

Islam and other Religions

Hossein Tofighi¹

Abstract

Any student of comparative religion will notice - and seek to identify as well - the points of similarity and difference between various religions. One might even claim that the discipline of "influence studies" has its roots in these discussions of comparison and contrast. However, these discussions persistently fail to address the nuances of particular faiths. Here, I intend to shed some light on the similarities and dissimilarities among religions. The point of departure and the framework for the study will be Islam, with a relatively strong focus on Judaism and Christianity.

Obviously, no study of this sort can be comprehensive enough since monotheists all over the world may perceive even a single shared concept (such as One God) differently. Moreover, the processes of translation and subsequent transformation of language affect the understanding of generations of believers, distancing them even from their religious predecessors. Thus, I hope to mention more practical issues, leaving a more detailed work to further specific research on the subject.

I also do not intend to examine the history of ideas, beliefs, or practices. Rather, my study will only concentrate on them as they are in their present form, without delving into occurrences of cultural exchange, interactions, and influences.

1. Assistant Professor, Imam Khomeini Educational and Research Institute, Iran (h_tofighi@hotmail.com)

This essay discusses the details of the belief in God and the prophets within a comparative perspective. In each part, theologically relevant issues will be examined as well. Now, let us have a look at the relation of these religions with each other.

Jewish and Christian Beliefs from a Qur'anic Point of View

To begin with, religions may be divided into two major groups: monotheistic and polytheistic. While the former religions emphasize God's unity, the latter do not deny the possibility of lordship in other material or non-material beings.

Within the monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam have similar belief systems. The many conflicts between Muslims and Jews since the time of the Prophet Muhammad (s) resulted mainly from a discord in their social interactions rather than their beliefs. Yet it should be remembered that the Qur'an calls the Jews the "first group to disbelieve" (*'awwal kāfir*) (Qur'an 2:41).²

Following this, Muslim exegetes of the Qur'an have interpreted the epithet "the condemned" (1:6) to refer to Jews and "those who have gone astray" (1:6) to signify Christians, although both attributes could equally have referred to any of the two groups. This distinction is because: (1) *surah* 1 is considered to be the *'Umm al-Kitāb* (lit., Mother of the Book), or a summary of the Holy Qur'an. (2) Upon examining many verses in the Qur'an, we realize that God has become furious with the Jews and has condemned them because of their evil deeds (Qur'an 2:61, 90; 3:112; 5:60; 7:152) and has counted the Christians as among those having gone astray because of their belief in the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus Christ (as) (Qur'an 4:171; 5:17, 72-73, 77, 116). Further, the Qur'an considers Jews and idol-worshippers to be the worst enemies of the Muslims, while it presents

2. The quotations from the Bible come from the New Revised Standard Version. The English versions of the other works (Qur'an, hadiths, etc.) are the translator's, unless otherwise stated.

the Christians as their best friends (Qur'an 5:82). The last verse of *surah* 1 has, then, been interpreted in this light.

The Holy Qur'an attributes a number of false beliefs to the Jews and reproaches them for those beliefs: (1) "Ezra ('Uzair) is the son of God" (Qur'an 9:13); (2) "God is poor and we are rich" (Qur'an 3:181); and (3) "God's hand is shackled" (Qur'an 5:64). All these beliefs - as well as the animosity to Gabriel which has implicitly been attributed to them (*ibid.*, 2:97) - are denied by the Jews. Therefore, exegetes of the Qur'an have argued that these beliefs must have been believed by certain Jews and that God has attributed them to all Jews because of their consent (Tabātabā'ī, *al-Mīzān*, 9:30).

On the other hand, the Holy Qur'an attributes certain false doctrines to the Christians as well, reproaching them for their beliefs: (1) "Christ is the Son of God" (Qur'an 9:30); (2) "God is the same as Christ, the son of Mary" (*ibid.*, 5:17, 72); (3) "God is one of three" (*ibid.*, 5:73). Christians accept all of these ideas, insisting upon their veracity, and only deny the attribution of divinity to Mary (*ibid.*, 5:16).

Besides sharing a similarity in the concepts of the unity of God, prophecy, and resurrection, Judaism shares a number of rules with Islam as well. Moreover, the Qur'an tells the idol-worshippers that the agreement between its content and the knowledge of the Jewish scholars attest to the truthfulness of the Qur'an (26:197). In addition, Muslims should be aware of Jewish tradition in order to be able to interpret some of the Qur'anic verses.

Eponymity Versus Arbitrary Designations

The ancient names of most nations, tribes, households, cities, and countries are designated naturally and over a period of time, without anyone intending to bestow their names upon them. This is the case for many religions: the name "Judaism" refers to the faith of the people whose progenitors were called Jews (*Yehudim*) because of dwelling in

the territory of Judah (*Yehuda*). Christianity refers to the convictions of the people who were called “Christians,” that is, the followers of Christ. The word “Christian” was first used after Easter (Acts 11:26), however, the early Christians called their faith “the way” (Acts 9:2; 22:4).

The words “Judaism” and “Christianity” do not occur in the Bible, while the word “Islam” and its derivations are repeatedly seen in its holy book, the Qur’an.³ Islam flourished at the time of the Prophet Muhammad (s) and has therefore been given an arbitrary name in order to be distinguished from other religions.

Unlike eponymous names, arbitrary names have a decisive meaning, such as the word “Islam” which means “submission.”

Finality or Prediction of a Subsequent Religion

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which are called Abrahamic or Revealed Religions, are interrelated in regards to their ancestry. All of these religions, initially attribute their own truth to that of the previous religion and seek the good tiding of their appearance in them and secondly, consider themselves to be the final revelation of God and reject the other faiths.

First, Judaism considers itself to be the fulfillment of God’s covenant to Abraham, whereas Christianity calls itself the heir to that covenant and seeks to find predictions about Jesus and God’s “new covenant” in the Hebrew Bible. Islam has also been attentive to the Israelite prophets and sacred texts, declaring that the predictions of the coming of the Prophet Muhammad (s) may be found in the Torah and the Evangel (Qur’an 7:157).

Furthermore, Judaism denies the possibility of its abrogation and Christianity does not expect any further covenants with God.⁴ Yet

3. Some Muslims claim that all monotheistic religions were called by the name “Islam” in the beginning, the names “Judaism” and “Christianity” being later inventions. This claim is not historically verifiable.

4. Christians deny the possibility of abrogation, saying that the Hebrew Bible has simply been a “preface” to the New Testament. Therefore, the annulment of the rules of the Torah is not called abrogation, but

both the Qur'an (33:40) and the hadiths attest to the finality of Islam and Muslims consider it to be an essential component of their doctrine.

Messianic beliefs do not contradict belief in finality because, according to believers, the promised one appears only to confirm the veracity of the religion and does not seek to establish a new faith.

Belief in finality blocks the way for new religions to arise. The latter, in turn, seek to find the predictions of their religion from their own particular interpretations of previous scriptures. Accordingly, Christians find the predictions of the coming of Jesus in their reading of the Hebrew Bible, which is of course not acceptable to Jews. Muslims, in turn, find the predictions of the coming of the Prophet Muhammad (s) in their interpretations of the Old and New Testaments, which the Jews and Christians obviously do not consider to be valid.

The discovery of the name and exact epithets of the coming savior and final prophet goes no further than fantasy; and these predictions are related to far-fetched names: Christians (cf. Matt 1:23) refer to the birth of Immanuel (Isaiah 14:7) and Muslims point to the coming of Shiloh in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 49:10) and the Paraclete in the New Testament (John 14:16, and others). Later religions demonstrate the same attitudes to the Bible and the Qur'an. Thus, the sacred scriptures are read and interpreted without recourse to the interpretation of their original followers.

In this manner, every religion claims that previous religions have been terminated (or abrogated) and that later religions are mere impostures. Thus, every nation only sanctions salvation for itself. This idea is closely connected with missiology. Judaism is an ethnic religion with no mission and most Jews call upon others to support

is instead considered a process which follows a special plan. As Paul says, "Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith" (Gal 3:24-26). Muslims argue that this is indeed nothing but abrogation.

Zionism. Christianity and Islam, on the other hand, do have missions. In Christianity, it is called evangelization (literally, “giving good tidings”), while in Islam it is called *da‘wah* (literally, “call”).

It should also be noted that the titles “prophet” and “apostle” (such as the Prophet Isaiah and the Apostle Paul) which were given to the ancient propagators of those religions do not signify the establishment of a new religion.

Theological Systems

In actual fact, interfaith dialogue and, more generally, any other kind of dialogue with polemical purposes, will not lead to any kind of remarkable results. In such polemical dialogues, both sides believe that they have found the ultimate truth and that the other party, intentionally or otherwise, refuses to understand. Since the human spirit becomes accustomed to familiar concepts and considers them to be universal, both sides of the polemical dialogue imagine that their only task is to match their own concepts with particular instances in another religion in order for their whole idea to be proved. It should be kept in mind, however, that religious concepts are not universal in any way; therefore, we cannot compare something from our religion with that of another in order to prove that our doctrine is correct.

If there is any necessity for polemics, we should know that even if our speech is the same as the prophets, it is doomed to failure in convincing the other side. For, if they are from the laity, they must refer to an expert in the case of failure; and if they are already well-informed, they remember more knowledgeable people who have taken the same path.

Evidently, every religion arranges its theological system in such a way as to prove both its own truth and the falsity of other religions. One such arrangement is the development of “banned discussions” so that problematic issues may not be scrutinized. For instance, the examination of the issue of the Trinity is banned in Christianity,

whereas criticism of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (s) may not be discussed in Sunni Islam.

The followers of every religion consider themselves “investigators” and call the followers of other religions “emulators,” justifying and rationalizing their own texts without giving the other party the smallest room for justification.

Usually, beliefs are not tested against the (textual) sources. Rather, people tend to believe in something because of their own feelings and emulations and then subsequently interpret and justify the texts based on those beliefs.

In every faith, foreign concepts are cast out as meaningless and false. For example, when a Roman Catholic says that she “consumes God” in her religious life, her statement sounds meaningless to a non-Christian. It does, however, have meaning for her because she believes (1) that the bread and wine of the communion are, in the proper sense of the word, the flesh and blood of Christ respectively and (2) that Christ is properly God. Therefore, the person who consumes the bread and wine of the communion does truly consume God. A Roman Catholic consumes God in order to unite with Him, however, this behavior seems to be mere superstition in the eyes of both Jews and Muslims alike. Shared concepts and stories are acceptable only to the extent that they are actually shared. For instance, Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe that humans can change God’s will by prayer. Another example may be found in Abraham’s “task” of killing his son. Theologians feel obliged to elucidate these propositions in such a way as to make them more acceptable.

The Fall of Man and the Doctrine of Salvation

Different religions have talked about the fall of man and his need for salvation. In the Qur’an (95:5) God clearly speaks of the fall of man and his transformation to “the lowest of the low.” With the emergence

of modern humanism, the fall of man lost its previous significance and religions focused on other aspects of human condition. Today, Jews and Christians emphasize that humans have been created “after the image of God” (Gen 1:27; 9:6), while Muslims highlight the role of human beings as God’s deputy – *khalifat Allah* – (Qur’an 2:30) and the importance of human dignity (Qur’an 17:70).⁵

Every religion sanctions salvation as only existing within itself, demonstrating this by appealing to both reason and canonized texts. (In times of necessity, nonetheless, these faiths distance themselves from their own exclusivism in order to satisfy and attract people.) Christians have long believed “there is no salvation outside the church.” Peter is quoted to have said about Jesus, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Muslims must also believe, based on Islamic teachings, that final salvation is guaranteed only for them: “And whosoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it is not accepted from him and he is among the losers on the Last Day” (3:105).

Spiritual Purification

All religions demand that their adherents live a righteous life and their ethical instructions are meant for the rectification of humankind. Thus, people acquire some sort of purification by following these instructions. It is true that humans have ascribed divinity to almost every animal that exists (from beetles to elephants) and have worshipped them as divine beings, but at the end of the day, religious life has benefitted from a certain type of morality, as it does today.

The confession of sins to a priest in Greek Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism is intended to reduce sin within society. Each and every

5. According to a Prophetic hadith, “God created Adam after his own image.” For commentaries on this hadith, cf. *Bihār al-Anwār*, vol.4, pp.11-14; Imam Khomeini, *Chihil Hadith (Forty Hadiths)*, Hadith 38.

one of these Christians, even the priests, bishops, and popes have performed the rite of confession many times. The confessing of sins to other human beings is not allowed in Judaism, Islam, and Protestantism. In these faiths, sins should be confessed to God alone and He should be asked directly for forgiveness.

Almost all religions have described this world as small and dark.⁶ Religions have invited people to some degree of seclusion from others, and thus the idea of monasticism has penetrated into all religions. Islam itself does not accept monasticism.⁷ Some Muslims, however, since the very early days of the religion, have inclined towards monasticism and have been reproached by religious leaders.⁸

It is said that Christianity does not have any formal law. Evidently, Christianity, as well as other faiths, do not allow moral sins like murder, theft, adultery, lying, gossip, false accusations, etc. Nevertheless, comprehensive legal systems, such as Jewish law, are not found in Christianity or various other religions.

Yet Christ's atonement for sins is also not a license for sinning, just as God's forgiveness and mercy or the intercession of religious leaders does not allow sinning either.

Abstinence from moral sins has purified some Christians in a surprising manner. In a speech delivered in his final days, and posthumously published in a book entitled *Haq va Bātil* (Truth and Falsity), Shahid Motahhari regards Christians and their clergy as pious and worthy of heaven:

If you look at this perverted Christianity and go to villages and cities, is any priest you see a decadent and corrupt person? By God, seventy-to-eighty percent of them are faithful, pious, and sincere people who have provided their community with justice,

6. Nonetheless, many religions have financial resources for different purposes. Quite remarkably, it seems that when people give money for the advancement of their religion, they are more attracted to their faith. Thus, apparently, the religions that receive money from people are more successful.

7. Prophet said, "The monasticism of my 'umma is jihad in the way of God" (*Bihār al-Anwār*, vol.8, p.170).

8. Cf. *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Khutbah 209.

piety, and purity in the name of Christ and Mary and they have no fault. They go to heaven and their priests go to heaven as well (*Majmu'e 'Āsār/Collected Works*, vol.3, p.439).

Conversion

A glance at the geographical distribution of religions shows that religion is attached to a person in a similar way to skin color. Thus, leaving a faith and converting to another one is both uneasy and rare.

Faiths are like oceans of believers, and have been established by social, political, military, and emotional events in history and geography. Converts may be compared to the drops of an ocean, which may sometimes penetrate another ocean. The receiving oceans consider these drops to be like pearls and are proud of their presence in the sea.

An examination of the background of converts reveals that most of them are from the laity with almost no qualification in the “native” and “target” religions – those which they have left and converted to, respectively. Therefore, the conversion of a religious scholar from his inherited religion to another faith occurs very rarely. The Jesuit priest Thomas Michel writes:

In fact, as it can be understood from history, the Christians and Muslims who have been devout in their religion and spirituality and have then converted to another faith are very few. It is true that in the past or present some people have converted for some reasons like marriage, job, cultural improvement, or social coercion, hardly can we find converts who have formerly been fully faithful and strict in their previous faith (*An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Rome, n.p., 1987, p.8).

Undoubtedly, such an interfaith explanation for leaving one faith and converting to another is totally unacceptable for theologians. The process of conversion is explained in every faith in such a way as to prove the truth of one’s own religion and the falsity of other religions.

Those who are attracted to a new faith cannot usually give a good reason for their conversion; the original followers of the faith want to know what has encouraged their conversion, while most converts cannot give an adequate response to this question because of their ignorance in both the “native” and “target” religions.

While most faiths accept converts, there are some exceptions, such as the Druze and the Mandaeans. These faiths contend that only those who are born into a believing family truly deserve the faith. Among the religions that accept converts, some have missionary activities and some do not. An example of the second category is Judaism.

Since its inception, Christianity has been a missionary faith; its missions have gone throughout the world and have had great success. Christian missionaries are very active in learning the languages of different nations, translating the Bible, and producing different missionary pamphlets. Colonial governments have usually supported these kinds of missionary activities.

Most Christian missionaries are Protestants. They invite people to their religion through establishing hospitals, teaching the illiterate how to read, and managing entertainment centers. Attractive media programs are also used for this purpose as well.

Conversion from Judaism is not possible because it is an ethnic faith and one cannot deny one’s own ethnicity. Thus, even if someone converts from Judaism to another faith, from the Jewish perspective, they continue to be Jewish, although they are accountable for this sin. It is possible to leave Christianity through will or coercion because it does not allow religious assimilation. Leaving Islam is possible only through will and, because of the rule of religious assimilation, it is not possible to leave it even under coercion. The Eastern religions permit their followers to embrace a variety of faiths, without leaving the original one.

God and His Name

In Muslim theology (*kalām*), the term “*tawhīd*” refers first to knowing God and second to monotheism.

Most religions (and perhaps all religions today) believe in the existence of God and most religions believing in God, call Him by certain names. Sometimes within a religion, or among its followers, God’s proper name is relegated to the background, and even forgotten. God’s proper name in Hinduism is Brahma, in Judaism YHWH (Jehovah), in Zoroastrianism Ahura Mazda and in Islam Allah. Christianity does not give a proper name to God; in the New Testament, the common name “God” (in Greek *ho theós*) is used to refer to Him.

When a people’s religious and native languages are not the same, it is possible for the native language to face such a problem. In Persian, the common name *khudā*, which is actually an equivalent of the Arabic common word *ilāh* (god), refers to Allah as well, seemingly because the first Persian-speaking Muslims did not want to use the proper name Ahura Mazda for Allah. Thus, translating the Arabic confession of faith, *lā ilāha illa-llāh* (There is no god but Allah), into Farsi is problematic. (In fact, it would be translated as “there is no *khudā* but *Khudā*,” the former *khudā* being common and the latter proper.) In Turkish, the word *tanrı* is used for *ilāh* and the word “Allah” refers to the proper name of God. Some other languages, such as those from Europe (and Christianity itself), do not have a proper name for God. For instance, the English word “god” is both a common and a proper name, with the difference that, in the latter usage, the first letter is capitalized. This strategy, however, does not always work because oral usage is more frequent.

Honouring the ineffable name of God has created some taboos. Based on the third commandment of the Decalogue (“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God”), the Jews forbid pronouncing the word YHWH even during recitation of the

Torah or the liturgy. On these occasions, the word *adonai*, meaning “my Lord,” is substituted, and on other occasions, the word *hashem* is used, which means “the name.” This taboo has extended to every name referring to God, even in other languages or scripts: some Jews write the Farsi word *Khudā* as *Hudā*, the Arabic *ilāh* as *i-lāh*, and God as G-d. Christians, as well as the followers of some other faiths, have had similar practices. The Oxford English Dictionary shows about 20 different variant spellings for the word “god,” which it attributes to such taboos.

God – One or Many?

People believe in god in two major ways: monotheism and polytheism. Of course, any of these two views can be put in such a manner so as to conform with the opposing view. On the one hand, in Christianity, the unity of God is associated with the Trinity. Christians attempt to organize their beliefs in such a way so as not to damage any of the Unitarian or Trinitarian aspects of their conception of God. Because this is not possible, they end up by saying that the Trinity is a mystery.

On the other hand, believers in multiple gods usually express the relation of these gods in a manner that one of those gods (for example, Allah for pre-Islamic Arabs) is so high that the other gods serve as the angels for his grace (also called henotheism). The belief that idols (unlike angels) cannot be the medium for the grace of God and an intercessor for humans is specific to Abrahamic religions. The Qur’an opposes this belief: “God has not sent down power through them [i.e., idols]” (Qur’an 12:40). Without reliance on revelation, humans cannot determine the borders between monotheism and polytheism: “Who can intercede before Him save with His permission?” (Qur’an 2:255).

The monotheists believe in a God who transcends human imagination. They believe that God’s knowledge and power are infinite and if they happen to find anything against this view in the religious texts, they reinterpret it.

Some polytheists say that God is so great, pure, and transcendent that He has no relation with this material world. So, according to this view, we should refer to his partners for our needs. These partners were considered to be the agents of the world orders and reference to them was deemed necessary. The monotheist prophets told people that these partners had not been appointed by God and were therefore without power and should not be worshipped or appealed to.

Anthropomorphism

None of the Abrahamic religions embraced philosophy in their earliest days. The writer of the Epistle to Colossians warns the Christians to “see to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ” (Col 2:8). One of the Church fathers, Tertullian, has said, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” (*Against the Heretics*, 7).

Before long, however, the followers of Abrahamic religions pursued philosophy and the discipline eventually attained harmony with their religions. Philosophy first led to the emergence of *kalām* and caused anxiety for the Muslims.⁹ Then philosophy came to the fore independently. With the emergence of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic philosophies, there was intellectual unrest. Subsequently, many of the followers of Abrahamic religions inclined towards philosophy in their discussions of God. Finally, philosophy gave way to mysticism.

One of the most important philosophical questions is regarding the materiality of existence. Human beings can only imagine matter and nature, and even if they believe in the non-material and supernatural world, it is only based on confirmation without imagination or, at most, they talk about that mysterious world with negative

9. Salafis continue to be annoyed by the emergence of *kalām*.

propositions. Wherefore, a discussion of God and spiritual or intellectual issues ends up with a shortage of words. In fact, we have to use the words of everyday human language, something which leads to other problems.

In fact, every thought about God (like imagining His existence), every behaviour in relation to Him (like worshipping Him), and every word (like the titles “lord and servant” and “father and son” for an explanation of His relation with humans) presuppose anthropomorphism. Thus, speaking about divine affairs is only possible through the language of worldly affairs.¹⁰

Thus, if the Hebrew Bible attributes wrestling to God, the Qur’an ascribes cunning, guile, deceit, and vengeance to Him (4:142; 3:54; 86:16; 3:4), saying that those who fight with Him (5:33) or offend Him (33:57) will be punished, that the believers should help Him (47:7), lend money to Him (64:17), and avoid disloyalty to Him (8:27). Other expressions, like God sitting on a throne, His presence in heaven, God’s arrival, viewing Him on the final day, and the attribution of hand, eye, face, and side have been deployed in anthropomorphist contexts. The Ahl al-Hadith have accepted the literal meaning of these Qur’anic expressions and have openly declared that whatever does not have a body, does not exist at all. Inspired by Imam Ali (as), the Shiites and Mu‘tazilites have rationalized such expressions and have found proper and rational meanings for them.¹¹ The Ash‘arites have, over time, distanced

10. Facing the natural phenomena of the world (like joy and sadness, happiness and misery, fame and notoriety, need and needlessness, health and illness, shortness and length of life, largeness and smallness of sustenance, flood, earthquake, famine, insecurity, etc.), the human mind cannot interpret them independently without recourse to God’s words in a manner in which God and human relations is entailed. The Bible and, even more forcefully, the Qur’an, emphasizes that these events are rewards, punishments, trials, *’imlā* and *’istidrāj*. Thus, these religions have used this interpretation of world events to improve morality and spirituality among people.

11. The opponents of Ahl al-Hadith have only denied materiality to God and accepted the materiality of other beings even the angels. The verses related to resurrection and afterlife also seem to require rationalization and *ta’wīl*. The majority of Muslims, however, have avoided *ta’wīl* in these contexts

themselves from the beliefs of Ahl al-Hadith and have, to some extent, become closer to the beliefs propounded by the Shiites and Mu‘tazilites. Of course, all of these beliefs can be seen in Islamic theology and scholarship today.¹²

Further, God is called “fire” in the Hebrew Bible (Deut 4:24), “spirit” in the New Testament (John 4:24), and “light” in the Qur’an (24:35). In order to remove these anthropomorphical ideas from their transcendent God, monotheist theologians have tried to interpret them in new ways by appealing to reason and other texts. Among textual evidences, the biblical expression “God is not man” (Num 23:19) has been used by the People of the Book, while the Qur’anic expression, “There is nothing like unto him” (42:11), has been cited by Muslim scholars.

The first century Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, interpreted the Hebrew Bible by recourse to allegorical interpretation. The scholarly heritage of Philo was passed on to Christianity by his fellow citizen, Clement of Alexandria (d. 215). Later, Origen (d. 254), another member of the School of Alexandria, organized it.

The issue of transcendence has such importance for theologians that they have claimed that, instead of “what God *is*,” we should talk about “what God *is not*.” This view has led to the emergence of Negative Theology in Judaism and Christianity. According to this theology, human attributes are not ascribed to God, so that even the words “existence” and “existent” cannot be used in relation to Him. On the other hand, because God has revealed Himself to humanity, negative theology does not result in agnosticism.

We can conclude from the above that one should not criticize the scriptures of other religions because of their linguistic limitations.

and have accepted bodily resurrection. Belief in the resurrection of the spirit has always been condemned in Islamic history.

12. For further information on Ahl al-Hadith, cf. Dimashqiyyah, Abd al-Raḥmān, *Mawsū‘ah Ahl al-Sunnah* (Riyadh: Dar al-Muslim, 1997). In this book the interpretation of the “hand of God” as “power of God” has been called false and heretical (vol.1, p.567).

Moreover, from an Islamic point of view, because they are composed by human beings, Muslims have no obligation to justify those passages. They should, nonetheless, be fair, especially since the Qur'an commands that in dialogue with the People of the Book the best kind of speech should be followed (Qur'an 29:46).

Mysticism and Sufism

As mentioned above, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam believe in the finality of their respective religions. It should be added that the finality of religion does not mean the end of divine grace and in each of these religions, there are grand spiritual figures who are supposed to continue to convey the grace of God to the world. These figures may be different from scholars, theologians, and interpreters because the latter group are simply specialists with learned knowledge, while the former are role models with intuitive knowledge. Even children and laypeople can reach these positions as we see such instances among the leaders of different faiths.¹³

In Islam, and especially in Shiism, various leaders, most notably the Imams, have imbued the suitable souls with spirituality and have continued in the way of the Prophet Muhammad (s), without having studied with anybody. The ninth, tenth, and twelfth Imams reached Imamate in their childhood, just as the Qur'an says that John (*Yahya*) attained prophethood in his childhood and Jesus declared his mission in the cradle (19:12, 30).

One strand of innate knowledge is mysticism, which is a reaction to jurisprudence and philosophical reasoning. Mysticism rises from aptitude, it is not subject to denial or approval, and has close ties with the arts. Mysticism is delicate like fire, consuming everything in its constant advance. The Indian and Far Eastern religions are altogether

13. The eighth Sikh guru attained this position at the age of five and died three years later. Aga Khan III (d. 1957) became an Isma'ili Imam at the age of eight and was in this position for about 70 years. A huge group of Sufi leaders were from the laity as well.

mystical, and in our age, with a little missionary activity, they have attracted many American and European converts.

Mysticism means a shift of attention from the exterior to the interior, from form to meaning, from letter to spirit, from the name to the named, from body to soul, from the beginnings to the end, from the law to the way, from presence to absence, from closeness to oneness, from reason to love, and so on.

All devout people accept this shift of attention and do not deny its necessity. However, there is disagreement on whether one should be concerned about both the exterior and the interior or if one should ignore and even oppose the exterior in order to be attentive solely to the interior.

All of us know that the greatest mystics, the Prophet Muhammad (s) and Imam Ali (as), observed the exterior of faith, even while they were more than mindful of the interior. Their speech conveyed their humility to God and was far from the utterance of lengthy and superfluous claims. Many mystics in the Muslim world have followed their model, choosing a sincere spiritual path. Allameh Tabātabā'ī writes:

The gnostic (*'ārif*) is the one who worships God through knowledge and because of love for Him, not in hope of reward or fear of punishment.

From this exposition it becomes clear that we must not consider gnosis as a religion among others, but as the heart of all religions. Gnosis is one of the paths of worship, a path based on knowledge combined with love, rather than fear. It is the path for realizing the external form and rational thought. Every revealed religion, and even those that appear in the form of idol-worship, have certain followers who march upon the path of gnosis. The polytheistic religions and Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Islam all have believers who are gnostics. (*Shiite Islam*, trans. S. H. Nasr, 112-113)

Every mystic conforms to the religion into which she/he is born. Andalusia belonged to the Islamic world for eight centuries, giving

rise to mystics like Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 638/1240). The whole land converted to Christianity in 1492, bringing forth mystics like Ignatius of Loyola (d. 1556), the founder of the Jesuit order. Apparently, if Spain turns to Hinduism one day, the land will give birth to idol-worshipping mystics.

Islamic mysticism is a heritage from Imam Ali (as) and all the Sufi orders trace themselves back to him.

The terms mysticism (*‘Irfān*) and Sufism are used synonymously in the major Islamic sources, as well as in the Muslim world. Thus, Ibn ‘Arabi, Rumi, and Imam Khomeini may be called both mystic (*‘Ārif*) and Sufi. In Iran, the word “Sufi” is used derogatorily for groups with a claim on mystical experiences, who wear moustaches and have cult-like organizations.

Jewish mysticism is called Kabbalah. Early Christianity resembled a sort of Jewish mysticism and the original Christians called it “the way” (Acts 9:2; 22:4) before it turned into an independent religion. But Christianity itself, which we can call a mystical order within Judaism, enjoys a rich mysticism with many great leaders. The Indian and Far Eastern religions, with their mystical character, have their own mysticism and mystics. Christian mysticism is associated with monasticism, while the mysticism in India and the Far East is replete with asceticism and contemplation. Some religions highlight theoretical mysticism, whereas others emphasize practical mysticism.

Revelation

Revelation, as the most manifest relation between God and humanity, is found in any religion that adheres to God.

The Islamic term *wahy* is to some extent different from its Christian counterpart “revelation.” *Wahy* (Arabic for “pointing”), in Islamic terminology, refers to divine direction. The Qur’an has used it on several occasions to signify innate direction, legal direction, and other divine directions. Examples of which are the bees (16:68), the

angels (8:12), the prophets (4:163), and Moses' mother regarding the protection of her child (28:7).

Revelation (from the Latin "revelare" meaning "to manifest" or "to unveil") signifies God's self-manifestation in His salvation plan. Besides the created world as a manifestation of God, the passage of the Israelites through the divided sea, their salvation, the laws of the Torah, and the life of Jesus can be called instances of Christian revelation.

The concept of revelation in Judaism is almost similar to Islam. According to Jewish belief, both revelation and prophecy ceased almost four centuries BCE.

Most religions contain some type of revelation and the question whether indigenous religions possess revelation depends upon our definition of the concept.

Scriptures

The material aspect of revelation, which has been preserved for later generations, is the written scriptures which contain divine revelations. These books, such as the Vedas, Tripitaka, Avesta, Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and the Qur'an are considered to be sacred by the followers of each respective religion. The style and language of these books vary and their sacredness depends on the understanding of the followers of each particular religion. Yet the sacred scripture of a religion can sometimes sound superstitious and ridiculous to others.

Some scriptures remained in oral form for centuries, being written down only after the passage of a long span of time. Other scriptures existed in the written format from the very beginning.

The Qur'an and the Bible

Many scriptures were first written down for purposes other than providing a scripture for the believers. Later, they were canonized as

sacred. The Qur'an, however, is, quite exceptionally, conscious of its own sacred and divine character and refers to it, time and time again.

A comparison between the Qur'an and other scriptures will reveal that the former contains more monotheistic and didactic messages. Such examples can be found in the Joseph narrative in the Qur'an (12) and Genesis (37-46), the stories of Abraham and Moses as narrated in both versions, let alone the outrageous story of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11).

Clearly, the followers of Judaism, Christianity, and other religions have received moral messages from their own sacred texts, just as Muslims have.

Furthermore, the Qur'an is the basis for Islam, while the Gospels and other books of the New Testament were composed several decades after the emergence of Christianity, and this religion existed without these books.

Pre-Existence of the Word

The pre-existence of the Word of God (Torah) in Judaism culminated in the belief in the pre-existence of Jesus in Christianity as stated in the Nicene Creed. Similarly, in Sunni Islam, the pre-existence of the Word (the Qur'an) prevailed.

The Jews believe that the Torah existed even before creation and was written with black fire upon white fire. Then, God dictated it and Moses wrote it down with his tears (Jerusalem Talmud, "Sheqalim" 6:1).

The Authorship of the Scriptures

The Old and New Testaments, as well as the Qur'an, are very different with respect to their genres. Moreover, none of these books contains a uniform genre. The Qur'an, which reached its final form in a shorter span of time, is divided into Meccan and Medinan sections which are different, not only with respect to their time of appearance, but also in

their content and style. The books of the New Testament were written by various authors over the span of a century (50 CE as a relative date for the composition of the First Epistle to Thessalonians until around 100 CE as a relative date for the Second Epistle of Peter). Yet, a collection of different genres – gospels, epistles, apocalyptic narrative, and the unique “historiography” of the Acts of the Apostles – are seen in the New Testament. In the Hebrew Bible, some ancient sections like The Song of Deborah (Judges 5:1-31) were presumably composed as early as the eighth century BCE. The composition of the different parts of the book continued until the mid-second century BCE (the Book of Daniel). Between these two dates, a collection of mainly historical writings found their way into the Jewish canon, which also contained moral and legal instructions, psalms, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, and other writings.

Nowhere in the Old and New Testaments do we encounter a consciousness in these books which is aware of its status as a sacred scripture. That is, the authors of these books do not seem to have imagined that their writings would become part of the sacred canon. The Qur’an, on the contrary, refers to itself as a scripture. It is, thus, replete with didacticism. Even when it comes to story-telling, the Qur’an follows each story with a moral message.

In regards to authorship, Jews, Christians, and Muslims have each had their own conception of the author of the scripture in such a way as to make it correspond to both their ideal view of an author and to the “historical” data of the tradition. According to Jewish orthodoxy, Moses is the author of the Torah. Christians attest to the authorship of the books of the New Testament by the early apostles of the Church, some of whom had not even met Jesus. This belief is not far from the Jewish view of their own scriptures if one sees it from another angle – Jesus is considered God and the relation of the apostles to Jesus resembles the relation between Moses and God. But the People of the Book do not consider their scriptures to be a divine dictation from the Lord, a view which is quite unlike the Muslim understanding of

scripture. The Islamic belief, hence, considers the Qur'an to be a divine inspiration of the word of God to the Prophet Muhammad (s), while the latter simply conveyed those words faithfully and accurately. Thus, in the process of inspiration, the message "Say: God is one" (Qur'an 112:1) has been preserved even with the word "say" without any alteration of the original during the transfer. Muslims continue to read the word "say" in their recitations of the Qur'an. For Muslims, the Qur'an, because of its messages and style, is a miracle of God, which, in keeping with its written nature and by the power of God, uniquely survives the ages.

Modern historical scholarship, which has achieved remarkable results in determining the dates of the compilation of different parts of the Bible, as well as the sources of the present final scripture, cannot verify its origin from the time of Moses or Jesus.

The Qur'an, however, has a clearer history. It took a relatively short time (22 years of the Prophet's mission) to emerge to its first audience; and shortly afterwards (in the first/seventh century) its different versions were unified and canonized. Quite exceptionally, some manuscripts of the Qur'an, from as early as the first/seventh century, are available to us. This is mainly because Islam flourished during the lifetime of the Prophet, thus beginning a world power based upon its sacred text. The history of Islamic civilization begins almost at the same time as the most important turning point in salvation history (compare this with the difference of time between the incarnation and the beginning of Christian empire).

Qur'an on the Bible

The Qur'an testifies to the truth of the Torah and Evangel, which have been sent down to Moses and Jesus (2:3-4 and others), while the People of the Book consider the Torah to be authored by Moses and the Gospels as simply a report of Jesus' life and ministry, not a collection of revelations which were received by him. This belief does

not harm the sacredness of the books for their addressees. The divergence mainly results from the fact that Jews, Christians, and Muslims do not have a single definition of what constitutes a sacred scripture.

In addition, the Qur'an says that the Prophet Muhammad (s) has been mentioned in the Torah and Evangel (6:157). The People of the Book, however, say that the manuscripts of the Bible originated in the pre-Islamic period in order to deny the claim of any reference to the Prophet (s). They do not accept the reinterpretations of Muslim scholars or Muslim converts. The most tentative theological explanation for the Qur'anic view of the *tawrāh* and *injīl* seems to be that they are unavailable to us, like the *ṣuḥuf* of Abraham (mentioned in the Qur'an 87: 18-19).

The most well-known Qur'anic view of the Bible is related to the question of *taḥrīf* – alteration. This means that, according to Islamic belief, the *tawrāh* and *injīl* which God revealed to Moses and Jesus have been altered, resulting in the omission of references to Prophet Muhammad (s) and the addition of anthropomorphic images. Muslims believe that the issue of alteration has already been mentioned in the Qur'an and hadiths.

It should be recalled here that alteration presupposes a change in a divinely inspired book, which cannot be the case in what is considered by the Jews and Christians to be a human composition. The issues of the absence of the coming promise of Islam, as well as the addition of anthropomorphism, have been discussed above. Now let us examine the Qur'anic verses which Muslims cite as proof of alteration.

1. “Do you expect that they believe you, while a group of them hear the word of God and then alter it after they have understood it and they know [what they were doing]?” (2:75)

2. “There is among them a group who twist their tongues as in reciting the book so that you may reckon it from the book while it is not from the book, and who say that it is from God while it is not from

God, and who say false things about God and they know [what they are doing]” (3:78).

3. “From among the Jews, there are who alter the words from their places and say, ‘We heard and we disobeyed’ and ‘Hear that thou may not hear [our response]’ and ‘*Rā’inā*’ that they may twist [the truth] with their tongues and mock the religion. And had they [instead] said, ‘We heard and we obeyed’ and ‘Hear’ and ‘*Unẓurnā,*’ it would have been better for them and stronger. But God has damned them because of their disbelief; so they do not believe but a few” (4:46).

4. “Because of their violation of their covenant, we have damned them and hardened their hearts. They alter the words from their places and they have forgotten some of the things which have been reminded to them and you continue to hear about a disloyalty from them, save for a few among them. So, forgive and pardon them. Surely God loves the good-doers” (5:13, cf. 5:41).

It can be seen here that in these verses alteration is attributed only to the Jews. Therefore, even if, as it is often assumed, these verses do indeed prove the alteration of scripture, it may only be with respect to the alteration of the Torah and not to the Evangel.

The Qur’an has said nothing about the alteration of the Torah or Evangel, as will be explained below.

a) In these verses, “alteration” is limited to a transformation of words which are spoken or heard, not written: “They hear the word of God, but alter it” (2:75), “They twist their tongues as in reciting the book” (3:78), “that they may twist [the truth] with their tongues” (4:46).

b) None of the verses talk about the alteration of the Torah and the Evangel. Only one of the instances cited above speaks about “the word of God” [*kalām Allah*] (2:75). All of the Muslim exegetes believe that this verse refers to the behavior of the contemporaries of Moses and is not concerned with the alteration of the Bible after the rise of Prophet Muhammad (s). It can also be assumed that the verse deals with the behavior of the Jews at the time of the emergence of

Islam. The word of God can thus mean the Qur'an, which the Jews heard but subsequently related to others in an altered way in order to reduce its validity. (This is similar to their conversion to Islam in the morning and their reconversion to Judaism in the evening in order to divert the Muslims, as related in the Qur'an - 3:72.)

Three other verses talk about the alteration of "words" [*kalim*]. Several of the altered words, together with their original forms, are mentioned in a passage (4:46): "*sami'nā wa 'ṣaynā*" (We heard and we disobeyed) instead of "*sami'nā wa 'ta'nā*" (We heard and we obeyed). Some Jews abused the Hebrew word "*seu*" (We did it) and transformed it to "*ṣaynā*" - "We disobeyed." They said "*'isma' ghayra musma'*" (Hear that thou may not hear (our response)," instead of "*'isma'*" (Hear). They pronounced the expression "*rā'inā*," instead of "*'nzurnā*" because in Hebrew "*rā'*" means "evil one" and "*rā'inā*" would mean "our evil one."

These kinds of wordplays and changes in meaning for certain purposes have been common among the Jews and examples may be found in the Talmud. Some biographies of the Prophet Muhammad (s) report that instead of saying, "*Assalam 'alayk*" (Peace be upon You), the Jews said "*Assam 'alayk*" (Death upon you), receiving the response "*'Alayk*" (Back to you).

Therefore, the Qur'an does not expressly talk about the alteration of the Torah and the Evangel. Rather, only the alteration of "words" (certain words in the daily language) is indicated in these passages. These kinds of alteration have not gone beyond the area of speaking and listening to the realm of written words. The question of alteration should, then, be discussed with the help of evidences other than the Qur'an.

Theologically, a Muslim cannot discuss alteration of the books which the People of the Book offer since their words have no theological value for Muslims. A Muslim can believe, just like the *ṣuḥuf* of Abraham (Qur'an 87: 18-19), the Torah and the Evangel have been lost and that the present Bible composed by humans has merely

replaced the original. The occurrence of some parts of the original Torah in the present Torah is not enough evidence since some Qur'anic verses are found in the biographies of the Prophet (s) as well.

The Qur'an says, "So, woe unto those who write the book with their own hands and then say that this is from God so that they may sell it with a low price! So, woe unto them for what their hands have written and woe unto them for what they gain!" (2:79). The Prophet Muhammad (s) says, "The Israelites wrote a book and followed it and put the Torah aside" (*Sunan al-Dārimi*, "al-Muqaddamah," hadith No.480).

Understanding the Sacred Scriptures

The study of the sacred texts can be undertaken in four different ways, which are here enumerated according to the rising degree of their complexity, objectivity, and popularity, as follows:

1. Translation - an attempt in transferring the content of the sacred text from the original literary language to another language.
2. Commentary - an explanation of the different aspects of a sacred text and removing ambiguities and paradoxes with the help of other parts in the same text and other intellectual, religious, and scholarly sources.
3. Allegorical interpretation - justifying, qualifying, deepening, and generalizing the sacred texts, regardless of their literal meaning, for the purpose of solving certain epistemological problems or gaining certain transcendent understandings. In allegorical interpretation, concrete everyday words are given abstract symbolic meanings.

It is not possible to draw a sharp distinction between these methods. For on the one hand, the simpler methods are not independent of the more complicated ones. For example, translation often requires commentary and occasionally allegory, while commentary may lead

to allegory. On the other hand, the more complex methods do not deny the simpler ones, although they claim to perfect and deepen them.

There was no such systematic method for studying the scriptures at the time of their emergence because they were completely within the understanding of their first addressees and therefore no one had any problem in understanding them (not even for something like the short letters in the beginning of some Qur'anic *surahs*). As it will be shown below, the problematic *mutashābih* (ambiguous) verses (mentioned in Qur'an 3:7) was the fulfillment of the promises given in the verses rather than their meaning. Only later generations from a different time and space (and who, consequently, had a different understanding) noticed the problems and clung to translation, commentary, and allegorical interpretation in solving their problems.

Upon examining the interpretations, it can be observed that commentary and allegorical interpretation overlap. Thus, based on one's presuppositions, one may derogatorily call certain outcomes of allegorical interpretation as commentary and amplify some allegorical interpretations to be mere commentaries of the message.

One can simply claim that the oaths at the beginning of the *surahs*, namely, "By the night" (92:1), "By the dawn" (89:1), "By the forenoon" (93:1),¹⁴ and "By the afternoon" (103:1), are references to various times of the day. According to some traditions, the order of the revelation of these *surahs* was identical to the emergence of different times of the day. From this point of view, "By the afternoon" (103:1) is only an oath by that time and other suggested meanings for the word '*asr*' (mostly meaning "afternoon," but other meanings like "time," "the time of the Prophet," "the time of the coming of the hidden Imam," "the afternoon prayer," "night and day," "pressure," "an extract of the created world," etc. have also been suggested) are mere allegorical interpretations, however beautiful they may seem.

14. Actually, *surah* 94 was revealed after 93 and before 103. But it is agreed that this *surah* is the sequel to *surah* 93.

On the other hand, commentaries are sometimes called allegorical interpretation. The many metaphors like light and darkness, life and death, wake and sleep, sobriety and drunkenness, vision and blindness, hearing and deafness, etc., are mentioned in the sacred texts for rhetorical purposes and understanding them is not difficult. In other words, no one becomes confused upon reading the verse which says, “Deaf, dumb, and blind. Then, they do not return” (Qur’an 2:18). Here the distinction between metaphorical language and allegorical interpretation becomes clear.

Allegorical interpretation and the Scriptures

In Islamic literature, *ta’wīl* stands for allegorical interpretation.¹⁵ Surprisingly enough, it is not used in the Qur’an in this sense. With 17 occurrences in the Qur’an, the word refers to the fulfillment of things which have been prepared beforehand, like the fulfillment of the promises regarding reward and punishment (3:7; 6:53; 10:39), the interpretation of dreams (12:6, 21, 36, 37, 44, 45, 100, 101), the outcome of al-Khidr’s deeds (18:78, 82),¹⁶ and the results of the deeds of this world in the other world (4:59; 17:35).

Although the term *ta’wīl* has come from verse 3:7, it is clear that the significance of the word, in this context, differs from what is seen in later Islamic tradition.

Allegorical interpretation is necessary because the language of religious texts belongs to the era of the simplicity of the religion. The factor of time – that is, the increase in human knowledge and experiences – as well as the factor of place – i.e., the expansion of a religion in different parts of the world – change the clear parts of a text into ambiguous expressions. Here the simplicity of a religion ends and certain deep and delicate concepts emerge which should, at any cost, be supported by the major text so that it may gain value and

15. In the first centuries of Islam, the word *ta’wīl* meant commentary.

16. Al-Khidr is commonly supposed to be the name of God’s “servant” in the Qur’an - 18:65.

validity in order that the contents of the sacred text may be harmonized with the mentality of later audiences.

The cultural heritages of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic societies clearly show that the elite of those societies observed that these texts, which are considered to be highly genuine and sacred for their followers, have occasionally spoken contrary to their expectations.

A number of those intellectuals turned away from the texts at the cost of public outrage. The behavior of these scholars finally cultivated hostility to philosophy among generations of Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

A majority of those scholars, nonetheless, patiently endeavored to raise the level of public mentality. They directed the attentions to the inside of the scriptures, and, with the help of allegorical interpretation, found proper answers to their questions. Finally, these scholars transformed philosophy into mysticism. By these endeavors, later generations of Abrahamic faiths were reconciled with philosophy.

Thus, it may be understood that because of the absence of support from the letter of the scripture, allegorical interpretation is highly subjective, whereas commentary, which may be supported by the letter of the text, is more objective.

Due to the absence of a literal support, the supporters of allegorical interpretation argue that the outcome of their activity is merely an addition to commentary. However, it can be seen that the majority of them were disappointed with exoteric interpretations and offered their allegorical interpretations with the hope that someday after the developments in public mentality it would be considered the correct and fixed interpretation.

In this manner, the public mentality gradually developed and found a greater capacity. The Jews and Muslims learnt that when interpreting the material images of God and angels and other concepts such as Judgment Day, Paradise, and Hell, some tinges of immateriality should be added through allegorical interpretation. The

belief in the immateriality of God was the first step in this path, although some scholars did not go further than this.¹⁷

A group of Muslims have rejected the idea of the immateriality of God and other beings. They are variously called *Ahl al-Hadīth*, *Mujassimah*, and *Mushabbihah*. Modern day *salafis* are the remnants of this group.

With the progress in the sciences, people had heightened expectations about discovering the mention of science within their sacred texts and many of them came to believe that different sciences like advanced modern mathematics, physics, and chemistry might be found in their holy books. New questions were posed and allegorical interpretation helped the religious elite find convincing answers to those questions.

The development of social ideas also provoked religious thinkers to harmonize their sacred texts with those ideas by interpreting them allegorically.

Opposition to Allegorical Interpretation

However useful, necessary, and popular allegorical interpretation may have been, it has been marginalized because of the lack of support from the letter of the text. The fear of illegitimate (and hence ungodly) interpretations or accusations of this sort never left these interpreters and, as a result, some of them gradually put this method aside. Some of them have also repudiated their own allegorical interpretations at the end of their lives and have occasionally, by this rejection, paid their debt to their sacred texts in their wills.

In fact, only in a few cases, a group could, like the Isma‘ili Shiites, bluntly defend allegorical interpretation and found their school upon such an understanding.

Allegorical interpretation has always had its own opponents. Regardless of the allegorical interpretations they themselves offered,

17. "From the hadiths, the existence of no immaterial being except God the Almighty is proved" (*Bihār al-Anwār*, vol.1, p.101).

these opponents considered allegorical interpretation to be an incorrect and immoral process whereby one places one's own words on the lips of someone who is more acceptable. The proponents of allegorical interpretation, in turn, answered that the immutability of religious texts implies that the concepts indicated in them will evolve together with the evolution of ideas, considering allegorical interpretation a by-product of this process of evolution.

The great Jewish philosopher and theologian Maimonides says:

Accordingly, with regard to the Midrashim, people are divided into two classes: a class that imagines that the Sages have said these things in order to explain the meaning of the text in question, and a class that holds the Midrashim in slight esteem and holds them up to ridicule, since it is clear and manifest that this is not the meaning of the (biblical) text in question.

The first class strives and fights with a view to proving, as they deem, the correctness of the Midrashim and to defending them, and they think that this is the true meaning of the biblical text and that the Midrashim have the same status as the traditional legal decisions. But neither of the two groups understands that the Midrashim have the character of the poetical conceits whose meaning is not obscure for someone endowed with understanding. At that time this method was generally known and used by everybody, just as the poets used poetical expressions (*Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines, Chicago University Press, 1963, 3.43).

When Maimonides used allegorical interpretation to interpret those verses of the Torah which he considered contrary to reason and thus created valuable and eternal works for the world of Jewish scholarship, a group of rabbis led by Judah b. al-Fakkhār (d. 1235) opposed his readings. This Andalusian rabbi, who led a hearty opposition against the allegorical interpretation school of Maimonides, argued that only those verses which openly contradict the Torah could undergo this process.

Although Christianity itself is rooted in *ta'wīl* (especially with the historical emphasis on allegory), some opposed “excess” in this regard. It is said that St. Jerome (d. 420) made the authoritative Latin translation of the Bible (known as the Vulgate) in order to oppose the “excessive” allegorical interpretations of his age. In the Middle Ages, some Christians opposed the allegorical interpretations of St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274).

In his last book, *Ijām al-'Awām 'an 'Ilm al-Kalām*, al-Ghazālī has warned against the risks of allegorical interpretation. Averroës, in turn, offered a detailed discussion in *Faṣl al-Maqāl* on whose allegorical interpretation in which matters of the Qur'an and traditions is incumbent and whose allegorical interpretation in which matters in the Qur'an and traditions is forbidden and also on the points where using or not using allegorical interpretation will lead to disbelief.

In the same vein, Rumi says:

Thou hast interpreted (and altered the meaning of) the virgin
(un-corrupted) Word: interpret (alter) thyself, not the (Divine)
Book.

Thou interpretest the Qur'ān according to thy desire: by thee the sublime meaning is degraded and perverted (*Mathnavi*, trans. R. Nicholson, 1.1080-1081).

Moreover, Mulla Sadrā, in his various works, attempted to interpret the ambiguous parts of the Qur'an by rejecting the allegorical interpretations of the Mu'tazilites as well as others. Nevertheless, he may have been far from reaching his goal of avoiding allegorical interpretation altogether. In approving of body resurrection, he criticized the allegorical interpretations of Avicenna in the latter's *Risālah Aḍḥawīyyah*, saying:

One of the Muslim philosophers has opened the way of allegorical interpretation to his heart and has done it by interpreting the clear verses on body resurrection. He has referred the corporeal things of the other world to the spiritual and has said that these words were addressed to the uncivilized

Arab and Hebrew public, who did not know anything of spirituality and that the Arabic language is full of metaphors and other rhetorical figures.... (*al-'Asfār al-'Araba'ah*, vol.9, pp.214-215).

The great seventeenth century Shiite scholar Allameh Majlisi quotes a Hindu in reproaching allegorical interpretation. The Hindu had said that allegorical interpretation is an altogether false approach because if the outcome of allegorical interpretation is not intended by the speaker, allegorical interpretation simply means falsely attributing something to him; if, on the other hand, the outcome is intended by the speaker, he may have had a goal in hiding it which will be negated in allegorical interpretation.

In the preface to *al-Mizān*, Allameh Tabātabā'ī also criticized allegorical interpretation, claiming that his exegetical method would leave no room for allegorical interpretation (*Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol.58, p.153).¹⁸

Imam Khomeini complained of a one-dimensional view of Islam and rendering the temporal verses as spiritual and vice versa:

For a long time we were entangled among mystics; Islam was entangled among mystics. They offered great services, but the entanglement was because they referred everything to the other [spiritual] world, everything and every verse which came into their hands.....Another time we were entangled among others who referred the spiritual to this [temporal] world and had nothing to do with the spiritual.... (*Sahifeye Noor*, vol.8, p.71; also cf. vol.1, pp.235-239).

Opposition to allegorical interpretation inspired society to fits of outrage against Maimonides (in Judaism), Aquinas (in Christianity)

18. The supporters of *ta'wīl*, however, claim that their activity does not contradict the intention of the speaker. From their point of view, since in the past the minds of people were not developed and audiences were unable to receive the subtle concepts in the message, the speaker hid the treasure of meaning under the plain words so that future audiences, with their developed minds, would understand it and so, finally, the speech would find its "real" audience.

and al-Ghazālī, Averroës, Ibn ‘Arabi, and Mulla Sadra (in Islam) and even excommunicate them.

On the other hand, these allegorical interpretations proved the vigorousness, timelessness, and richness of religions as well as their conformity to the needs of different times. In this manner, these scholars performed a great service to ethics, spirituality, thought, civilization, and culture. In all these religions, later generations, after knowing of these grand thoughts, valued those thinkers greatly and honoured them.

Conclusion

In the above discussion, we tried to demonstrate the points of similarity and dissimilarity among the three Abrahamic religions. The major issues which were explored related to two elements of theology – God and the prophets. We noticed that these faiths share many things with each other. Yet, it was also observable how, even within these points of similarity, the Abrahamic religions show signs of difference and sometimes one concept does not have the same meaning in each Abrahamic faith. A more detailed comparison may take any of the above points and illustrate the subtleties of any religion. This essay will be followed by another study on leadership, eschatology, and religious practice in different religions.