

Kinship and Otherness: Consequences of Theology in the Religious Discourse

By A. E. SOUAIAYA, *University of Iowa*

Abstract

Despite the common roots and the shared history, despite the common themes, despite the genealogical affinity, otherness is easily created through theological dogma. This reality is best exemplified by the level of distinctiveness and “alienation” that characterize the emerging identities of the Semitic religions. Arguably, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad are all descendents of the Patriarch Abraham. Furthermore, they share the same story of creation, worship the same deity, and accept the authority of the scripture. Yet, theological disputes created new identities that rendered cousins strangers and neighbors enemies.

Disowning His Own

Despite the different names and disparate hierarchies, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have more in common than they have in exclusivity: adherents of all three religions, to some extent, worship the same deity, conceive of the same story of creation, and subscribe to the same eschatology. They also attribute the human fall from the heavens to violating the law and disobeying God. Jesus did not reject Jewish laws nor did Muhammad. So what is the reason behind the pronounced distinctiveness?

I would argue that it was not the laws that created differences between the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities; rather, it was theology that created otherness and alienated relatives. There are too many examples of theological disputations that alienated relatives in the Semitic traditions to list them all here, but few examples will suffice. Abraham, a central figure for all three religious communities, was disowned by his father when he challenged his conception of God. According to Islamic traditions, his father decided to burn him alive for antagonizing the established belief system even when such a system was shown to be illogical and irrational. Moses was betrayed by his people when he secluded himself for forty days and Jesus was deemed false Messiah when he called his people to a new theology of God. Muhammad too was rejected by his people and was never recognized by Jewish authorities for antagonizing the established orthodoxy. Even within the same religion, innovators in matters of faith and beliefs are either killed under heresy charges or they are forced to

establish their own distinct sect. In contrast, dissent in legal matters is tolerated especially in Judaism and Islam and followers are told that all *rabbīnic* or *fiqh* schools of thought are equally acceptable. In the light of these examples, examining the place of theology in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam becomes helpful in understanding how religious identity is formed and preserved. While doing so, it must be noted that the treatment of the place of theology in Judaism and Christianity is cursory and generalized based on the basic doctrines and central arguments in each tradition without delving into the details of each Christian denomination or Jewish innovations.

In the following paragraphs, I will explain why Christianity relied primarily on theology, while Judaism initially completely shunned it—or so it seems, whereas Islam selectively engaged it after having fully embraced it at first. These differences can be summarized in a simple generalization: Judaism can be thought of as the domain where the adherents think that they know God; while in Christianity, the adherents fashion God in the human image. As for Islam, it can be said that the adherents struggled to discover God only to know his attributes and nothing more. In order to explain these statements further, let's consider each of the three religions and attempt to establish the domain and functions for theology in each of them.

The Varying Functions of Theology in Judaism, Christianity and Islam

In Judaism, and from reading the Pentateuch, it can be said that the myth is told in no uncertain terms and that the personal and collective relationship with God cannot be made any clearer and more explicit. The nature of God and the story of mankind and God and the relationship between the

two cannot be told in a simpler way than the way it is told in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. These books told the full stories of creation, Adam and Eve, the fall of Man, the Prophets, and the Covenants. In the eyes of the Jews, God is too close for them not to know Him or to engage in speculation about Him. The Jews see themselves as having a special affinity with the deity and with that kind of relationship comes the presumption of knowing. Subsequently, it was the law and practice that needed to be clarified; but even then, it was not up to the laymen and uninitiated scholars to comment or interpret the Torah.¹ Reportedly, God gave Moses the authority to interpret and protect the Torah by way of the Oral Torah; and subsequently, rabbis were empowered to determine the application of the Torah in any other given time period. Authority in Judaism is inherited—or should I say vested—downwardly:

Judaism knows God through the Torah. We know about God exactly what God has told us and what our sages of blessed memory have handed on from the revelation at Sinai to our own day as the truth, the tradition, about God... We know God as more than a principle and a premise of being (such as philosophers know about God), and even as more than a presence (as pious people know about God through prayer). Rather, we know God as a person and, by the end of the Oral Torah, even as a fully embodied personality. So the story of God that we gain in the Oral Torah is the unfolding of the knowledge of God in the Torah. As a matter of fact, our sages know God in four aspects: (1) principle or premise, that is the one who created the world and gave the Torah; (2) presence, that is, supernatural being resident in the Temple and present where two or more persons engage in discourse concerning the Torah; (3) person, that is, the one to

whom prayer is addressed; and (4) personality, a God we can know and make our model.²

With this kind of role tradition and religious authority play in determining the Jewish worldview, speculation about God or about any other theological theme will be a moot subject. Even the use of the terms "Orthodox Judaism" becomes highly suspect if it were to be taken in a context similar to that implied when one speaks of Christian Orthodoxy. Jewish "orthodoxy" is more like Islamic positivism that characterized the field of law and jurisprudence than Christianity's attempts to standardize faith and beliefs. Subsequently, the use of the concept of "Jewish Orthodoxy" must be construed as a reaction to Christian influence since it emerged with Maimonides who adopted reason to explain and interpret Jewish traditions sometime during the second half of the twelfth century C. E.³ As for the theological themes that I addressed in the Islamic context and those that come to mind when thinking of Christian theology, they were reduced to three: God, Israel, and the Torah.⁴ However, these themes are not the subject of pure speculation; rather, as exegetical efforts that consider the Torah⁵ as the ultimate source and subject at the same time. In the words of Neusner,

if people wanted to explain how they would be saved, they would use the word Torah. If they wished to sort out their parlous relationships with gentiles, they would use the word Torah. Torah stood for salvation and accounted for Israel's this-worldly condition and the hope, for both individual and national alike, of life in the world to come.⁶

To sum up, Jewish theology existed only to accommodate reformist movements and help them adapt in each historical epoch; thus, you find it expressed in the language of the dominant religious tradition of that particular time.⁷ It is not possible to speak of an indigenous Jewish theology because the normative shield established around the scripture in the form of Mishnaic, Midrashic and Talmudic compilations left little room for abstract theological speculations.⁸ The claim of unmitigated

absence of indigenous Jewish theology can be further supported by the utter absence of an official comprehensive system of articles of faith or creed. Evidently, it was not until modern times that Rabbi Moshe bin Maimon, a medieval Jewish scholar, created a list of Jewish beliefs known as the thirteen principles of faith.⁹

For Christianity, it can be argued that the very nature of the religion demanded the emphasis on theology. After all, it is in Christianity that the nature and acts of God become so central to one's faith and salvation. It is not the law and ritual that determines one's relation with God or one's fate in this world and the Hereafter; rather, it is the acceptance of the mythical component.¹⁰ Indeed it may appear to be troublesome for a faith-based religion to resort to theology in order to posit and rationalize its creed; however, theology can be seen as the extension of the human faculty to enable the seeker to reconcile the truth from within and without. Christianity accepts the struggle between good and evil and it is theology that will serve as an aid to defeat evil or the demonic forces from without. With this kind of matrix, theological exercise becomes inescapable. Another factor that gives Christian theology the special characters that separates it from its counterparts in other religions and that is the place and status of the clergy person. Unlike the inherited and mystical authority of the rabbis in Judaism or the acquired status of Sunni Imams and *mujtahids*, scholarship and religious authority in Christianity is hierarchized.

It is an atypical scene for a Jew or even a Muslim to see Christian preachers or clergy persons interacting with the scripture the way they do; the way they handle the Bible and the way they interpret it unaided by authoritative exegetical traditions is simply "unorthodox." To put it mildly, it can be seen as too direct and too informal.¹¹ While the Christian authority goes directly to the Bible and interprets it in order to extract wisdom and guidance and apply it to events in the moment; the Jew must seek the authoritative exegesis that mediates the present with the past. In contrast, only a grand jurist (*mujtahid*) may directly refer to the Qur'an or consult the *hadith* compilations. The legal scholars (*faqih*) and the followers may only consider the opinion of the grand jurist and the legal precedent within their respective schools of thought.

In a sense, the scripture is shielded by a layer of authoritative texts and authorities. Similarly, in Shi'ite practices, only the Imam (and now the grand *marja`* [authority]) may consult the primary sources; other scholars and the followers can only exert their *ijtihad* within the domain of the declared authority. Arguably, one way of gauging the potency of theology and its role in any religious tradition is to look at the way scholarship within that particular religion interacts with the scripture: if the interaction is direct and unmediated; then it is possible to predict that that religion will be dominated by the theological discourse.¹² In contrast, if scholars of another religion habitually consult the exegetical work and not the original scripture, then scholars of such religious tradition will be the least interested in theological themes. It is in Christianity that the term "orthodoxy" has a real meaning and provides a practical function; since it is in Christianity that the entire tradition is synthesized and reduced to one simple maxim that defines the Christians from those who are not, those who belong from those who do not, the one who is saved from those who are doomed. Just like early Muslims, Christians too have found themselves setting new standards and establishing new relationships with each other and with the deity.

In the case of Islam, the nature of the Qur'anic discourse may have contributed also to the early start of theological discourse. To the discontent of its adherents who, like other human beings, have strong inclination towards and preference for systematic and orderly instructional materials; the Qur'an is furthest from being systematic. In fact, with very few exceptions, the Qur'an rarely provides a coherent unit or continuous idea. It is rather characterized by fragmented injunctions, unfinished stories, and intrusive enunciations that seem to some to be out of place. Reportedly, scholars who are used to the Biblical narrative (especially the Hebrew Torah), always find the jumbled and terse Qur'anic chapters frustrating and in need of contextual backgrounding. Moreover, the Qur'an is replete with ambiguous passages and idiomatic insertions.¹³ These elements of the Qur'an encouraged (or compelled) Muslims to seek the apparent as well as the figurative meaning of such passages; thus they initially engaged in a theological discourse. However, once the Prophetic traditions were com-

piled and the hermeneutical interpretation of the Qur'ān was standardized; the place of theology, especially reasoned theology, has become secondary in importance and functional application.

On the Lack of Inter-Religion Theology

On the account of cross-traditional scholarship, there has been a heated discussion on the lack of Jewish participation in the field of Old Testament (OT) theology. Some, who were interested enough to answer that charge, argued that it was Christian real or perceived anti-Semitism that discouraged Jewish scholars from contributing. That answer, if it has any truth, would only apply to the sentiment that might have existed in modern Europe. However, it can be argued that anti-Semitism is an untenable hypothesis especially in the domain of normative scholarly work.¹⁴ The answer, in my opinion, lies in the proper understanding of which theology disinterests Jewish scholarship: is it the indigenous theology that characterized two of these three traditions, or the discipline as a whole? On both accounts, Jewish interest is clearly lacking, but one is understandable and may require very little explaining; the other may be open to extensive speculations and theorizing.

If the questions were to focus only on the lack of participation of Jewish scholars in the topic of OT theology whose parameters were set by Christian theologians, then the question becomes unfair and unnecessary. Because in this context, it is clear that OT theology is a private discourse.¹⁵ A Jew should not be expected to participate in such debate, just like Muslims ought not to expect Christian scholars to normatively write about the theology of Christ of the OT and NT in the context of the Qur'ānic account. That is because the later religions, some how, hold the previous religions' scripture—as a whole—divine but not the other way around. In other words, for a Jew or a Christian scholar to engage in a normative discourse based on the Qur'ānic account for instance, he or she will be indirectly recognizing the authority of the latter scripture. Doing so will

amount to religious reformation or the creation of new denomination altogether.

Arguably, adherent scholars look backward for authority and forward for inspiration. With that in mind, it can be suggested that the events of the future, even if they were to be a realization of prophecies in their own scripture, are heresy unless they confirm and validate every single precondition set by the respective religion. For instance, the doctrine of the Messiah which is upheld by all the three Abrahamic religions will not be fulfilled unless each of these religions, separately and independently, verifies—based on its own checklist if you will—that the claimant is indeed who he says he is. This process will ultimately places faith and reason face to face: on the one hand, reason demands that God sends prophets or Messiahs because there is an absolute need for doing so; which would imply that each and all of these religions have undergone some transformations—or did not evolve—to remain authoritative as it were when first revealed. Given that the faithful cannot believe in a faulty or inadequate religious system, the only option left will be to reject the claim altogether. In other words, this conflict between the demands of reason and the requirements of faith make it impossible for any of the religions to recognize the Messiah if he were to come. Moreover, unless the Messiah's teachings and practices are in *full* accordance with the scripture and the teachings of the religious community wherein he emerges; it is highly probable, based on previous reported events and experiences, that such a claimant will be dubbed “false prophet” or “impersonator” and charged with blasphemy and possibly killed. For these reasons, theology of an earlier religion can only be normatively engaged and produced by scholars of that particular religion or those adhering to later religions but not the other way around.

The historical or critical study of theological ideas of more than one religion ought not to be questioned or discouraged because it is believed by many modern scholars that the comparative approach does indeed enhance understanding. In fact, I would argue that it is by way of comparative and inter-religious discussions that the limitation of the normative approach can be counteracted and its effects reversed. The normative method effortlessly empowers

scholars of the most recent religions to theorize backwardly covering themes addressed in their own traditions as well as those addressed in the religions that preceded them; but inhibits scholars of the older religions to address the theology of the later ones without compromising the tenets of their own. This state of affair is mainly due to the linear and one-directional appropriation of the preceding religion's tradition. For example, a Muslim scholar can easily discuss Christ since he is part of the Qur'ānic themes and he may even critically appraise the theology of Christ without him being accused of engaging in deprecatory assault on Christianity. The reverse may not be plausible. Subsequently, the comparative, historical, and critical study of the theology of various religions would neutralize that phenomenon.

Conclusions

In considering the place of theology in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it was hoped that different attitudes towards the discipline in general and the themes in particular would contribute to some understanding of the functions, and nature of theological discourse. It is argued that (a) the foundation of the specific religion, (b) the interaction of the religious authorities and the adherents with the specific scripture, and (c) the specific historical and ritual obligations required of the adherents by the specific religion determine the value and function of theology.

All three religions for instance, attempted to provide explanations (in varying vocabulary) for God, creation, reconciliation, and redemption. In Judaism God is portrayed as the “friendly” figure who has a special place for His “chosen people.” In Christianity, God is associated with martyrdom and sacrifice so He is revealed in a dual form: divine and human. Muslims on the other hand, see God through His attributes: He is what He says He is and He is not what He says He is not. The dual nature of God in Christianity (God/Human) required Christian authorities to keep explaining it over and over; whereas the full divine nature of God in Muslims' traditions made it possible for them to avoid explanations and theorizing. For this reason, in Christianity, the topic of the nature of God and His role in and impact on creation cannot be dropped out as a subject of theology without collapsing the foundation of the entire religion.

That does not seem to be the case in Judaism and Islam.

Historical and Biblical theologies are two critical components that are present in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The way the two activities that focus on the interpretation and the expounding of the meaning of the scripture in history by the religious establishment related to the divine texts also determine the persistence of the theological discourse in any given religious tradition. For instance, it can be argued that the protective layers of interpretation that shield the Torah and the Qurʾān does minimize the spread of “natural theology” when compared to Christianity where the religious authority interacts directly with the Bible. To be more specific however, the so-called “natural” and “revealed” theologies may be two different things in Jewish and Muslim thought, but are like two faces of the same coin in Christianity.

Lastly, the very fundamental requirement asked from the adherent to any given religion could also determine the pervasiveness and persistence of the theological discourse in that religion. Arguably, the Covenant and the various rites in Judaism draw a clear path towards God. Similarly, a person can become a member of the Muslim community by believing in certain declarations (Articles of Faith) and by undertaking certain rituals (Pillars of Islam). Faith for the Christian on the other hand, is primarily founded on the acceptance of “revealed” dogmas, chief amongst them, the dual nature of the deity as a God and Human. These different requirements necessarily tagged the theological discourse with varying degrees of relevance to the adherents to Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

One could conclude that if we were to exclude the theological themes that existed in Judaism, Christianity and Islam; theology as an accepted ecumenical discipline consisting of both the natural and revealed/inspired components remain a fundamental part of Christianity, rarely materialized in Judaism, but existed then collapsed in Islam to give way to jurisprudential and legalistic discourses. In other words, it is very unlikely for Christianity to exist

without the theological discourse; I am not sure that that is the case for Judaism and Islam. In the final analysis, it may not be the attitudes (anti-Semitism and racism) that may prevent some religious scholars from undertaking theological endeavors; rather, it is possibly the place of the discipline that determines one’s interest in it. For Christianity, in contrast to Judaism and Islam, reasoned and revealed theology has been and continues to be an existentialist matter; since to be Jewish is to be historically born so, to be Christian is ultimately to believe in the myth of the cross, and to be Muslim is to practically follow the path (*shariʿah*).

Endnotes:

¹ K. Kohler, *Jewish Theology* (New York, the Macmillan Company, 1918), 354-66.

² Jacob Neusner, *The Foundations of the Theology of Judaism* (London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1991), ix-x.

³ Louis Jacobs, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt* (London: The Littman Library of Jewish civilization, 1999), 18-30.

⁴ Interestingly enough, with the emerging of *usūl al-dīn*, Muslims also reduced the theological themes to God (*tawhid*), the *ummah*, and the Qurʾān.

⁵ Torah is no longer signifying just the written portion of the revelation; rather, the entire body of literature associated with it as suggested by Neusner: Judaism as we know it at the end of the late antiquity reached its now familiar definition when “the torah” lost its capital letter and definite article and ultimately became “to-rah.” See Jacob Neusner, *The Foundations of the Theology of Judaism: an Anthology* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 1.

⁶ Jacob Neusner, *The Foundations of the Theology of Judaism: an Anthology* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), ix-x.

⁷ On the role of Christian and Islamic thought in the rise of development of Jewish theologies, see K. Kohler, *Jewish Theology* (New York, the Macmillan Company, 1918), 2.

⁸ Werner E. Lemke, “Is Old Testament Theology an Essentially Christian Theological Discipline?,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* Vol. 11 (1989): 59-71.

⁹ Compared to Christianity where the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene or Constantinopolitan, and the Athanasian have established the universal dogma or the Islamic declaration of faith (*shahādah*) and the subsequent synthesis of the six Islamic articles of faith, all of which were established at a very early stage in the respective religions; Judaism did not produce a similar system until 12th century although it is the oldest of the three.

¹⁰ Werner E. Lemke, “Is Old Testament Theology an Essentially Christian Theological Discipline?,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* Vol. 11 (1989): 59-71.

¹¹ In order to have a better appreciation of this phenomenon, consider the special arrangements that must be under-taken to dispose of the pages or books containing verses of the Torah or the Qurʾān in both the Jewish and Islamic practices: while the former must be buried, the latter is burned.

¹² For the interplay between faith and theology as processes, see David Ray Griffin, “Process Theodicy, Christology, and the Imitatio Dei,” Sandra B. Lubarsky et al,

Jewish Theology and Process Thought (New York: SUNY Press, 1996), 95-125.

¹³ `Abd al-Rahmān Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 3:55-60.

¹⁴ A number of Jewish and Christian scholars have argued that the sentiment of anti-Semitism or anti-Judaism is direct reasons for the lack of interest in OT theology. For a sample of this reasoning, see Jon D. Levenson, “Why Jews are not interested in Biblical Theology,” Jacob Neusner et al, eds, *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* (1987): 281-307.

¹⁵ Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: William, B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 139-193.