

---

# Abrahamic Faiths: Their Sense of Status

S. A. Nigosian

Department of Religion, University of Toronto

---

"Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," says Josef van Ess, "have lived since time immemorial at close quarters; and they are likewise so closely related in a structural sense as religions of revelation, that tensions and petty rivalries have been common" (Van Ess 1985, 6). To be sure, it has become customary recently to emphasize the common legacy of Abraham shared by all three. Islam considers Abraham as the "father" of the Arab people through his eldest son Ishmael; Christianity considers Abraham as the "father" of believers in Christ (Col. 3:6-9); and Judaism considers Abraham as the "father" of the Jewish nation and the "founder" of monotheism.

Moreover, four basic assumptions are common to all three Abrahamic faiths: (1) the existence of a supreme God, who is transcendent, eternal, creator, and in absolute control of history; (2) the revelation of the message of God through select messengers or prophets; (3) the message of God is encodified in a Holy Book; and (4) the moral accountability of every individual whose life consists of a single existence. Despite the characteristics shared by all three faiths, each of them finds it hard to modify, much less abandon, its sense of status. It is common knowledge that both Islam and Christianity regard themselves respectively as abolishing and superseding their predecessors(s), on the basis that the earlier religion(s) were, at best, preliminary stages, or at worst, imperfect products. By contrast, Judaism continues on the assumption that God spoke only once to a group of people, with whom He made a special covenant. I shall attempt to give a brief exposition of the Islamic and Christian sense of status to indicate how it has served more than any other ideology to separate the three Abrahamic communities.

## Islamic Understanding of Christianity<sup>1</sup>

Muslims insist that Christians have failed, and still fail, to comprehend or implement fully God's plan for humankind. In their view, then, Islam corrects earlier human aberrations and, therefore, must be considered the pure and perfected outcome of the divinely ordained historical process of revelation. The doctrines that provoke conflict between Islam and Christianity are relatively few but they are fundamental to the faith each represents.<sup>2</sup> They are associated with four Christian dogmas, emphatically rejected or denied by Islam, namely: Fatherhood of God, Divinity of Christ, Doctrine of Original Sin, and Christian Scriptures. A brief comment of each will explain the traditional lines of debate between Islam and Christianity.

**Fatherhood of God.** The term "fatherhood," in reference to God, is abhorrent to Muslims, because it denotes a physical relationship. To consider God as "Father" is, for Muslims, to imply that God has a wife and an issue—both of which are blasphemous concepts. Nor are Muslims prepared to rationalize the term "Father" in a metaphorical sense as "Father of all mankind," because in Islamic teaching human beings are creatures and servants of God, not His children. Nor again do Muslims recognize the idea of God the "Father" as presented in the Christian concept of the Trinity. Trinitarianism is flatly condemned in Islam on the grounds that it denies the sole worship of God. The severity of Qur'anic judgment on those who hold the doctrine of the Trinity is affirmed by the exhortation to Christians, people of the book: "O people of the book; come let us make an agreement, that we serve none but God, and that we associate none with Him" (3:57).

The Qur'ān makes a fundamental distinction between God and all else, including human beings who are finite creatures. God alone is infinite as well as absolute. To point to an individual such as Jesus with delimitations of birthplace and birth date and then to say simply that He is God, or the second person of the Godhead, is, according to the Qur'ān, impossible and unpardonable. The Qur'anic judgement against those who uphold the doctrine of the Trinity is similar to its judgement against idolaters: "Those who say: 'God is the third of three,' are infidels, for there is no God but One" (5: 76-77).

To Muslims, the doctrine of the Trinity is absolutely repellent since in the end it negates the oneness of God—the only absolute Reality. To associate another entity, be it Christ or the Holy Spirit, with the worship of God is akin to worshipping a multiplicity of gods—a form of polytheism. So fundamental is the unity of God to Muslims,

that to discredit it or introduce an ambiguity or a paradox is reckoned as an unforgivable sin.

*Divinity of Christ.* So far as Islam is concerned, Jesus is recognized as one of the prophets with a divine mission who preceded Muhammad. Like all other prophets, Jesus is seen as no more than a mere human being. As such, Jesus is neither free from human frailty nor from physical want. Muslims accept Jesus as one who prayed in the wilderness and on the hillside, who conversed with people of all walks of life, and who entered the homes of the rich as well as the poor. What makes Jesus unique in the minds of Muslims is the divine message he brought to humanity, not his life. To Muslims, Jesus is one of the greatest moral teachers of the world, and was entrusted by God with a dual message: a universal and a particular message. His universal mission was to recall humanity from idol worship and from following false gods. His particular message was directed to his own people, the Jews. In the eyes of Muslims Jesus was committed to "redeeming" the Jews from the bondage of the Law (Torah), with its accretion of irrelevant rites and practices. In that sense, according to Muslims, Jesus was the "Messiah" of the Jews, but in all else he preached a universal message advocating humility, love, charity, compassion, purity, justice, and truth.

In addition, Islam recognizes the virgin birth of Jesus as a sign of messengership or prophethood (Qur'ān 19:22-23). In fact, the veneration of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is profound in Islam (3:37-38, 19:16-17). She is regarded as one of the three holy women—the other two being Khadījah and Fāṭima, the Prophet Muhammad's wife and daughter respectively.

Also, according to Muslim tradition, Jesus was at the last moment saved by divine intervention from an ignominious death (Qur'ān 4:156-57). Conservative Muslims believe that Jesus was translated to heaven. Rationalist Muslims explain the disappearance of Jesus in terms of intellectual hypotheses. One view is that Jesus was rescued by supporters who revered him (not necessarily his disciples) and kept him concealed until the threat to his life had subsided, after which they sent him to the regions of the East (India?), where he pursued his universal mission and eventually died peacefully (Ali 1975, 472).

Thus, Islam accepts Jesus essentially as a link—a human link—in the chain of prophets (Qur'ān 5:50), whose teachings remained incomplete until God sent another messenger, Muhammad the Prophet, with similar human limitations to convey to humanity God's message for the last time.

On the other hand, the Christian doctrine of the divinity of Christ, in particular the dogmas of Sonship, Intercessor, Crucifixion, and Resurrection, have no place in Islam and are categorically denied in the Qur'ān (5:76, 116; 9:30-31; 10:69; 19:36, 91). Moreover, the notion of "justification by faith in Christ" is, according to Islamic thinkers, preposterous and utterly disastrous to human morals. All such teachings, Muslims insist, were once borrowed from foreign, mainly pagan, sources and interpolated with the teachings of Jesus. In fact, Muslims see the idea of vicarious offering and atonement in Christianity as a survival of the concept of the appeasement of an angry god through the offering of a sacrifice—a concept which prevailed among the nations of antiquity.

*Doctrine of original sin.* The Christian doctrine of original sin is absolutely repudiated in Islam. Hereditary depravity and natural sinfulness (i.e., a sinful nature), as affirmed in Christianity, are emphatically denied. The Muslim cannot conceive how God, the Almighty Creator of the universe, could create a world fated to contamination by inherent human sinfulness. At no time can the Muslim interpret the story of Adam and Eve as reflecting the "fall" of human generations from God's grace. Unlike Christianity, Islam makes no attempt to derive from the Garden of Eden allegory any lessons or rules about human nature (Qur'ān 7:17-24, 19:115-24). Not only do Muslims reject the concept of original sin; they find it incomprehensible that Almighty God is incapable of rooting out original sin except by offering Himself through His only begotten Son as a sacrifice to save humanity from eternal perdition. Such teachings are not simply unintelligible, but irreverent and insulting since they challenge the credibility of God's power and omnipotence.

Sin is generally represented in Islam as disobedience to God's command, not as a transgression against some divine standard. According to Islamic teaching, God demands obedience from humans and is ready to punish or pardon them according to their actions. God is absolutely unaffected by human deeds. He ordains what is to be done and what is to be avoided. It follows, therefore, that there is no absolute standard of right or wrong, because this would imply another authority alongside God—an impossible concept. Islam's preoccupation then, is not so much with sin, as with sins committed or omitted: with acts of disobedience.

The Qur'ān refers to Adam and Eve's act in eating from the Tree of Knowledge as "disobedience to God," for which they sought God's pardon and received His forgiveness (7:18-24, 20:118-23). Moreover, Islamic tradition records that, according to the Prophet Muhammad,

every human being is born pure and religiously constituted. Two impulses, or inclinations, exist within each individual, prompting him or her to do good or evil. To those who seek God's help in resisting evil, God is ready to show His mercy and guide them on the right path. Hence, each individual from Adam onwards is personally responsible for acts of disobedience.

*Christian Scriptures.* Muslims possess an instinctive sense of "Holy Books," the highest and greatest of which is the Qur'ān. The Holy Book of Islam is revered as the product of God's message delivered to one human intelligence operating over a period of twenty-three years. In contrast, Muslims find the Christian Holy Book to consist of a varied collection of documents (including the Jewish Holy Book), all of independent authorship, spanning more than a thousand years. For Muslims, the Qur'ān is the Word of God communicated to Muhammad through an angel (as a verbal transmission from heaven) and immediately transcribed for all to see and hear. It does not represent what others may have reported Muhammad to have said. Such reports constitute Tradition (Ḥadīth), and are of lesser value.

Not so the Christian scriptures, they state. The writings of the Old Testament, the Gospels and the Epistles, all represent vicarious experiences retold at second, third, or fourth hand by their authors and an additional reworking by redactors and editors. Within the New Testament are four Gospels, utterly incomprehensible to Muslims, since the Gospel entrusted by God to Jesus was reputedly a single Book. The conclusion derived by Muslims is that because there are four, none of them are reliable. In fact, the popular Islamic explanation is that the early Christian community lost the original Gospel received by Jesus and set about to make good the deficiency, by substituting for one sequential account an intricately woven fabric of writings and traditions of many periods and different generations. Thus, according to Muslims, the teachings of Jesus might now be irretrievably lost to posterity were it not that their substance is preserved in the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān is also cited as the appropriate authority when it makes reference to people and events chronicled in either the Old or New Testaments. Where there are differences or discrepancies between the biblical and Qur'ānic accounts, Muslims explain the biblical record as some form of corruption.

Thus, differences between biblical and Qur'ānic accounts are explained in terms of distortions in the present canonical biblical versions of the originals. These differences are particularly apparent in a comparison between Qur'ānic and New Testament presentations of Jesus. Muslims argue that Christians (and Jews) were not fit custodi-

ans of their own Holy Books and that they tampered with them in various ways, particularly by suppressing or obscuring what otherwise would have confirmed Islam and the true nature and identity of the Qur'ān (Khan 1980, 84-85).

Stated differently, the Islamic view is that though the present content of Christian Scriptures does not match the content of the Qur'ān, in their original form they did match. The original form is irrecoverable and corruption has occurred in the present versions. But this does not matter, because the Qur'ān is infallible and the "true" Word of God. All other scriptures ought to conform to the Qur'ān; but they do not. Therefore, they are distortions, representing human interpolations rather than the direct word of God, and their integrity is questionable.

In modern times, some Muslims have quoted recent western biblical criticism in support of their arguments challenging the authenticity of Christian Scriptures. Few, if any, have contributed to or participated in discussions of biblical criticism that have occupied Christian thinkers for a long time. Nevertheless, educated Muslims are familiar with the works of biblical scholars. The problem is that some Muslims do not properly understand or simply disregard the preoccupation of western scholars with inquiry based on utter scientific integrity. They accept any evidence (revealed or suggested by western research) that throws doubt on the authenticity or accuracy of Christian Scripture. Muslims are quick to assume that Christians themselves dispute the validity of their own Scriptures. Despite such misunderstandings, the Muslim charge against Christians is quite clear: they have failed to preserve the original revealed Word of God, substituting for it a spurious "Word of God" reworked by redactors and editors.

### Christian Understanding of Judaism<sup>3</sup>

Judaism is the only ancient religious tradition that survived the religious pogroms of the Roman Empire following the Empire's zealous espousal of Christianity after the fourth century. When Christians finally surfaced in triumph from their hiding places among the catacombs of Rome they, in turn, drove former detractors, nonconformists, and rivals underground—but permanently. Christianity and its agents and adherents were directly or indirectly responsible for eradicating the religions of former great civilizations such as the Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, Roman, European, Aztec, Mayan and Inca.

Judaism was the exception. What gave it immunity from Christian proselytizing zeal and crusading fervour? Jews maintained no standing armies and their traditions mitigated against the appearance of char-

ismatic military leaders. They were tough, resourceful, and dispersed, but they represented easy targets. Why did Judaism not follow all the rest into oblivion? Perhaps the reason is that Christianity was, and still is, viewed as an offshoot of Judaism and indissolubly bound to it.

There was a time when the religious movement which came to be known as Christianity was viewed as another sectarian form of Judaism to be distinguished only from variants advocated by Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots. The occupying Roman government certainly thought so. Jesus taught in the Jewish Temple as well as in the streets. The first Christians were Jews. Jesus, the founder of Christianity, and Paul, who formulated most, if not all, of Christian theology, ethics, and practice were adherents of Judaism. Nobody felt threatened by their heterodoxy except the orthodox.

Christianity was the result of a split in Judaism over matters of theology, institutions, and observances. The Jesus of history (whatever other characteristics are attributed to him) was a devout adherent of Judaism who became the leader of a Judaic sectarian movement in very much the same way that Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a devout adherent of Roman Catholicism who became the founder of a Christian sectarian movement which spawned Protestantism. It is not likely that Luther would have accepted the parallel, but Pilate and the priests who negotiated the crucifixion of Jesus might have. It is only the long perspective of time that gives Christians the illusion that they are anything other than non-conforming Jews.

Paul thought of Christianity as a "branch" of Judaism comprising Jewish members, "natural branches," and Gentiles, "grafted branches" (Rom. 11:13-24). Christianity is, therefore, according to Paul, rooted in Judaism. At no time can Christianity cut off the root that sustains it. In fact, Paul postulates a universal divine mystery: the rejection of God's plan of salvation in Christ by the Jews means the reconciliation of the Gentile world to God. But Paul wants Christians to understand clearly that the refusal of Jews to accept God's latest plan of redemption through Christ is a temporary condition requiring the redemption of the entire Gentile world before the Jews themselves can also be saved. Here are his words:

[A] hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved.... As regards the gospel they are enemies of God, for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so that they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may receive mercy (Rom. 11:25-31).

Followers of this new Judaic sect, including Paul, believed and still believe, that Jesus the Jew was none other than the long-awaited Messiah of the Jews. It was natural therefore, that though Jesus, Peter, Paul, and converts to this new Judaic sect, which came to be identified as Christianity, rejected orthodox Judaic tradition, they also retained major elements from Judaism. Admittedly, non-Jews (i.e., Gentiles) also joined this new sectarian movement, but the influence they brought to bear on Christianity from their own religious backgrounds was slight compared to the dominance of Judaic traditions retained by adherents of the new sect. Basic ideologies, solemn observances and important institutions of Judaism survived intact or were carefully modified. A few examples must suffice in a discussion of this deliberately limited scope.

Christians accepted and revered the same collection of materials that was regarded in Judaism as Scripture. This acceptance embraced all the stories and theological concepts (but not all of the observances) recorded in the Holy Book.

The Messianic prophecies were considered by Christians to have been fulfilled in Jesus. The concepts implied by the terms "election" and "covenant" were inherited or assumed from the Jews, "the old Israel," by the Christians, "the new Israel." Henceforth, according to Christians, God renewed the covenant with the Jews (Heb. 8:13, 10:9) and made a new covenant with the Christians through Jesus (Heb. 9:15). In fact, Christians considered themselves now to be the sole interpreters of God's will.

In addition to appropriating the Judaic text of the Holy Book and the privilege of God's favour formerly bestowed on Israel, Christians retained the Judaic notion of God acting in world history. As evidence, Christians interpreted the destruction of the Jewish Temple and the city of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE and 135 CE respectively, as God's act of punishment upon the Jews for committing the crime of deicide—killing the Son of God. Here are the words of Origen, a prominent third-century Christian theologian:

We may thus assert in utter confidence that the Jews will not return to their earlier situation, for they have committed the most abominable of crimes [i.e., deicide].... Hence the city where Jesus suffered was necessarily destroyed, the Jewish nation was driven from its country, and another people was called by God to the blessed election.<sup>4</sup>

Origen's confident assertion is not at issue in the present context. It is simply cited here as a further illustration of the conviction held by



Christians that they had assumed from the Jews the mantle, the burden, of carrying God's word to the people on earth.

There are, of course, numerous other elements from Judaism that are retained in Christianity in either their original or modified form. The Mosaic Decalogue (Ten Commandments) remains to this day the standard of Christian life and conduct. The Judaic injunction to set aside one day as the Lord's Day or the day of rest is still literally and rigorously maintained by many Christians. The Christian feasts of Easter (Jewish Passover) and of Pentecost (Jewish *Shavuoth*) are Judaic observances in their modified forms. The Christian rite of baptism, the significance and sanctity of marriage, and the proper order of burial represent characteristics of Christian worship and belief derived from the Judaic legacy. Again, the Judaic theologies of good and evil, sin and repentance, and the problem of reconciling human suffering with a loving, caring God are all major issues of Christian theology. The respect due to the patriarchs, to Moses, to the Jewish monarchs, and to the prophets, is retained in Christianity as it is in Judaism proper.

Christianity has never acknowledged or sustained a common bond with any other world religion as it has with Judaism. There is no better evidence of this than the official statement issued by the Roman Catholic Church at Vatican II Council:

As this sacred Synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it recalls the spiritual bond linking the people of the New Covenant with Abraham's stock. For the Church of Christ acknowledges that, according to the mystery of God's saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are already found among the patriarchs, Moses, and the prophets.... The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy deigned to establish the Ancient Covenant.... The Church recalls too that from the Jewish people sprang the apostles, her foundation stones and pillars, as well as most of the early disciples who proclaimed Christ to the world.<sup>5</sup>

It is this intimate relationship that motivates Christians to study the Jewish Bible, the rabbinic materials, the institutions, and the practices of Judaism. By studying and exploring the rich literary and institutional heritage of Judaism, Christianity has promoted understanding among non-Jews of what Judaism is all about.

Today, Christians consider Christianity to be an extension of biblical Judaism. Jews, too, consider Judaism to be an extension of biblical Judaism. Christians think of themselves as successors or inheritors

of the "Chosen People" recorded in the "Old" Testament, of the Patriarchs, of Moses, and of the prophets. Jews consider themselves as direct descendants of the "Chosen People" recorded in the Bible. Christians proclaim that God made a new Covenant with them. Jews proclaim that God never rejected not annulled the Covenant He made with them.

From early times to Vatican II, Christians justified their acts of barbarism against the Jews as just retribution for the crime committed against Christ. Jews "justified" their cruel sufferings and persecutions at the hands of Christians as witness to the world of their continued trust and loyalty to the living God. Christians associated the Jews with the biblical Cain and the fate destined for him. Jews associate themselves with the destiny of the Suffering Servant, a symbolic representation of the biblical Isaiah. Christians insisted, and still do, that Jews should turn and accept Christ, their long unrecognized Messiah. Jews insist that no Messiah possessing extraordinary attributes and superior powers of leadership has arrived yet.

These are not the claims and rebuttals of alien and disparate religious movements. These examples, limited as they are, clearly illustrate common roots, common spiritual values, and common aspirations. Until very recently, it is true, Christians inveighed against the Jews with a litany of charges, including ignorance, rebellion, repudiation of faith, and the death of the long-heralded Messiah. There is no better evidence for this than the words of the Apostle Peter expressed on the day of Pentecost to the Jews assembled in Jerusalem:

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through Him in your midst...this Jesus...you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.... Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified (Acts 2:22-23, 36).

All through the intervening twenty centuries Christians compelled the Jews through philosophical persuasion, but mainly through physical force, to submit to the Christian faith. The record of attempts to effect forcible conversion makes sad reading. And yet, all through these bloody twenty centuries Christians shrank from the wholesale eradication of Judaism which characterized their confrontations with rival ideologies. The reason for this is that Christianity is indissolubly rooted in Judaism. In fact, Christians often refer to their religion as the "Judeo-Christian" tradition, acknowledging the common ancestral bond between Jews and Christians.

Since the Council of Vatican II (1962-64), there has been the gradual emergence of a new type of "theology of encounter," emphasizing "dialogue" as the only mode of interreligious encounter appropriate to the present age. Exactly why an interreligious dialogue should replace the old order is all too often either left unexpressed or confined to the realm of pure abstraction.<sup>6</sup> In any case, the "theology of encounter" or "dialogue" has become excessively popular. But if dialogue is to be successful it is surely important that the participants in it, particularly those claiming to belong to the Abrahamic faiths, recognize the importance of modifying (if not abandoning) their deep-rooted sense of status.

## Endnotes

1. The following section on the "Islamic Understanding of Christianity" is a revised version of Nigosian 1987, 189-99.
2. For a comparison of Islamic and Christian doctrines see Ali 1906; Cragg 1964.
3. The following discussion is based on Nigosian 1986, 197-208.
4. *Contra Celsum*, 4.22. A striking parallel is found in Gregory of Nyssa's *Ora-tio catechetica magna*, 18.
5. Abbot 1966, 663-64. This statement was officially issued by the Roman Catholic Church during the Twenty-First Ecumenical Council, commonly known as Vatican II Council (1962-64).
6. For a discussion on this issue see Sharpe 1975.

## Works Cited

- Abbot, W.M., ed. 1966. *The documents of Vatican II*. Trans. J. Gallagher. New York: Guild Press.
- Ali, A. 1906. Christianity from the Islamic standpoint. *Hibbert Journal* 4 (2).
- . 1975. Islam and Christianity. In *The ways of religion*, ed. R. Eastman. San Francisco: Canfield Press.
- Cragg, K. 1964. *The call of the minaret*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Khan, M. Z. 1980. *Islam*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Nigosian, S. A. 1986. *Judaism: The way of holiness*. London: Aquarius Press.
- . 1987. *Islam: The way of submission*. London: Thorsons.
- Sharpe, E. J. 1975. The goals of inter-religious dialogue. In *Truth and dialogue*, ed. John Hick, 77-95. London: Sheldon Press.
- Van Ess, Josef. 1985. Islam and Christianity. In *Christianity and the world religions*, ed. Hans Küng. New York: Doubleday.