

Alleging the sameness of God for Christianity, Islam, and Judaism

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I

To claim God’s sameness in the three Abrahamic religions seems unexceptionable, and some version of the claim is often heard. But the implicit exclusions of the claim, whether across theologies or within theological traditions, are considerable.

Across theologies, if God be the same in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, does that imply that conceptions of the divine in Hinduism and Buddhism, for example, differ constitutionally from the Abrahamic conceptions? Might the question reinforce a view of God that privileges what it means for “Abraham” to believe? If the issue is approached from the point of view of monotheism, that raises the attendant questions of whether and when a religion is indeed monotheist, and why – for example – Gnosticism, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism are not included.

Then, within theological traditions, how might “sameness” be construed, when the historical fact of division, often over conceptions of God, features

persistently in the histories of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism? To mention some medieval disagreements with continuing impact, did Martin Luther and Pope Leo, or Ibn Sina and al-Ghazali, or Ben Maimon and Ben Nachman believe in the “same” God?

Despite these complexities, the three traditions assert their faith in what they describe as one God in documents they hold as classic or canonical. In addition to the recognized Scriptures of each (Tanakh, the Old and New Testaments, the Qur’an), the interpretative perspectives of Rabbinic, Patristic, and Hadith literatures set out standards of coherent discourse as well as authoritative findings. Within that discourse, cogent and comparable views of the one God are set out.

In what follows, I have set out some conclusions from a collaborative work with Jacob Neusner and William Graham, entitled *Three Faiths, One God. The Formative Faith and Practice of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Boston - Leiden: Brill, 2003). After each extract (often in an edited form), I have given page numbers in parentheses. The volume offers textual supports for the materials extracted. Comparability within each of categories made our work possible. Precisely because these views of God are comparable, however, whether they are the same seems questionable.

1 God’s Revelation

Jesus is the Christ because he is God himself, bodily in an instant of human experience which can be located historically, bodily also in an eternal moment of God's own destiny which can be described theologically. He who was born of a woman, within the constraints of humanity, was then and has been forever that divine force which restless human natures seek, the bodily fullness which answers the pangs of human vacancy. (59)

Judaism concurs with Islam that God cannot be represented by any human form. But, with Christianity, it conceives of man in God's image, therefore of man and God as in some ways commensurate. Then the question is, in what ways? [The answer involves the evolution of *halakhah*.] The middle position between Islam and Christianity may be characterized as a God who incorporates human traits but not a God in human form: corporeal but not incarnate. (59)

If there is any "given", any absolute presupposition of a Muslim's faith in the transcendent, omnipotent Lord of Creation, it is the absolute oneness and uniqueness of the Almighty. So fundamental is this premise to Muslim faith that it is fair to say that whatever their

other doctrinal differences, the same basic understanding of God as unitary, unique, and alone worthy of worship has undergirded and sustained all the diverse Islamic sectarian and interpretive traditions through the centuries. This understanding has rarely, if ever, been subject to radical questioning by Muslims of any time, place, culture, or tendency. The unvarying constants of Muslim faith in all its forms are God's lordship over, as well as transcendence of, all Creation, and His uniqueness among and incomparability with everything else in the universe. (91)

2 God's People

The understanding of human history both in the Qur'ân and Hadîth and in the later Muslim community is straightforward: God created the world and humankind in the person of Adam and placed human beings in the world of creation as His vicegerents. They are charged with obedience to their Lord. Those who are faithful and do good in this world are promised eternal life beyond the life of this world in the eternal garden, or paradise, God has prepared for the righteous. The evildoers here are promised eternal life also, but a life of punishment in the fire God has prepared for the wicked. (100)

The startling quality of the Christian conception of “the body of Christ” does not derive from how it is developed within the letters written by Paul or later attributed to Paul. That trajectory is a relatively consistent product of the interaction between the Eucharistic theology of solidarity with Christ, which was common within Hellenistic Christianity, and the quasi-Stoic language of incorporation into Christ which Paul himself had learned in Tarsus, his home. The radical feature of the usage is not to be found in the development of the concept itself, but rather in the claim that the Church is defined solely in respect of this “body.” Whether Jew or Greek, only incorporation into Christ mattered to Paul (so 1 Corinthians 12:12-13). The consequence of that univocal definition is spelled out in Ephesians (after the motif of the body has been invoked): the dividing line between Jews and non-Jews had been set aside definitively in Christ (Ephesians 2:11-22). (138)

Every Judaism uses the word “Israel” to refer to the social entity that it proposes to establish or define, and all Judaisms deem their Israels to be in continuity with the Israel of whom the Hebrew Scriptures speak. Some deem the connection to be genealogical and fundamentally ethnic, putting forth a secular definition of their “Israel.” Rabbinic Judaism defines its Israel in supernatural terms, deeming the social entity to form a transcendental community, by

faith. To Rabbinic Judaism “Israel” does not speak of a merely ethnic, this-worldly people, but rather a social entity defined by matters of supernatural genealogy [obedience to the Torah]. (140-141)

3 God's Justice

The normative law, or *halakhah*, of the Oral Torah defines the principal medium by which the Rabbinic sages who in antiquity founded Judaism set forth their message. Norms of conduct, more than norms of conviction, served to convey the sages' statement. The theology of the Written and Oral Torah – that is, Judaism – conveys the picture of world order based on God's justice and equity. The Halakhah embodies the extension of God's design for world order into the inner-facing relationships of [1] God and Israel, [2] Israel's inner order in its own terms, and [3] the Israelite's household viewed on its own in time and space and social circumstance. (161-162)

Eschatology in all of its rich nuances constitutes the fundamental perspective from which Christianity addresses the problem of suffering and urges a positive engagement with the world. The God who makes the world also redeems the world, and he redeems the

world that we know, as it is. That may involve waiting over time (Temporal Eschatology), transforming the place where we stand (Transcendent Eschatology), and/or entering into a judgment which will change us (Juridical Eschatology), but in any and all cases, suffering is not the last word, but the transitional word before glory. (184)

The *shari'ah* is not (as it is commonly described in the popular press) a legal code or codex of legal practice, but the comprehensive pattern of rights and duties in all facets of life that reflects God's will and as a whole constitutes for human beings the path of true obedience to Him. It involves both religious observances (worship of God and fulfillment of the basic duties of Muslim practice) and just and moral conduct of one's life in all its various spheres (including family life, sexual relations, personal hygiene and diet, business life, political life, and social and communal life). Not unlike Torah, Shari'ah is a transcendent ideal that by human effort and struggle in understanding and interpretation can be translated into specific norms for everyday living. In this sense, Islamic jurisprudence, *fiqh* (lit., "understanding", commonly rendered as "jurisprudence"), is the science of discerning both how to know the *shari'ah* and what its specific implications are for the concrete situations of everyday life in which it should be implemented. (192)

4 Eschatology

Judaism's position on life beyond the grave at the end of days in history is captured by a single doctrine: God's justice and mercy require him to accord life beyond the grave to all who qualify, otherwise man will not bear responsibility for what he does. Since life continues beyond the grave, what we do in the initial life goes to our account, one way or the other, upon which we draw when we rise from death to eternal life. (255-256)

Jesus held that, at the end of time, God would change human life so radically that ordinary human relationships would no longer prevail. That conviction of a radical change brought with it a commitment to the language of eschatology, of the ultimate transformation God both promised and threatened. Although Jesus' eschatology was sophisticated, his commitment to that idiom of discourse is evident. Resurrection, as usually defined, promises actual life to individual persons within God's global transformation of all things. (270-271)

Islam presents a thoroughly linear, unidirectional, and teleological understanding of history. It begins when God in eternity created the

universe and the earth upon which he placed humankind with their special responsibilities. For Muslims, the Qur'ân tells of what became in later Islamic tradition an event said to have taken place before God's creation of the world – a primordial covenant that God sealed with human beings while they were as yet unborn souls. (290)

II

Once these categories of comparison are set out, a kinship among the characterizations becomes evident. God in each case is held to be self-disclosing to a people defined by that disclosure, and to require a justice that will complete God's creation at the end of days. But does a kinship among characterizations imply an identity of God as posited by each system?

The differences as one moves from system to system are not only non-negligible in theological terms, but comport with the distinctive characters of the religions. If God is first, foremost, and always “unitary, unique, and alone worthy of worship,” as William Graham says of Islam's conception, then that transcendent truth is directed to all humanity, which is obliged to struggle for the pattern of rights of duties that will put people at the right side of the eternal covenant at the end of days. Yet if all the fullness

of divinity is indeed revealed bodily in Jesus Christ, *somatikos* as Paul says (Colossians 2:9), then the people of God are defined by their inclusion in that disclosure, as worked out in their transformation of their contingent lives into eternal glory. And Israel's commitment to the one God together with humanity's affinity with that God produces a confidence that Israel participates in divine eternity, and bears divine justice until its completion.

The literatures embraced as classical and/or canonical by each system are cognate with these theological choices. The Torah of Israel refers both to Judaism's characterization of the Hebrew Bible as a whole, and to what Jacob Neusner calls "the extension of God's design for world order into the inner-facing relationships of [1] God and Israel, [2] Israel's inner order in its own terms, and [3] the Israelite's household viewed on its own in time and space and social circumstance." Christianity sees the Scriptures of Israel as prophecy more than as law; its New Testament insists that the fulfillment of prophecy is incarnational, and Patristic theologians as well as their Gnostic counterparts worked out hermeneutical and the ontological consequences of that insistence. The Qur'an is the recitation of transcendent truth, seconded – as Willaim Graham describes (p. 24) -- by the Hadith, "the chief vehicle of the Sunnah, or 'tradition' ('traditional practice,' lit. 'beaten path,' 'way) of Muhammad and his original

community, the pristine *Ummah* of the first generation of Muslims in Mecca and Medina.”

If categorical comparison leads not only to an appreciation of profound theological difference, but also to a clearer apprehension of how different the literatures of the three religions are, despite their topical overlap, should the attempt to assert that we are dealing with the same God be given up? Although an abstract case might be made for that move, in history the confession of one God leads to the conclusion that “all humanity divides into those that know or respond to God and those that do not,” as Jacob Neusner, William Graham and I also recognized (p. 208).

This division of humanity, the emphatically universal perspective of these religions, means that each has a theory of the others. The particular theory, even when stretched to become as inclusive as possible, is congruent with the systemic foci already identified

Outsiders

Clearly, the moral ordering of the world encompasses all humanity. But God does not neglect the gentiles or fail to exercise dominion over them. For even now, gentiles are subject to a number of commandments or religious obligations. God cares for gentiles as for

Israel, he wants gentiles as much as Israel to enter the kingdom of Heaven, and he assigns to gentiles opportunities to evince their acceptance of his rule. One of these commandments is not to curse God's name, so Bavli Sanhedrin 7:5 I.2/56a: "Any man who curses his God shall bear his sin" (Leviticus 24:15): It would have been clear had the text simply said, A man. Why does it specify, Any? It serves to encompass idolaters, who are admonished not to curse the Name, just as Israelites are so admonished." Not cursing God, even while worshipping idols, seems a minimal expectation. (221)

Justin sets his *Dialogue with Trypho, A Jew* in the period after the revolt under Simon called Bar Kokhba (*Dialogue*, chapter 1), which occurred between 132 and 135. Thematically, Justin disputes Trypho's conception of the permanent obligation of the law (chapters 1-47), and sees the purpose of scriptures in their witness to Christ's divinity (chapters 48-108), which justifies the acceptance of non-Jews within the Church (chapters 109-136). Trypho is portrayed as arguing that the systemic meaning of the Scriptures is the law, while Justin argues that their meaning is Christ.

Justin describes his own development from Platonism to Christianity as a result of a conversation with an old man. The sage convinced him that the highest good which Platonism can attain, the human soul, should not be confused with God himself, since the soul

depends upon God for life (chapter 6). Knowledge of God depends rather upon the revelation of God's spirit (chapter 7):

Long ago, he replied, there lived men more ancient than all the so-called philosophers, men righteous and beloved of God, who spoke by the divine spirit and foretold things to come, that even now are taking place. These men were called prophets. They alone both saw the truth and proclaimed it to men, without awe or fear of anyone, moved by no desire for glory, but speaking only those things which they saw and heard when filled with the holy spirit. Their writings are still with us, and whoever will may read them and, if he believes them, gain much knowledge of the beginning and end of things, and all else a philosopher ought to know. For they did not employ logic to prove their statements, seeing they were witnesses to the truth....They glorified the creator of all things, as God and Father, and proclaimed the Christ sent by him as his Son....But pray that, before all else, the gates of light may be opened to you. For not everyone can see or understand these things, but only he to whom God and his Christ have granted wisdom.

Here is a self-conscious Christianity, which distinguishes itself from Judaism and proclaims itself the true and only adequate philosophy. Justin's account of the truth of the *logos* depends upon two sources of revelation, resonant with one another: the prophetic Scriptures which attest the Spirit and the wise reader who has been inspired by the Spirit. (238-239)

In the earliest Arabian community especially, along with the pagans of Mecca, Medina, and the wider peninsula, it was the formally recognized “people of Scripture” who were the primary religious “others” for Muslims. These consisted in, first, the Arab Jews and Christians in the Arabian peninsula and then the less well-known Jewish and Christian communities of the Levant, Egypt, and Abyssinia. From the period of the last decade of Muhammad’s life in Medina, when the Muslim community first became a reality, the Jews and Christians were the two religious communities with which the first Muslims had most explicitly and consciously to deal -- largely because they were communities with identifiable and prominent scriptures and monotheistic notions of God. Of course, with the pagans there was little to deal about: either these converted and became part of the Muslim *Ummah*, or they were considered the enemies of God because of their idolatry and refusal to abandon it

once they had received His message. The Qur'anic revelations from this time are not all easy to reconcile with each other, as we shall see below. However, it does appear that both irenic tendencies and impulses to violence toward the two monotheist communities were encouraged at different times by the qur'anic word, probably according to the particular situation that a given revelation addressed.

Thus we read the following words addressed to the Muslims in Surah 29:46, calling on them to approach the other "scripture folk" kindly, as persons of kindred faith:

Do not dispute other than in a good way with the people of Scripture, except for those of them who do evil; and say: "We have faith in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you. Our God and your God are One, and to Him we submit [ourselves]."

There are also passages like the following two, which seem to distinguish some of the "Scripture folk" who fall short of a true and pure faith in God because of their impiety and rejection of Him. These are in implicit contrast to others in their particular community who are presumably persons of genuine piety and faith:

There is a group among the people of Scripture who desire to make you go astray, and they make no one to go astray except themselves, but they do not realize it. (S. 3:69)

Truly, those among the people of Scripture and the idolaters who reject [God] ungratefully will be in the fire of Gehenna forever. Those are the most evil of [all] created beings. (S. 98:6)

As one might expect from these statements about the unbelievers of the people of Scripture, in other passages those members of these communities who are faithful servants of God are praised in very positive terms, as in S. 3:199:

Truly, among the people of Scripture there are some who have faith in God and what was revealed to you [Muslims], and what was revealed to them, submissive to God. They do not sell the *âyat* [signs, verses] of God for a paltry price. Those are they for whom their reward is with their Lord. Truly God is quick to reckon.

There are also passages that seem to look with approbation upon the Christians while condemning the Jews along with the polytheists:

You [Muhammad] will find the Jews and those who associate other gods [with God] the strongest in hostility to the faithful. And you will find the closest of them in friendship to the faithful to be those who say, “Truly, we are Christians.” That is because among them are priests and monks, and because they are not arrogant. (S. 5:82)

Finally, there are also segments in the Qur’ân that are sharp in their criticism of all the people of Scripture who do not recognize Islam as the path fulfilling their own traditions:

Say, “O people of Scripture! Why do you deny God’s signs/revelations, when God is witness to what you do?”
Say, “O people of Scripture! Why do you bar from the way of God those who have faith, desiring to make it crooked, when you yourselves are witnesses to it, and God is not unaware of what you do?” (S. 3:98-9)

Such passages, probably revealed at different times and to different ends during Muhammad's career, indicate how easy it has been for later generations to find justification for either rapprochement and toleration of Christians and Jews or antagonism and belligerence towards them. Taking all the diverse Qur'anic statements about the People of Scripture together, it is impossible to ascertain a single clear "line" regarding their proper treatment at the hands of Muslims. The historical trajectory of the early Islamic empire led to actions of violence and discrimination on occasion, but also, and more typically, to acts of charity, understanding, and often remarkable toleration vis-à-vis Jews and Christians in particular. Sadly, the later experiences of the Christian Crusades, the Ottoman-Christian state rivalries, and then European global imperialism and colonialism in the modern age did much to replace the more irenic Muslim approach to Jews and Christians with more belligerent and intolerant responses to perceived threats. Indeed, these factors would lead to an increase in the late 20th century in attitudes of enmity and postures of conflict rather than reconciliation and toleration. Nevertheless, these developments are far removed from the world of early Islam, and even much of the medieval world as well: Jews and Christians were not only generally left alone so long as they did not present problems for Muslim rule, but individual Jews and Christians were able to reach high positions of

governmental trust and power in the early and middle periods. Even conflict between Muslims and “scripture folk” on the battlefield was minor compared to other kinds of interaction in the early Islamic centuries.

What is particularly important to remember is that so long as Muslims were dealing with other religious minorities, apart from overt polytheists, *within* their own Muslim-ruled states, legal toleration was the norm and communal strife remained minimal. This is especially true if one compares the situation of Jews and Christians in Muslim states with that of Jews and Muslims in Christian states in the same periods. Of course, border areas were a special case. In these, Muslim populations were typically threatened by non-Muslim states close by, and warfare with these non-Muslim states was frequent. As a result, toleration had a harder time flourishing in these contexts, as one would expect in any similar situation anywhere. (245-247)

William Graham’s final comments reflect the circumstances that have, in recent years, pressed comparative theology to a new task. Tolerance and mutual respect among religions, particularly the Abrahamic religions, has emerged as an imperative for peace, and for some communities as a necessity for survival. Perhaps theologians should embrace that social

impetus, and involve themselves constructively in the celebration of the same God as the inheritance of Abraham.

III

Daniel Boyarin has criticized just this suggestion, in his historical assessment of Judaism and Christianity. He has shown that the two religions should not be understood as parting from one another at any finite moment. Indeed, he challenges the use of “religion” to characterize Rabbinic Judaism at all, arguing that Christian apologists developed this category in order to dispute allegedly restrictive Jewish views.¹ His argument extends an insight that he developed in a study of Paul:²

Paul was, therefore, troubled by, critical of, the “ethnocentrism” of biblical and post-biblical religion, and particularly the way it implicitly and explicitly created hierarchies between nations, genders, social classes. Despite this powerful, nearly irresistible concern for universal “Man” and critique of “Judaism,” Paul nevertheless remained convinced that the Hebrew Scriptures contained God’s revelation and that the Jews had been at least the vehicle for the communication of that revelation.

¹ *Borderlines. The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2004).

² *A Radical Jew. Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California, 1994) 52, 85.

Boyarin says elsewhere in the same monograph, “Paul’s genius was not as a philosopher, which he was not, but in his realization that the common dualist theology – ontology, anthropology, and hermeneutics – which together for him formed a christology, provided the answer to the theological problem that troubled him the most: How do the rest of the people in God’s world fit into the plan of salvation revealed to the Jews through their Torah?”

My understanding of Paul, directed by his own biography as well as with most exegetical opinion, makes his orientation more specifically Stoic than Boyarin suggests. I have also argued that Paul’s background in Tarsus, and within a Hellenistic synagogue, helps account for his devotion to the international vocation of Israel, a vocation reinforced by apocalyptic influences that later shaped his thinking.³ In other words, Paul’s devotion to a unitary ideal in both theology and anthropology was consonant both with his Hellenistic and with his Judaic identity.

Although I disagree with Boyarin in the etiology of unitary perspectives, because I see them more as endemic within monotheisms (and philosophical henotheisms) than as specific to Christian thinkers, I agree with him that their inevitable tendency is apologetic. To declare that God is the “same” implicitly lays a claim to a superior definition of what makes for that sameness. (A comparable paradox has seen ecumenical progress thwarted by the formation of groups that claim to be more

³ See *Rabbi Paul. An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

inclusive than any others, but then set up separate identities and so promote more faction.) As an analytic category in the comparative study of religion and theology, “sameness” does not appear productive.

But allowing Christianity, Islam, and Judaism their distinctive characters, without a program of discovering sameness, does not obviate confronting their competition with one another. Comparison makes that competition seem all the more acute. They compete not only over whose God was disclosed to Abraham, but over the who that God truly is, as revealed to whom, with the demands of what kind of justice, and by the sanction of what eternal rewards and punishments.

Systematic comparison that these profound differences are sometimes pointed into moments in which one of the Abrahamic religions appears at odds with the other two. Christianity’s Incarnation, Judaism’s eternal Israel, Islam’s seal of prophecy are as unacceptable to their partners as they are non-negotiable to faith as articulated in the canonical and classic literatures. Each partner can learn from the others, because they share categories of faith, even as they contradict one another in what is believed. But precisely because they all lay claim to the one God of Abraham, contradiction must attend their interactions. The identity of their God is why that God is not same, and why believers need to acquire a taste for the fruits of difference.

