



A Phenomenology of Monotheism in Relationship: Jews, Christians and Muslims

Reuven Firestone | 01.10.2017

Subsequent another contribution of a series of articles (see: part [one](#), part two , part [three](#)) that features a dozen Christian and Jewish theologians reflecting on the state of Jewish-Christian relations today and whether there exists a “special relationship” between the two religious traditions. The articles were first published in CURRENT DIALOGUE No. 58, 2016, edited by the World Council of Churches and are republished with kind permission.
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Some involved with interreligious dialogue have argued that Judaism and Christianity have a special “sibling-relationship” that derives from their roles as inheritors of Biblical Monotheism – to the exclusion of Islam which arrived on the scene centuries later and out of a largely different context. Others have argued that Judaism and Islam have a special theological relationship that derives from their particular understandings (or articulations) of divine unity as a theological core, which explicitly and purposely denies any kind of Trinitarian nature to God. I will take a somewhat different tack by observing a phenomenology of interreligious relationship that I consider to be based on the serendipity of history. Because of the limited space allowed for this inquiry, my observations will necessarily be somewhat general.

It has long been established that Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity emerged out of the ashes of Second Temple Judaism and that early expressions of Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity seem to be in many ways indistinguishable.^[1] The famous (or infamous!) “parting of the ways” resulted eventually in the formation of two separate and contending monotheist communities, each claiming that it represents the authentic continuation of Biblical Monotheism.^[2] This is a “zero-sum” relationship. One expression is correct. All others are incorrect. One represents the Truth. All others are wrong.

This insistence on the absolute and precise nature of Truth – and the claim of unqualified possession of that Truth – is referred to by Jan Assmann as the “Mosaic Distinction:” “... the distinction between truth and falsehood in religion, between the true god and false gods, true doctrine and false doctrine, knowledge and ignorance, belief and unbelief.”^[3] For centuries before the emergence of Christianity, that distinction reigned between a single expression of monotheism and its view of all other religious expressions, all of which were one or another form of polytheism. That monotheism certainly evolved during the First and Second Temple Periods. It produced various competing sub-communities and sectarian groups within it, but all varieties remained essentially united through faith in a singular God within a single ethnos, while virtually (or perhaps literally) all other *ethne* were polytheists of one variety or another. Assmann argues that polytheisms are inherently tolerant. “By disarticulating the sphere of the numinous into distinct roles and functions, [polytheism] converts the divine world of a particular group into a format that makes is compatible with the divine worlds of other groups and cultures.”^[4]

Polytheists who observed Biblical and Second Temple Monotheism were sometimes perplexed by the rigidity of monotheist practice and perspective, but with some notable exceptions, they generally tried to accommodate the strange or distinctive nature of monotheist claims and ideas.^[5] Despite the internalization of the “Mosaic Distinction” among Biblical Monotheists, they, too, could live with the existence of polytheists as long as they had a “safe haven” in which to practice their religion without interference or temptation to revert to earlier (Israelite) polytheist practice through religious and

even social interaction with polytheist peoples. The temptation of polytheism, from within the community as well as without, remained a threat to Biblical Monotheists for centuries.^[6]

Monotheists polemicized against polytheism throughout the Hebrew Bible, but the purpose was hardly to convince polytheists to come over to monotheism. The major purpose was rather to convince Israelites to remain or become more thorough monotheists. Likewise, while some polytheists polemicized against Israel and their notions and ways, there is no evidence of any creedal polytheist anti-Judaism.^[7]

That *modus vivendi* would change with the “parting of the ways” because that parting represents the first time in which two separate, independent, self-identifying monotheist communities vied with one another over their particular notions of Truth, divine disclosure in the form of canonized scripture, destiny and salvation. To use Assmann’s terminology, it was the first time that the Mosaic Distinction applied between two competing expressions of monotheism; hence the zero-sum nature of Jewish-Christian argument.

Despite so much in common between Jews and Christians, I suggest that small differences were made into big differences because of the zero-sum mentality of the Mosaic Distinction between two competing monotheisms. Prior arguments between factions within the Second Temple Judean community were not seen as win-or-lose at the same level. After the initial zero-sum crisis between Jews and Christians, however, even internal argument became more problematic, perhaps not so significantly among Jews who belonged to a single ethnos (even if by this time it was entirely, as opposed to partially, constructed^[8]), but certainly among Christians who struggled so mightily with the problem of sectarianism and heresy.

I argue that the intensity of the Mosaic Distinction remained high as long as the distinction was obtained between only two separate self-identifying parties. Christians claimed to have superseded the position of the Jews as God’s one and only chosen (Matt. 22:14, 24:1-22; Mark 13:20-32; Luke 1:30-33, 9:28-35; John 15:5-6, 15-16; Romans 9:7-8; Gal. 4:21-31; Heb. 8:6-13; 1 Peter 2:7-10, etc.). During the period that Christians became increasingly influential, Jews became increasingly powerless. By the 4th century they were unable to make bold claims like their Christian competitors (they were often forced to articulate their position in code in Rabbinic Literature so as not to endanger themselves), but their view of themselves in relation to their Christian competitors was no less elitist than that of Christians.^[9] Each distinct monotheist community competed against the other through a binary perspective; each claimed an independent identity and each claimed ownership of the whole truth.

That binary relationship could not easily change because of the centuries during which it became codified in the most sacred literatures of both parties. But when a third party emerged, the nature of monotheist relationship changed profoundly. No longer could the relationship be defined as zero-sum. It could no longer be either-or. As just mentioned, Jews and Christians continued to process the world, including the emergence of a new and independent form of monotheism in Islam, under the inertia of the formative centuries of polemic between their binary worldviews. But that is not the perspective of the Qur’an, and I would argue that the emergence of a third option along with its non-binary perspective regarding earlier monotheisms even came to affect the views of some Christians and Jews, such as the Christian Nikolas Cusanus (d. 1464) and the Jew Menachem Me’iri (d. 1310).^[10] As the Muslim community began to recognize itself as a distinct religious community,^[11] it observed not one or even two contending communities, but a number of different expressions of monotheism. Some were Jewish, some Christian, and some may have been neither.^[12] The very existence of harsh internal polemic between rival Christian communities and, less so, between rival Jewish communities, rendered all of their claims relative.

The rhetoric of the Qur’an, then, tends not express an either-or, zero-sum perspective on truth in relation to Judaism and Christianity.^[13] It recognizes that both Judaism and Christianity derive from

God and that both contain truth. But their particular expressions of originally pristine monotheism had become corrupted or distorted over the centuries.^[14] Through error or forgetfulness (Q. 2:59, 5:13-14) or purposefully (Q. 2:75, 146, 3:78, 187), Jews and Christians altered the original forms of their scriptures so that contemporary believers may not even be aware that their religious practice and belief is not entirely accurate. In God's great wisdom and compassion, therefore, the Qur'an was given as a clear revelation of divine disclosure confirming and correcting what came before.^[15] It sometimes corrects the theology and practice in earlier scripture – the altered versions of a divine template that was retained intact in the Qur'an^[16] – but it does not claim to supersede it.^[17] The old covenants are not declared invalid.^[18]

The Qur'an returns monotheism to its original, accurate, pristine form, but it is not supersessive. Some verses such as 3:110 may be read as elitist, but the notion of "best community" is understood by some as a conditional statement.^[19] And perhaps the most supersessive verse, "Whoever desires a religion other than *al-islam*, it will not be accepted from him, and in the Hereafter he will be one of the losers" (3:85) is likely to refer contextually to a generic submission to God rather than to a distinct religion.^[20] Even its critique of prior religions is ambivalent. While submission to the divine will as articulated in the Qur'an is best, the Qur'an itself can still instruct believers, including Muhammad, to ask the People of the Book if they are uncertain (Q. 10:94; 16:43).

The Qur'an argues repeatedly that difference between human communities is intentional, that God created humanity to disagree.^[21] It also argues against certain practices or beliefs of established monotheisms, but it does not argue against their intrinsic value. I suggest that the rigidity that crept into Islamic thinking in its relations with other forms of monotheism was largely a reaction to the absolute rejection that it experienced from earlier monotheists. Not all earlier monotheists rejected Islam, of course. In fact, most Christians and many Jews in the Middle East and North Africa became Muslims themselves, but the powerful institution of the church rejected Islam and its scripture out of hand as either a ridiculous error or worse, the work of the devil.^[22] Partly in response to this rejection out of hand, and partly in response to its own internal processes associated with political and ethnic and religious rivalries (which cannot really be separated) for power and control with the emergence of the Caliphate, Islamic institutional thinking became increasingly rigid itself, and that includes its rejection of Christianity and Judaism. It became not merely an issue of rejecting the errant particulars of Christianity and Judaism practiced by Christians and Jews, but a more absolute rejection of all things Christian and Jewish.

The result has been a vector of absolutism in Islam that roughly parallels the vectors of absolutism in Christianity and Judaism.^[23] The phenomenology of identity formation is roughly alike. As Muslims came to identify themselves increasingly as a community independent from those of Christians and Jews, they saw their movement in increasingly absolutist terms, just as the movements that eventuated in Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity became increasingly self-isolating and self-absorbed as their ways parted. Ironically, a "third way" that was initiated in the Qur'an could not be sustained among most post-Qur'anic Muslims, perhaps another loss to the unavoidability of religious realpolitik.

I end with the observation that today, in a pluralistic environment in which the prizes of politics are much more readily available through means other than religion than in previous eras, we have an opportunity to transcend the absolutist tendencies that Assmann believes are inherent in the "Mosaic Distinction." There are traditional models in each of our traditions that can be plumbed for considering how to retain the particularism of our commitments while simultaneously opening ourselves to the likelihood that the truth of the Ultimate cannot be contained entirely in a single community.^[24]

Footnotes

- [1] A number of different names have been employed to identify the kinds of monotheism practiced by the people who populated the Land of Israel prior to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE: Israelite monotheism, Biblical monotheism, Second Temple Judaism, etc. These refer to a variety of changing practice and theology that predate Rabbinic Judaism, the expression of monotheism among Jews that became dominant by the end of the Talmudic period and which corresponds roughly with the emergence of Islam in the 7th century.
- [2] See, for example: James Dunn (ed.), *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); Julie Galambush, *The Reluctant Parting* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005); George Nickelsburg, *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel* (London: Littman Library, 1996); and Adam Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (eds.), *The Ways that Never Parted* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).
- [3] Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 2. Assmann has written extensively on this and has stimulated much discussion, especially in Europe. Perhaps his most concise and recent book treating this issue is the monograph listed here.
- [4] *Ibid.*, 24.
- [5] See John Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University, 1983); Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1997). The anti-Jewish violence in Elephantine and Alexandria in Egypt (Gager, 43-54; Schäfer, 121-69) is explained by Assmann as a violent reaction-formation in response to a far earlier expression of the “Mosaic Distinction” initiated during the Amarna period by Akhenaten (*The Price of Monotheism*, 32-67; *From Akhenaten to Moses* (Cairo: American University in Cairo, 2014)).
- [6] See, for example, Ex. 15:11; 2 Kings 21:1-9; Ps. 95:3, etc. See also Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2001); Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel* (London: Continuum, 2001).
- [7] The term, “Israel,” is the standard Jewish term for the people that are referred to in Jewish sources variously as “Hebrews,” “Israelites,” “Judeans,” and “Jews.”
- [8] I follow Benedict Anderson’s work, which is also relevant to an earlier age (Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983)). See also Patrick Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2003); Lee Patterson, *Kinship Myth in Ancient Greece* (Austin: University of Texas, 2010); Exodus 12:37-38, the Book of Ruth, etc.
- [9] See the work of Daniel J. Lasker, such as *Jewish Philosophical Polemics Against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (New York: Ktav, 1977, 2007), and Sarah Stroumsa, “Jewish Polemics Against Islam and Christianity In the Light of Judaeo-Arabic Texts,” in N. Golb (ed.), *Judaeo-Arabic Studies: Proceedings of the Founding Conference of the Society for Judaeo-Arabic Studies*, Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations 3 (Amsterdam, 1997), 241-50.
- [10] Inigo Bocken, “Nicholas of Cusa and the Plurality of Religions.” in Barbara Roggema, Marcel Poorthuis and Pim Valkenberg (eds.), *The Three Rings: Textual Studies in the Historical Dialogue of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Lueven: Peters, 2005), 163-80; Moshe Halbertal, “‘Ones Possessed of Religion:’ Religious Tolerance in the Teachings of the Me’iri.” *The Edah Journal* (2005), 1-24; idem, *Between Torah and Wisdom: Rabbi Menachem Ha-Meiri and the Maimonidean Halakhists in Provence* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2002).
- [11] Fred Donner and others argue, to my mind successfully, that the movement that eventuated in the community of Muslims did not emerge as a distinct religious confession but became that only with time (Fred Donner, “From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Muslim Community,” *al-Abhath* 50-51 (2002-2003), 9-53; *ibid.*, *Muhammad and the Believers: at the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2010)).
- [12] See, for example, Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede, *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Stephen Mitchell and Peter Van Nuffelen (eds.), *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 2010).
- [16] It is not in the nature of scripture to avoid what we today would identify as inconsistency, but as will be observed below, the Qur’an often refers positively to the religions of Jews and Christians

even if not to what it identifies as their practices and beliefs. This is not the case regarding what it defines as shirk or polytheism, which has no redeeming value.

[14] Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, "Tahrif" in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., Vol. 10 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998), 111-12; Gabriel Said Reynolds, "On the Qur'anic Accusation of Scriptural Falsification (*tahrif*) and Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 130.2 (2010), 189-202.

[15] Q. 2:2-5; 4:47; 5:48; 12:1-2; 15:9; 16:64.

[16] For example, Q. 50:38 argues that God had no need to rest on the day after creation, 5:72 argues that Jesus is not God, 4:157 argues that the Crucifixion did not occur, and 4:160-61 argues that the strict dietary restrictions among Jews was either self-imposed (3:93) or punishment for wrongdoing (4:160-61).

[17] The Qur'an does claim abrogation of revelation (Q. 2:106). Some Muslim scholars understand this to refer to prior revelation, though it became the basis for the theory of internal abrogation within the Qur'an (*naskh or al-nasikh wal-mansukh*). But in either case, it is corrective rather than supersessive.

[18] Reuven Firestone, "Is there a Notion of 'Divine Election' in the Qur'an?" in Gabriel S. Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Qur'an. The Qur'an in Its Historical Context 2* (NY: Routledge, 2011), 393-410.

[19] "You are the best community brought forth for humankind, commanding right and forbidding wrong, and believing in God. If the People of the Book had believed, it would have been better for them. Some of them are believers, but most of them are wicked." The conditional nature can be understood as *whether* the community indeed commands the right and forbids the wrong.

[20] See also Q. 3:19; 5:3; L. Gardet, "Islam" in EI (2), Vol. 4, 171; A. J. Droge, *The Qur'an: A New Annotated Translation* (Sheffield and Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2013), 32, note 26. For a history of the Islamic interpretive tradition on the Qur'anic term, see Jane Smith, *An Historical and Semantic Study of the Term 'Islam' as Seen in a Sequence of Qur'an Commentaries* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975).

[21] Q. 5:48; 6:106-07; 10:99; 11:118-19; 42:15; 49:13.

[22] Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1960); John Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University, 2002); Minou Reeves, *Muhammad in Europe: A Thousand Years of Western Myth-Making* (New York: New York University, 2003).

[23] Judaism, however, while certainly equally elitist in its sense of monotheism, is relieved of the problematic of the salvation/damnation binary. That is, non-believers are not automatically destined for damnation because Judaism presumed entry to the World-to-Come for all non-Jews who follow the Noahide Laws (Tosefta, Avodah Zarah 9:4; Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 56a). The seven Noahide laws are listed in later Rabbinic texts as the prohibition of idolatry (worship of idols but not necessarily owning images), murder, theft, sexual immorality, blasphemy, eating flesh taken from a living animal; the last is not a prohibition but rather a requirement to maintain courts to provide legal recourse.

[24] I mentioned Nikolas Cusanus and Menachem Me'iri above. See also the work of Mohammad Hassan Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others: The Salvation Question* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), idem (ed.), *Between Heaven and Hell: Islam, Salvation, and the Fate of Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Editorial remarks

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