

Islam and Inter-Faith Relations

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7. A Jewish View of Islam

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The strength of a broadly sketched presentation is also its weakness. A wide view of such broad phenomena as Judaism and Islam perforce essentializes them, while overlooking many details and much nuance that are essential to a balanced picture of the two entities, their historical relations and the possibilities that may be held for their common future. Nevertheless, such a broad sketch also allows us to recognize the main currents of the past, challenges of the present and possibilities for the future. The following generalizations should therefore be taken as just that, along with the hope that these general reflections will withstand the test of finer scrutiny, while suggesting directions for future research and reflections. I would like to express the hope that whatever nuancing this paper invites, particularly regarding the refinement of statements concerning Islam as these emerge from the observations of a Jewish scholar whose knowledge of Muslim sources is perforce second hand, should be motivated by the spirit of unapologetic examination of self and other in which I myself have tried to write. The present overview seeks to point to complicated and menacing realities, without masking their complexities. I look forward to the overall notions being engaged with the spirit, both critical and constructive, with which these thoughts are offered.¹

1 The present essay sounds a very different note, though it ultimately remains complementary, to a paper co-authored by myself along with Paul Ballanfat and Paul Fenton, 'Judaism and Islam: Directions for Dialogue, Collaboration and Mutual Recognition', in preparation for the First Congress of Imams and Rabbis that I helped organize in January 2005, and which is available through the Elijah Interfaith Institute. That essay sought to create a historical and conceptual common ground between religious leaders of two traditions often considered as being at war with one another.

Elective Monotheisms – A Conceptual Overview

As a way of bringing together a series of distinct, though clearly interrelated, observations regarding Islam from a Jewish perspective, I would like to suggest a conceptual framework that allows us to grasp the commonality as well as the difference between the two traditions. These traditions are often referred to as Abrahamic, as though the figure of Abraham provided the conceptual, or genealogical, common ground between Muslims and Jews.² I prefer to adopt the usage of Martin Jaffee, who coined the term 'elective monotheisms' to describe the two traditions, as well as Christianity.³ As Jaffee rightly suggests, simply pointing to the belief in a common God, or even to other theological principles that Judaism and Islam share in common, is to mask the complexity of the issues and the real differences between the religions. On the vertical level the two religions do indeed point to a belief in a common God. However, this God enters the arena of history and engages humanity through his word. The act of revealing his word, choosing a community to whom his word is entrusted and which therefore becomes his community proper and the passage through history with the sense of unique revelation and relationship, until the eventual messianic vindication of the one chosen community – these are all constitutive components of elective monotheism. Consequently, an honest mutual assessment must take all these components into account. Accordingly, the present observations will be grouped according to the key elements that make both Judaism and Islam elective monotheisms, and that suggest where their major agreements and disagreements lie. These include God, revelation, the religious community (the community that God chooses and to which he reveals

The irenic note sounded by that paper is an example of the kind of constructive direction recommended by the present paper. However, the appeal to history and commonality, while useful for the occasion and while possessing educational and psychological merit, is also fraught with difficulties, as the present essay suggests.

² For a critique of this designation, see A. Goshen-Gottstein, 2002, 'Abraham and "Abrahamic Religions" in Contemporary Interreligious Discourse: Reflections of an Implicated Jewish Bystander', *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 12, pp. 165–83.

³ See Martin Jaffee, 2001, 'One God, One Revelation One People: On the Symbolic Structure of Elective Monotheism', *JAAR* 69:4, pp. 753–75.

himself), history (the passage of the two communities along the axis of time and the interweaving of their relations) and the messianic end (the tension and the quest for the ultimate vindication of the truth and meaning of the commitment of the religious community).

God

It is important to acknowledge the theological common ground of Judaism and Islam, a common ground which may provide the ultimate foundation for Jewish-Muslim relations and whose significance must be reaffirmed despite all the complexities that make 'elective monotheism' more than simply monotheism. Judaism and Islam recognize and worship the same God. This has been the general tendency of Jewish authorities towards Islam throughout the ages.⁴ The ruling of Maimonides, according to which Muslims are not to be considered idolaters, because they believe in true monotheism, has become a default position in a Jewish assessment of the Muslim recognition of God.⁵ The recognition of the common God also opened the door to a great deal of theological and spiritual exchange between Jews and Muslims throughout the generations. Particularly noteworthy are the spiritual exchanges that characterize Maimonides' own descendants, as they forged a unique Jewish-Sufi spiritual synthesis, in which a particular spirituality and a variety of customs and forms of worship were integrated into Jewish praxis.⁶ None of this could have taken place without the fundamen-

⁴ The affirmation has not by any means been universal. Some of the exceptions to this general recognition will be noted below. See Marc Shapiro, 1993, 'Islam and the Halakha', *Judaism* 42, pp. 332-43. It is fair to suggest that underlying the lack of recognition of the identity of the God worshipped by Judaism and Islam, particularly as expressed by various authorities who considered Islam to be a form of *Avoda Zara*, a form of foreign, hence prohibited, worship of God, are identity politics, as these get played out in the historical relations of the two communities. For a particularly clear articulation of this relationship see the halachic discussion of Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg, *Ziz Eliezer*, vol. 14, responsum 91.

⁵ See Maimonides, *Laws of Yein Nesech* 11,7.

⁶ See Paul Fenton, 1998, 'Abraham Maimonides (1187-1237): Founding a Mystical Dynasty', in M. Idel and M. Ostow (eds), *Jewish Mystical Leaders and Leadership in the 13th Century*, Northvale: Jason Aronson, pp. 148ff.

tal acknowledgement of the identity of the God recognized by the two traditions. It is therefore a commonplace that Judaism considers itself closer to Islam than it does to Christianity. In other words, when a theological, rather than a cultural, perspective is chosen, Judaism and Islam share a fundamental understanding of the one God, which is free of the complexities that characterize Jewish-Christian relations.

Revelation

The profound differences between Judaism and Islam arise as we move from God understood philosophically to the relations God forges and the revelations he gives. In theory one could reconcile multiple revelations, assuming different intended audiences. While this position was not common, we have at least one precedent of a Jewish philosopher who was willing to acknowledge the validity of the Qur'ān's revelation, as long as its intended audience was not the Jewish people, for whom the Torah remains the final revelation. Thus, R. Nethanel Alfayumi, a twelfth-century Jewish philosopher, who has been described in this regard as a Jewish Isma'īlī, allows for the possibility of the Qur'ān's validity for a Muslim audience.⁷ Needless to say, the Qur'ān itself has a variety of references that recognize the fact of a previous revelation in the Torah. Thus, if other social, political and historical circumstances had prevailed, this position might have enjoyed greater currency. Circumstances were different, however, and they are best illustrated through the reasoning offered for why Islam should be considered *Avoda Zara*, an alien worship, even though it affirms belief in the same God. There are, as is well known, three prohibitions that must not be transgressed and for which the law prescribes choosing death over

⁷ See Steven Wasserstrom, 'Mutual Acknowledgements: Modes of Recognition Between Muslim and Jew', 1992, *Islam and Judaism, 1400 years of Shared Values*, ed. Steven Wasserstrom, Portland: Institute for Judaic Studies in the Pacific Northwest, p. 63 f. Al Fayumi's position was echoed recently, though without reference to him, by British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in the first edition of his *The Dignity of Difference* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 55. This formulation is one of the points of the work to have drawn the ire of his critics, leading to its reformulation in the second edition of the work.

committing those transgressions.⁸ One of those is idolatry, the worship of other gods, *Avoda Zara*. If the God of Islam is the same as the God of Judaism, how should one act under conditions of religious persecution? If God alone were considered, it would seem that conversion to Islam should be the recommended course of action. This conclusion was unacceptable to legal authorities who addressed the political realities of religious persecution. Rabbi David ben Zimra (sixteenth century) arguing in favour of martyrdom, shifts the basis of the discussion from the understanding of God to revelation.⁹ Were we only to consider God from the theological and philosophical perspectives, the entire Torah would be undermined. The Torah is a way of life, an entire religious system communicated by God to his people. One should prefer death to conversion to another religion, even if it recognizes the same God, because such conversion undermines the ability to live out the relationship mandated by God. Under historical circumstances of forced conversion and religious competition, the option that recognizes the validity of other forms of revelation finds no fertile ground to grow.¹⁰

Even though on a certain level Islam recognizes Jewish Scriptures, in many significant ways it fails to do so in a way that is satisfactory to Jewish religious, as well as historical, sensibilities. Unlike Christianity, Islam does not consider itself the next chapter of the same story. Rather, it is a variant telling of many components of Judaism's foundational story. Consequently, it does not own the Jewish Scriptures as such. This diminishes the kind of friction that developed from the scriptural takeover of the Jewish Bible by the Church. But it also introduces friction on another, possibly more profound, level. Christians have always recognized Jewish Scriptures, leading them to value Jewish learning and the tradition of interpretation entrusted to the Rabbis. This has led to millennia of study of Jewish sources by Christian students, always aware of the direct rela-

8 Maimonides, *Laws of Foundations of the Torah* 5,2.

9 Shut Radbaz 4,92, citing the earlier authority of the *Ritva*.

10 Steven Wasserstrom (cf. fn. 7) makes the point that symbiosis could take place because it served mutual needs. Theological positions are also couched within social realities. Neither cultural models nor theological positions grow in a historical vacuum. The climate of interreligious dialogue could in theory provide a soil upon which this hitherto marginal view could gain greater currency.

tionship between Judaism and Christianity. By contrast, Muslims do not consider themselves fundamentally indebted to Jewish tradition. They are in possession of the full revelation, making any need for the study of Jewish tradition and the related acknowledgement of a historical relationship superfluous. Whatever interest the modern historian may have in tracing the Jewish sources of Muslim teachings, to the Muslim believer such historical dependence is meaningless. God's revelation is not in need of historical precedent or formative materials. The discrepancies between the Jewish and the Muslim telling of related narratives is reconciled through what may be considered the earliest form of biblical criticism – the elaborate Muslim criticism of the contents of the biblical narrative as morally inferior and as spiritually impossible, leading to a recognition of a gap between the theory of revelation and the actual product that is said to contain it. The Jewish Scriptures are thus viewed as having been impaired and falsified by human hands. To all intents and purposes there is no need to learn from Jews and their concrete Scriptures are not appreciated as words of revelation.¹¹

Recognition can take many forms. Upon closer scrutiny one realizes that Jewish-Muslim relations are fraught with various degrees of lack of recognition of historical continuity.¹² The most contemporary expression of this tendency is the widespread attempt to deny any relationship between the historical Jerusalem Temple and the Haram al-Sharif. Erasure of memory and denial of continuity cast the two religions as increasingly distinct from one another, thereby undermining the historical basis of continuity that could in theory have served a constructive role in the relations between the two religions.

Issues of memory and continuity concern self-image and under-

¹¹ There may be alternative ways of understanding these early charges of falsification, that may be more harmonious with the present desire to ameliorate inter-group relations. See the paper composed by Paul Ballanfath, Paul Fenton and myself, 'Judaism and Islam: Directions for Dialogue, Collaboration and Mutual Recognition' (The Elijah Interfaith Institute, 2004), pp. 14–15.

¹² The ambivalence toward the *Isra'iliyat*, traditions that made it to Muslim sources from Jewish origins, is an additional instance of this ambivalence. Attempts to expunge these traditions are instances of conscious erasure of memory.

standing. What is at stake is not historical fact, but the construction of identity and the relationship to the other. These in turn draw upon different cultural modes of relating to the past. The different uses of history reveal significant cultural differences, on account of which Jews and Muslims often lack a common language. The Jewish appeal to history is, in principle, more open to a critical perspective, while many Muslim spokesmen would deny a meaningful role to historical enquiry and its critical methods as far as these can contribute a historical depth dimension to Jewish-Muslim relations. Consequently, resolving tensions over memory and image is dependent to a large extent on finding the conceptual and methodological common ground that would allow Jews and Muslims to share a discourse in light of which issues of history, continuity and identity could be explored.

There is one final point I would like to add in relation to Scripture and its implications for shaping the view of the other. Reuven Firestone has made a significant point regarding the long-term implications of the qur'ānic representations of Muḥammad's complex relations with the Jews and of some of the difficult statements made in that context.¹³ Appealing to the historical method, it is understandable that under the pressure of particular historical circumstances various statements of a derogatory nature were made. However, once these statements take on metaphysical significance, their destructive potential is brought to light. If the Qur'ān is God's word of truth from all eternity, it is harder to relativize negative statements concerning the Jews and to see them as merely products of a given historical moment. The text's metaphysical status can in theory lead to the negative essentialization of the other.¹⁴

13 Reuven Firestone, 2005, 'Jewish-Muslim Relations', in N. de Lange, M. Freud-Kandel (eds), *Modern Judaism, An Oxford Guide*, Oxford: OUP, pp. 438–49, p. 440.

14 In principle, the concern is mutual, and could be equally applied to Jewish descriptions of Ishmael or non-Jews in general. However, the dynamics of tradition are different. Negative views of Muslims are not found in Judaism's most fundamental text, but in later strata that are less authoritative. Nevertheless, it is clear that ultimately both communities must tackle traditional religious sources that portray the other in a negative light.

The People – Receiving Revelation and Moving through History

The next component in Jaffee's scheme to be considered relates to the choice of community that receives the divine revelation and traverses history with it. More is at stake here than the simple, though fundamental, difference regarding the identity of the chosen community – whether it is the people of Israel or the Muslim Umma. Under this rubric we would do well to consider the matrix of Muslim–Jewish relations throughout the long periods in which Jews were subjects of Muslims. Relations between the groups reveal fundamental theological understandings.

Islam understood its political victory as theological victory as well. It is this close juxtaposition of political history and theological triumph that provides the backdrop for much of the theological difficulty that Islam faces with the change of historical tides. As Jewish–Muslim relations are coloured by the historical changes in power relations, one must be aware of the significant role that the political dimension plays in defining inter-group relations.

From a completely theoretical perspective, one could develop a Jewish model of Islam that would legitimize Islam's mission in the world, as a religious community. Just as one could contemplate notions of multiple revelations, one could also contemplate complex relations between different communities, chosen to fulfil different parts of God's plan for humanity. To the extent that Judaism is bound up with its ethnic identity and to the degree that it is perceived as non-missionary and not seeking to convert the world to its form of belief, a convenient division of labour could be conceived in relation to Islam. Islam could be the outreach arm of the monotheistic and spiritual vision of Judaism.¹⁵ However, such a view would require a level of mutual recognition the two traditions lack; and the power relations between them, as well as their different approaches to their respective and intertwined histories, play an important role in frustrating such mutual recognition.

¹⁵ Of course, this is just as true of Christianity. Indeed, very often Christianity and Islam are considered together in attempting to provide a place for them within the overall Jewish economy of history and salvation. See Maimonides, *Laws of Kings* 11,4.