a number of religious subcultures, some of which were marginalized or worse, especially when they led to practical separatisms from the mainline communities. *Judaism* had its Samaritans, its Qumran community, its zealots, its followers of Jesus, its Karaites, and a number of sectarian movements of different sorts throughout history. It saw the opposition between Sephardim and Ashkenazim, the Liberals and the Orthodox, but also its Hassidim, its religious Zionists, and nowadays its ultra-nationalist activists, with all the consequences for present-day Israel. *Christianity* had its ascetic movements and its communal religious orders, its excommunications after each Ecumenical Council, its East-West schism of 1054 and its sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. One should mention the Jansenist, Puritan, and Pietist movements in the West, but also the worldwide missionary movement, the feminist movement, and the rise of independent churches especially in Africa, and of movements inspired by the theology of liberation, especially in Latin America. Different church models reflect the basic opposition between centralized power in the Roman Catholic Church and autonomous communities in Protestantism. *Islam*, too, has known its separatist and even heretical movements. Right from the beginning there were the Shī'ite, Khārijite, and more ascetically inclined movements. Throughout history, a number of repristination movements have called for a return to the Qur'ān and Sunna only, whereas the various Mahdist movements announced the end of time. Islam has had its Bābīs, Bahā'īs, and Ahmadīs, its Wāhhābīs and Tālibān, but also its Ṣūfī orders and accommodations to local culture. I should mention the difference between Sunnī and Shī'ī Islam and between the *ṭarīqas* as centres of spiritual life and the Islamist activist movements aiming at the Islamization of society through political action.

In more recent times, new social constructions were developed in the framework of these religions, sometimes later also taken up by people not belonging to the three religious communities themselves. In *Judaism*, the movement of 'ingathering' of diaspora Jews in Israel as well as the continuing debate about the assimilation of Jews in other societies and cultures is to be noted. The foundation of Israel as a Jewish national state has had a profound impact and great efforts have been made to present Jewish tradition and life to broader circles. In *Christianity*, the Christian socialist movement, the missionary movement, the feminist movement, and the activities for Justice and Peace (*Justitia et Pax*) deserve mentioning. I am also thinking of current critical movements targeting the present-day economic and political world order or a globalization according to the market model. One should mention the human rights move-

ments and movements supporting the poorer Southern as opposed to the richer Northern countries. In *Islam*, a number of movements arose in response first to tradition, then to modernity, and finally to misuse of state power in the context of changing social and economic conditions. The burden of political power and interests, both national and international, weighs heavily on present-day Muslim societies and the religious communities constituent in them.

In recent times, these three religions have known changes and movements in different contexts that would have been difficult to imagine in the nineteenth century. This is an indication that the history of their adherents is continuing and that further constructions are to be expected. The ongoing process of the construction of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is taking place before our eyes.

### **Common Elements and Features of which Adherents are Conscious**

Adherents of the three religions have been more or less aware of the fact that Judaism, Christianity and Islam have elements in common. Best known are elements that can be found in the scriptures of these religions, directly mentioned or merely alluded to and with which readers will be familiar. This is strengthened by the fact that Christianity has also recognized the Hebrew Bible as scripture. Let me give a few examples.

1. Several figures are common to the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'ān, and also alluded to in the New Testament, for instance Adam (and Eve), Noah, Abraham (willing to sacrifice his son), Joseph and Moses.
2. In all three scriptures, we find some basic narratives in common or alluded to, for instance the creation of the world, the creation of man and woman, the mistake of Adam, the deluge and the ark of Noah, Moses receiving the Tablets of the Law, and the Israelites' veneration of the golden calf.
3. In all three Scriptures, respect is paid to God's powerful reality and to God-given Law. God's generous disposition toward the human being is stressed as is the need for the human disposition of obedience, love and submission toward God. Several common ethical rules are proclaimed, such as taking care of widows and orphans, the poor, and the strangers.

Looking more closely, however, we see that the presentation of these elements common to the three scriptures is not the same, but varies. The underlying interpretation sometimes differs considerably, and they are often linked in different ways. This is also true for the Qur'ān, although its often rather allusive style tends to obscure this fact. The more elaborate presentations, for instance, of Abraham's call and wanderings and of Moses' call and his receiving the Law and guiding the Israelites as described in the Hebrew Bible, differ considerably from references to the same material in the Qur'ān and allusions made to it in the New Testament. Historically, such differences can of course be attributed to different sources, but we must also assume that the storytellers and redactors had their own particular intentions when they transmitted or recorded the stories and that they wanted to convey particular messages to their audience or readers. As a consequence, we should read these narratives as already presenting particular



interpretations that the storytellers or redactors made out of the materials they had at their disposal, along with their own deeper intentions.

In their attachment to scripture and tradition, these communities bear a striking similarity. In all three religions we find a canonized scripture enjoying more or less absolute religious authority and considered to have been revealed. Supplementary to scripture, there is in all cases a tradition that claims to go back to the founding figures of these religions and is recognized by most adherents as authoritative.

In their ways of systematic thinking, once established, the three religions also show remarkable common features. What has been called ‘natural theology’, developed by reason without recourse to revelation, is quite similar in the three religions. The juridical systems of Judaism and Islam are similar in structure. At certain moments during the medieval period, Muslim, Jewish and Christian thinkers were able to discuss—at least in writing—a number of common philosophical and theological questions. This was because these thinkers shared a common framework of thought based on Aristotelian and Neoplatonic thought. Even the ways religion was taught to students in the three communities were largely similar, since there existed common traditions of study and teaching. Medieval scholars must have been aware of these facts.

### **Parallels of which Adherents are Less Conscious**

We are here also concerned, however, with certain features the three religions have in common, but of which the adherents themselves are mostly unaware, since they naturally tend to view things from the perspective of their own particular religion. It is only in a more detached comparative view that such features catch the eye. All three, for instance, have comparable notions of the individual person and stress his or her responsibility.

Parallels between these three monotheistic religions are all the clearer if one compares them as a family with other families of religions, such as the Indian religions, the religions of China, or the religions of Antiquity. I would like to give four examples of such parallel features, to which others could be added.

1. First of all, common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam is the idea that something special—a *gift* implying reciprocal duties—was offered to the community, which it accepted as the foundation for its existence. This kind of communication took place through a particular prophetic figure, and the community accepted the offer subsequently by covenant or alliance, though it did not always live by it. The prophetic figure himself, whether Moses, Jesus or Muhammad, is held in great honour by the community aligning itself with him.

The communal nature of the deal implies that the gift entails a responsibility of the community as such. At the same time, the members of the community are considered responsible as individual persons. Both communal and individual life is seen as privileged and responsible.

In all three cases, the community’s acceptance of the gift has a wider significance. Christianity and Islam in particular have the whole of humankind

and its well-being in view. All three communities consider themselves exempt from a certain disorder or even confusion that is supposed to prevail among people in the ‘outside’ world. They have received a meaningful orientation in the world and this is part of the gift.

From a comparative point of view, this common structure, centered around a gift that was received, seems to me basic to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which can be seen as variants. Certain key terms in this respect—God, revelation, alliance or covenant, law, judgment, paradisiacal situation—have an important place in all three religions. This is also true for certain key intellectual problems; their elaboration—for instance of the relationship between reason and revelation—runs rather parallel.

In all three religions, certain religious elites—scriptural, intellectual, mystical, practical—cultivate a particular expertise in matters related to the gift and claim authority for it. In Orthodox and Catholic Christianity, a highly influential and sometimes powerful hierarchical clergy developed; in Judaism and Islam, rabbis and ‘*ulamā*’ were considered authorities on law and religion in general. All three religions have also known another kind of authority based on personal religious experience.

Such parallels of key terms, of intellectual construction, and of religious elite formation are not merely formal; they can reach substance as well. They are striking from a comparative view, if one considers the three religions as a kind of extended family. But for the people concerned, this family resemblance remained largely hidden behind the religious walls erected and maintained between the religious communities. Even basic knowledge of each other’s religion as it is lived in practice has been absent in these communities until very recently.

2. A second common feature of the three religions is the claim to possess a *revelation* mediated on divine authority and of absolute validity. All three religions regarded revelation as the highest good. In all three cases, this revelation was somehow linked to a canonized scripture that became practically the guarantor of revelation. In all three religions, moreover, what was viewed as revelation was considered final and immutable, not only for the community itself, but also fundamentally for the rest of humankind.

As a consequence, in defending the possession of revelation, scripture has played a pivotal role for these religions. But it could also serve other aims. In the monotheistic religions, scripture often served to provide access to the ultimate truth(s) about the community’s religion. One could appeal to scripture against degradations of religion in social life, injustice and immorality in society, misuse of religious law, misconduct by the religious leadership, oppression by the political leadership, and last but not least against false sacralizations of law, tradition or popular customs. Scripture could also be used, however, to ‘purify’ religion. Karaite, Calvinist and Ḥanbalī reformers invoked their scriptures in support of their puritan programmes and practices.

The polemics between the three religions often denied and attacked the claims of revelation made by other, that is to say rival religions. The other’s scriptures

could be viciously attacked at their most sensitive point, that is to say their claimed character of revelation.

As long as the people were not familiar with their own, not to mention other scriptures, and with the various ways of studying and applying their texts, they were dependent on specialists performing these tasks, '*religious literati*'. The latter's authority and even power rested on the fact that scripture was considered and had even been sacralized as the necessary intermediary to revelation. The specialists had different ways of explaining and applying scriptural texts and were rivals for the power to control their interpretation and application. In a number of cases in the histories of all three religions, scripture was simply used to legitimize or support ideas and practices that served other interests.

3. A third common feature of the three cases is the nearly absolute value that each religious community and its adherents attributed to its *own religion*. Believers were expected and encouraged to identify unconditionally with their respective religions.

We should see this phenomenon in its context. For a long time, religions corresponded to autonomous ethnic, national and other social groups that had to defend themselves to assure their survival or make exorbitant claims to increase their power. Religion was a sensitive spot for every community with common beliefs and religious practices; it was not to be mocked. Throughout history, one of the major tasks of the religious leadership was to support the given community by defending its religion both against disintegration from the inside through heretical movements with a different practice or interpretation of the same religion, and against attacks from the outside by rival communities that followed a different religion. Claims of true revelation, true scripture and tradition, true beliefs and practices and true spiritual leadership were not Platonic ideas or exercises in theological thinking. They were intimately linked with political strategies to assure a common ideological mobilization of the faithful and to guarantee control of the community at large. The idea of the absolute self-sufficiency of the religion of the community had a prominent place in this strategy of survival.

Thus, in the course of history the three communities have seen not only each other but also each other's religions as rivals, resulting in an ideological battle. The factual relations between the three religions throughout history can be compared to the rivalries and occasional alliances between tribes or nation-states, empires or power blocs that also use their myths and ideologies to identify and promote themselves while defending themselves against each other. In the case of the three monotheistic religions, however, these religions were absolutized not only by means of intricate ideologies but also through complex forms of spirituality.

4. A fourth and last common feature of the three monotheistic religions is the singular but overriding fact that for each of them, all '*others*', that is to say non-adherents, outsiders, were seen as problematic. From the very beginning, there was a deep concern with one's own religious in-group, of which one was part and parcel. When the community grew and its adherents increased

in numbers, there arose a similar concern for its homogeneity, and monolithic views of the religion of the community were useful at the time to strengthen communal awareness. In the case of Christianity, such concerns contributed to the persecution of heretics by the churches, later softened to their exclusion.

For all three religions, relations with those outside one's own religious community were basically problematic. States could later provide passports to their citizens and mutually recognize each other; but religions could not. How could deeper relationships be established between human beings if there were no common views of God, the human being, and the world, no common faith, and no common rule of conduct? How could religions that had erected religious walls between people and that had been absolutized for centuries recognize the rights of other believers?

The late twentieth century witnessed the growth of the notion of a common and broader humanity beyond the differences of religion and of some religious leaders' attempts to give their own community a place within this common broader humanity. One could stress the 'special case' (*Sonderfall*) of one's own community within this humanity. One could undertake missionary action to bring to others the truth one had been given oneself. One could develop the idea of a religiously-based social order to be extended throughout humanity or imposed on it. One could even launch a worldwide programme of practical cooperation, ethics and religious dialogue between people of different faiths. In any case, people not belonging to one's own religious community started to be perceived.

It seems to be, however, only with an increase in solid knowledge of processes of modernization, in solid insight into the workings of ideologies, and in solid reflection about humankind's potentialities, that true advancement may be expected. This requires of course a broader responsibility than that for the good of one's own community only. It demands a commitment to norms like human dignity, conditions of life worthy of that dignity, justice, peace and respect for every human being.

For people of good will, the centuries-old religious walls erected between Judaism, Christianity and Islam as rival religious systems seem to become permeable or at least to lose that rigidity that often gave them an inhuman character. People of other religions are no longer fundamentally a religious or ideological problem when we no longer identify them with what we have constructed as their religion. In the end, people need no longer be seen as products of a religion but as responsible agents themselves capable of interpreting and applying their religions the way they see fit.

### **Some New Views from the Two Prophetic Religions**

#### *From a Jewish Point of View*

An example of a new view from the Jewish side is the book by Ignaz Maybaum published in 1973 under the significant title *Dialogue between Jew, Christian and Muslim*. The author, at the time a rabbi of the Liberal Jewish community in

London, presents here his personal ‘trialogue’, his own effort to grapple with Christianity, Islam and Orthodox Judaism.

Rabbi Maybaum shows himself here a well-schooled theologian who rejects false romanticism or any idealism that cannot deal with reality. His interpretation of Judaism appeals to Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), but he does not agree at all with Rosenzweig’s rather negative judgment of Islam during and after World War I. As is well-known, Rosenzweig—who had thought seriously of converting to Christianity—‘converted back’, so to speak, to Judaism. He saw Judaism and Christianity fundamentally as two roads leading to the same God and in this way opened a new kind of Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Rosenzweig did not see Islam, however, as a full-grown monotheistic religion. His book *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt a. Main, J. Kauffmann Verlag, 1921; translated into English by William W. Hallo as *The Star of Redemption*, New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971) contains denigrating remarks about it and he gives negative judgments about Islam, which, however, he had not studied from the sources and which he did not really know. As I see it, Rosenzweig, when he reconverted to Judaism, set himself up against Islam. This has had more or less catastrophic effects for the image of Islam among those Jews and Christians who have followed Rosenzweig as their spiritual leader or model.

Maybaum, however, referring to the Muslim prayer to an Almighty God—understood and served as both one and unique in Himself—recognizes Islam as a full-grown monotheistic religion. Perhaps Maybaum could have spoken not of two but of three or more possible roads to God, although he does not use this formula himself. But this is in fact the basis of the ‘trialogue’ for which he pleads between Jews, Christians and Muslims as monotheists.

The particular and positive contribution of this author to our subject is what he calls ‘prophetic’ Judaism. The Jewish Enlightenment (*haskala*) that started with Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86) at the end of the eighteenth century was a break in tradition-oriented medieval Judaism, and Maybaum greets it as a real breakthrough. It led to establishing what was called liberal Judaism and to the critical historical study of Judaism (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*). Orthodox Judaism, however, which wanted to give a rational defence of traditional Judaism, crystallized as a reaction against this development. It dominated in continental Europe and obtained a veto-wielding position in present-day Israel. Liberal Judaism, by contrast, developed in Great Britain and in North America, where it took its own course.

Following Rosenzweig’s line, Maybaum accentuates the prophetic character of true Jewish life and thinking. He opposes this to Christian thought, on the one hand, which he reproaches for having made a split between the spiritual and the material aspects of reality, and to Muslim thought, on the other, which he sees as paralyzed through the unconditional submission of the human being to the Almighty God. Maybaum feels that the positive side of prophetic Judaism is due to the immediate link it makes between the human being and God as the divine Being, and to the particular kind of existence that is given to Jewish believers and that distinguishes them from the *goyim*, the non-Jews.

But such a prophetic Judaism also has its negative sides. Maybaum mentions

for instance the marginal character of Jewish existence and the condition of the *galût* (diaspora) which Maybaum diagnoses for Jewish life inside and outside the state of Israel. What is seen in the 'world' (Muslim, Christian, or otherwise) as a way of life set apart or even as a kind of alienation, is for Jewish consciousness in fact the way of being truly human and is characteristic of Jewish individual life and fellowship. The true Jewish believer sees Christianity and Islam as two one-sided fruits of Judaism with which he or she is continuously involved. He or she cannot identify with them, but knows him- or herself as co-responsible for them. Such a deeper consciousness of human responsibility is typical of prophetic Judaism. For this reason, according to Maybaum, it distinguishes itself from Orthodox Judaism, which has become closed within itself.

Looking back on Maybaum's place in the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century, I would say that his thought on the relations between the monotheistic religions is a fruit of the positive dialogue of those years. He does not, however, show a real knowledge of Christianity or Islam as distinct religions that have now become independent from prophetic and rabbinical Judaism. He sometimes passes judgments about them that are in conflict with the facts. His dialogue remains a grappling, an intense spiritual dealing with Christianity and Islam, which he continues to perceive as 'children' of Judaism. He does this on the basis of his Jewish identity and self-awareness.

#### *From a Muslim Point of View*

In his article 'New Perspectives for a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue' (*Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 1989), Mohammed Arkoun gives his vision of the relationship between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as well as his thinking on the dialogue to be furthered between the adherents of these religions. Like Maybaum, Arkoun makes an energetic attempt to break out of his own rather closed community, in this case the Muslim one. He appeals to the results of scholarship, in particular the social sciences, and presents some Islamic notions that have universalistic implications, since they transcend the borders of the Muslim community.

Arkoun views Judaism, Christianity and Islam in particular as 'Scriptural' religions. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities constantly refer to their sacred scriptures, which are subject to a process of continuous exegesis and application. The three religions share common problems of text interpretation, that is to say hermeneutics. The societies in which these three religions are alive are marked by the fact that they stand under the authority of a scripture. The cultural forms and the views of the human that have been developed by the adherents of these religions and their societies have always borne the mark of their scripture.

With their essential message of monotheism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam all call to the service of the one and only God. The fact that there is one and the same God for all three communities guarantees universality. Yet, in the course of their history all three religions have assumed their own social and organizational forms. They have institutionalized themselves, and these forms have subsequently been considered definite and unchangeable. All three religions have

developed their own theology, religious law and ethics in order to fix their own religious system and to protect their own community against the influence of others. They have proclaimed their own character and truth to be exclusive. Arkoun reproaches theologians and jurists for concerning themselves only with developing theology, law and ethics for their own community alone, without being conscious of wider responsibilities. In other words, he reproaches the monotheistic religions for having closed themselves up within themselves and off from each other.

Arkoun presents a number of critical considerations on the ways in which texts, history and doctrines in Judaism, Christianity and Islam have been interpreted and used. In his analysis, he appeals to insights obtained in the humanities, for instance in semiotics and in anthropology. Reality, as it is described in the three religions under consideration, is always an interpreted reality, rich in symbolism, since meanings and significances are expressed in symbolic terms. This kind of interpretation of reality turns out to have serious limitations, however, when we take into account the historical and social contexts of these religions and their history and social reality. The study of symbolism is able to bring to light the meanings these religions, as interpretive systems, have been able to provide to people in given historical and social contexts.

Arkoun's trust in what scholarship can achieve goes back not only to the Enlightenment tradition but also to his own deeper philosophical premises. He stands in the line of humanist thought and he defends the humanist tradition and concept of the human person as a responsible being as they have been articulated in Islamic thought. With this orientation he opposes current ideologizations of Islam in Islamic activism. But he also rejects current Western views that emphasize fatalism and the lack of freedom of the human being in Islam or that see mysticism as the apogee of the human being in Islam. Arkoun has always defended reason. For him, the human being as presented in Islam is a being gifted with reason, that is to say between animal and angel, and this is the basis for human dignity.

Arkoun has taken upon himself a role mediating Islam to the West. He objects to a kind of Western orientalism that is closed in on itself and that is incapable of dialogue with Muslims and of communication with Islam as a living culture and religion. Arkoun has conducted a continuous dialogue with Westerners of all sorts and is guided by the idea of the complementarity of the various cultures and religions. Muslim activists have accused him of letting himself become Westernized. Arkoun for his part reproaches the so-called 'Islamists' for their poor and one-sided knowledge of the Islam they want to defend. In the final analysis, Arkoun turns out to be a heroic figure combining Islamic and Western values in his own original way.

### **A Historical Point of View**

In their essay 'A Dialogue of Creeds' published in *Islamochristiana* in 1993, Keith and Kevin Massey investigate the oldest creeds of the three monotheistic religions. Such statements of faith were meant to show the community where it had a common stand distinguishing itself from other communities surrounding it.

Instead of tracing historical dependencies, the authors want to show that the monotheistic religions, when formulating their respective statements of faith, had a kind of ‘dialogical’ relationship with each other. Three examples clarify this.

The Jewish creed is contained in the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4 ‘Hear, O Israel, God our Lord is One’ (*ehad*). In contrast to Canaanite culture and religion—with its adoration of El, Athirat, and their children—there is here a clear monotheistic stand. For the redactor of the text there is only one God, the one who liberated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

The oldest Christian confession of faith, according to Oscar Cullmann, was formulated in two directions. Towards the Jews it asserted simply that Jesus Christ is Lord; profession of belief in the one and only God was self-evident here and did not need to be expressed. Towards Hellenistic polytheism, however, such a confession needed to be made explicit. In his first letter to the Corinthians (8:6), Paul formulates the faith both in one God (the Father) and in one Lord (Jesus Christ). He adds that this profession of faith brings salvation (eternal life). Somewhat later, this double profession is formulated in John 17:3: ‘And this is life eternal: that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ [the anointed one (*christos*)] whom Thou hast sent’ (King James translation). With this statement of faith, the community of the Christians distinguished itself from other religious communities existing at the time. It stressed the ‘unique’ character of the God of Israel and the particular importance of the revelation of Jesus (as being sent by God).

The Muslim creed is the *Shahāda*: ‘I witness that there is no god (or: nothing divine) but God (Allāh) and that Muhammad is his prophet.’ The authors observe that, curiously enough, this text does not occur as such in the Qur’ān, which demands, in a slightly different formulation, that one should bear witness to one’s faith both in God and in his prophet (Q. 24:62).

The authors then offer the hypothesis that the formula of the *Shahāda* might go back to the profession of John 17:3. During Muhammad’s lifetime this text could have been known in Arabia as the Christian creed. The Muslims would then simply have replaced the name of Jesus with that of Muhammad. The authors submit that this change occurred around 700 CE, when a growing number of Christians in the Middle East converted to Islam. This created the need for a formulation of the Islamic creed stressing the significance of Muhammad instead of Jesus.

Whereas the *Shema* mentions the unity and uniqueness of God, the Christian creed adds Jesus, while the Muslim creed adds Muhammad in place of Jesus. In each case, the later community situated itself with regard to the preceding one by means of a statement of faith. The three professions of faith of what became the monotheistic religions reflect a debate or dialogue and, consequently, they should be understood in relation to each other.

The three religions themselves, in principle, can resume and continue a dialogue that was stultified after the fixation of their three professions of faith.

### **The Question of Religious Identity**

Until now we have taken as our point of departure the idea of religions and



religious communities as presented by the latter's religious leaders. Religious identity is then seen as something that is religiously and socially given, primarily by the religious community to which one belongs, with its own tradition and authority.

A very different and more scholarly question, however, is how the people concerned want to *identify themselves*, religiously or otherwise, together with others or individually. It then becomes clear that, on an empirical level, religious identities vary and that a religious community is not as homogeneous as is often represented or imagined. Someone's 'religious' identity is in fact part of a whole range of identities in daily life, and in most cases it is not as exclusive or dominating as people imagine. This applies particularly to life in modern society, but even in traditional societies the personal 'real' identity of people does not coincide with their social role.

It could very well be that the usual definitions of what constitutes a Jew, a Christian or a Muslim religiously have little to do with the way such people in fact identify themselves or even conceive of themselves ideally. This is certainly the case in plural societies, especially in cities where only the individual, not the tradition-bound community, can give explicit information about his or her identity. In the study of religions we should accept the idea that religious communities consist of people with very different motivations and identities and for whom a given religion has a significance that is ever more individualized.

Even in the case of Jews and Muslims, where identity is maintained as strongly as possible by the leaders and in the community, the usual formal criteria are not sufficient to grasp the ways in which people identify themselves. Although religious leaders may try to strengthen the homogeneity of their communities, in practice the 'real' identity of persons in modern contexts turns out to be much more fluid than the 'official' norms would allow.

Such changes in the contents of identity, largely due to changes in and of societies, unavoidably affect the relationships between Jews, Christians and Muslims. They may have learned what it is to be a Jew, a Christian or a Muslim as radically different identities or about Judaism, Christianity and Islam as rigidly separate religions. These categories were largely developed to underscore one's own truth and values and to combat syncretism. They stressed the differences more than common ground and could be useful in situations of crisis, tension and conflict. In the present-day public sphere, however, these identifications tend to obstruct what I would like to call a normal communication between human beings of different backgrounds. They should be seen as responsible actors rather than more or less passive subjects undergoing their religion.

### **Some Conclusions**

The science of religions can approach relations between Christian, Muslim and Jewish persons and groups in various ways. One way is to study the various ways in which the people concerned construct their own and each other's religions in given situations and contexts.

I first gave a brief historical view of the three religions and the way in which they saw each other. Once established, they tended to distinguish themselves

ever more sharply from each other. One reason was that the communities concerned saw themselves as new and independent entities. They constructed their religions as more or less homogeneous traditions proceeding from revelation, and they constructed the 'others' as more or less radically different. I concluded that neither the images that the religions cherished of each other nor the constructions that they presented of themselves conformed to historical and social realities, but had a normative character.

Next I offered a brief comparative view of the three religions. They have a number of elements in common, and adherents have been more or less conscious of this fact, especially with regard to scripture and systematic thinking. I showed that there are also other common elements and parallels that adherents have been hardly conscious of but which become evident in comparative research and research on the interactions that took place between the communities. Such common elements and parallels, however, have been interpreted differently in the three religions and again by different trends and schools within these religions. The religious communities themselves have been eager to stress their own distinctive character, notably by indicating the unique origin and character of their religion and its truth and by stressing its historical continuity. I have submitted that the religious communities always wanted to prescribe how relations with outsiders ought to be seen. The way in which other religions were constructed from the point of view of one's own religion largely served this purpose. I concluded again that these constructions of relationships between religions are normative and do not correspond to historical and social reality.

I then moved from considering religions and their relationships as historical and social entities to the personal voices of two intellectuals from the Jewish and Muslim traditions. I left aside similar voices from the Christian side, such as John Hick and Hans Küng, since I supposed them to be more or less known. The two intellectuals mentioned offer a kind of synthetic unified vision of the three monotheistic religions, in which the specific character of each of them is viewed as its own particular responsibility.

I concluded that the real relationships between people from the three religious communities in given times and places can in fact differ greatly from what has been thought until now about the relationships between their religions. This argument is strengthened by what the science of religions has discovered not only about the empirical and constructed realities of these religions, but also about prevailing constructions of 'reality' and images of 'religions' in Western as well as other societies. This means that more research is needed about situations and contexts in which Christians, Muslims and Jews have been in contact with each other. Christians, Muslims and Jews live less and less in their familiar traditional societies. Their relationships in 'modern', 'late modern' and 'postmodern' societies, with their tensions and conflicts, inevitably acquire a different character. This increases the priority of the issue of the identity and especially the self-identification of the persons and groups concerned.

Present-day relations between persons or groups that identify themselves as Christian, Muslim or Jewish are conditioned by a great number of factors and elements. Religion is one of these elements but not always and not necessarily a decisive one.

The major problem that religions pose, however, is that, in the name of religion, norms can be proclaimed that have authority for and sometimes even an absolute claim on the adherents, with negative consequences for their relations with non-adherents. I do not mention the possible negative consequences for the adherents themselves, since that remains their own responsibility. The idea, for instance, that religions or cultures as such are involved in a struggle with each other has been used in situations of tension to present adherents of another religion as a real or potential enemy. Further research on relations between Christian, Muslim and Jewish persons or groups in given situations and contexts is needed. Only then may we become more able to explain and understand what happens in situations of tension and conflict between groups with different religions. We ought to have more insight into what role lived religions and current representations of those religions play alongside other social forces. The question becomes particularly urgent when people in situations of conflict are willing not only to fight but also to die for their religion.

But a clear distinction must be made between the *people* with their ideas, practices, constructions and images, on the one hand, and the *religions* and religious leaderships that they claim to adhere to, on the other hand. Close inquiry into the ways people present or represent their own or other peoples' religions and into what such religions mean to them is a key to understanding. Let me suggest three areas in which I think such research is urgently needed.

- (1) Attention should be paid to the ways in which people *view their own religion* with the acceptance of differences within this religion, *as well as other religions* while accepting that they have a certain validity, at least for the adherents. In Christian, Muslim and Jewish communities, we observe on the one hand a tendency to take a more objective attitude towards one's own religious tradition and scripture. On the other hand, there are clear orientations and movements in the three religions that want to fall back on particular elements of the tradition or on particular texts of scripture and that tend to ideologize them.

Such a rediscovery and reactivation of the sources of one's religion is, in the first place, a personal or communal search. But it has implications for the relations entertained with 'others' with whom life has to be shared and for participation in society at large and ideas about how society should be organized. It is linked to a search for norms in life and society at large.

The far-reaching changes in people's conditions of life and new means of communicating with each other seem to lead necessarily to new orientations towards existing religions. This is particularly true for Christians and Muslims, as adherents of the two largest religions, and for their mutual relations.

- (2) Attention should be paid to the ways in which people *identify themselves at all*, with or without the help of religion. In many cases people no longer identify themselves primarily through their religion, but rather for instance according to their ethnicity, nationality, social class, profession or causes to be served, including political adherence. People may identify themselves in

different ways in different situations and contexts. Religious identities also have social aspects that vary according to contexts. As a consequence, we should ask what exactly people mean when they identify themselves 'religiously' or socially as Christian, Muslim or Jewish. Do they practise their religion? What does their religion mean to them?

Changes of identity often have to do with experiences that are linked to new and sometimes critical situations, or to contexts in which traditional communal structures are falling apart and in which people have to individualize themselves to survive, as is certainly the case in Western societies. Certain groups discover themselves as being oppressed, and subsequent liberation and emancipatory movements tend to affirm the newly articulated identity of their members. Migrants arriving from outside often redefine their identity in order to survive. Specific crisis situations, but also personal communications, can be catalysts in such processes of new self-identification and personalizing or, on the contrary, loss of identity and depersonalization. This certainly holds true for Christian, Muslim and Jewish communities worldwide and their relations.

- (3) Attention should also be paid to empirically observable changes in religious communities, the religious leadership and current changes of orientations in religions like Christianity, Islam and Judaism. During the last 25 years, besides the rise of new religious orientations, a certain 'hardening' in religions seems to have taken place. The last decades of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of a new 'fundamentalization' in religions.

Islamic fundamentalism protests against secularization and wants to re-Islamize society, imposing its own version of Islam on all Muslims. Jewish fundamentalism protests against assimilation, wants to Judaize Israeli society, and plays here a political role with religious arguments. Catholic fundamentalism is a protest against the openings offered by Vatican II and plays a political role in affirming and centralizing the Church's power in Rome. Protestant fundamentalism protests against secularization and sees Evangelical Christianity as the remedy for various kinds of evil. Research has been underway for some time to locate, analyze and explain such 'fundamentalisms' in religions and the powers and interests at work in them. Fundamentalist orientations directly affect relations between Christians, Muslims and Jews.

More promising for the future, however, seems to be the question of what happens to religions and to the relations between them in circles that have a 'relaxing' and a more 'serving' character, opening up to other people, listening to what they have to say and committing themselves to human causes. Ethics and social concerns may play a primary role here. We ought to know more about orientations and tendencies of this kind among Christians, Muslims and Jews, without classifying them in advance. So I suggest research should be done among such people about their mutual perceptions, ecumenical activities, cooperation and dialogue even with adherents of other religions, shared ethical concerns, actions of human solidarity, development of self-critical views and awareness of political and other forms of abuse of religion. My guess is that

people of this kind of orientation are willing to cooperate, whatever their Christian, Muslim or Jewish background.

The question of the extent to which a self-critical attitude of mind has been cultivated among and by *intellectuals* with a background in one of the three religions under consideration has hardly been asked so far. I am thinking for instance of critical attitudes toward religious, political and other social institutions and their leaderships. Yet such intellectuals could cooperate.

There was a time in which one placed confidence in the values of world religions as 'goods' without further ado. But in practice even world religions have turned out to be highly ambivalent. They can be used for good, but they can also be abused for power and self-interest. A student of religion cannot be unaware of this. Critical scholarship cannot serve idealism, religious or otherwise. It can contribute, however, to a *realistic understanding* of what is happening in the broad field of religions in various contexts. It can discern to some extent where religions like Christianity, Islam and Judaism are used for what is good, and say so. It is, however, up to the adherents to act.

## Note

This text goes back to a public lecture given at Villanova University, Villanova PA, November 2000. It was prepared for publication in this *Festschrift* for Professor Mahmoud Mustafa Ayoub. In the meantime it was published in the author's *Muslims and Others*, published by Walter de Gruyter (Berlin and New York, 2003) who did not object to its publication in this *Festschrift*.

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