

# Jewish Muslim Dialogue, Globalization & the Judeo-Islamic Legacy

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## Abstract

Since World War II, Jewish-Muslim relations have almost entirely been mired in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. One of the results of this heavy politicization has been the curtailment of any serious or fruitful dialogue between the mainstream, established Jewish and Muslim communities of the West. The short article will bracket out the political issues which have been a cause of mutual distrust and consternation to explore the theological, juridical and mystical affinities between two strikingly similar traditions. It was these affinities which led to the creation, in the medieval past, of a Judeo-Islamic tradition – a tradition which in the words of one scholar was “parallel to and no less real – perhaps in fact even more real – than that of the Judeo-Christian tradition.” It will be shown that the Judeo-Islamic tradition offers some valuable resources for promoting not only dialogue but congenial relations between Jewish and Muslim communities. The paper ends with a brief overview of the shared (Jewish/Muslim) experience of otherness in the West by drawing on the insights of Edward Said to examine the views of Hegel, Ernest Renan and Abraham Kuenon. This shared experience offers yet another vantage point from which to approach Jewish-Muslim dialogue.

## Introduction

In a recent article entitled “Dialogue and Solidarity in a Time of Globalization” published in *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, James Fredericks has argued that interreligious dialogue should be promoted as a form of civic virtue in modern Western societies, part of the aims of which should be to contribute to ways in which religious communities may learn to live together more harmoniously. Dialogue, he contends, should seek to create and cultivate broader feelings of communal and social solidarity, the need for which is made all the more pressing because of a number of significant consequences of globalization. Among them he notes the large-scale relocation of religious communities, due in large part to mass immigration, mostly to Europe, North America and Australia. This wide scale “deterritorialization” has resulted in the creation of neighborhoods where religious communities now live together with each other in a manner which is historically unprecedented. Indeed, the observation of Diana Eck of the Harvard Pluralism Project, that America may be the most religiously diverse nation in the world (1-6) could perhaps also be made of other equally if not more diverse nations, such as Canada and Britain. Another significant consequence is the reemergence of traditional religious identities as new forms of social cohesion, partly as a reaction to the destabilizing effects of globalization.<sup>1</sup> Instead of dying out as some 19<sup>th</sup> European thinkers predicted, religion has not only survived the onslaught of modernity, but emerged as major player in identitarian politics. Religious dialogue

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<sup>1</sup> As an example in this trend, a recent Pew Poll found that in the US, 46% of American consider themselves Christian first, while an equal percentage consider themselves Americans first (Pew).

can, in light of these developments, serve not only to mitigate the potential growth of militant fanaticism, but also help forge broader inter-confessional communal relationships to offset the more inward turning, sometimes parochial tendencies of the major world religions whose adherents now work and live together – as neighbors, colleagues, teachers, students, and business partners – to a degree and scope that is without historical precedent.

There are few who would contest Fredericks's argument that interreligious dialogue has the potential to contribute to the stability and welfare of our rapidly expanding, increasingly heterogeneous, global village. The challenge, however, lies in bringing together people whose identities are closely bound to religiously charged conflicts. In the current dialogical landscape in North America, perhaps the most difficult obstacles on this front are faced by the Jewish and Muslim communities. While dialogues of the three Abrahamic faiths have been quite common over the last few decades, exclusively Jewish-Muslim dialogues have been rarer. It is as if adherents of these two faiths have often been unable to meet in interfaith venues without the buffering presence of Christians. The reasons are not hard to understand. The emotionally charged Palestinian-Israeli conflict has almost entirely laid siege to Jewish-Muslim relations since the Holocaust and subsequent creation of Israel with the unfortunate result that Jews and Muslims are often unable to meet for irenic inter-faith exchanges without either party demanding of the other some form of politically oriented disclaimer, dissociation, or apology. Indeed, if the extent of mutual distrust among Jews and Muslims living in the West<sup>2</sup> reflects, to any degree, the sentiments of Jews and Muslims in Israel and the Islamic World as gathered by a recently released study, then the reasons behind the impasse which Jewish-Muslim dialogue face are clear. The findings of a Pew Poll released just a few years ago found, on the basis of survey of six predominantly Muslim countries – Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia, Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan – that less than ten percent of its citizens felt favorably disposed towards Jews. A similar survey conducted in Israel found that these sentiments were echoed among Israeli Jews: less than ten percent of them were also amicably disposed towards Muslims. The Pew Poll also found similar results regarding how violent Jews and Muslims felt each other's religions were. According to the survey, all the citizens of the Arab and majority Muslim countries, who felt that some religions were more violent than others, believed Judaism to be the most violent, with Turkey a notable exception (for Turks it was Christianity). Similarly, among Israelis who felt that some religions were more violent than others, Islam topped the list, with 91 percent of Israelis expressing such a sentiment (Pew Research Centre). There is little doubt that these perceptions of how prone Judaism and Islam are to violence, among members of the opposite faith, cannot be separated from the ongoing conflict in the Middle-East.

And yet despite the findings of the Pew Poll, there seems to be a need, particularly among a small but growing segment of North American Jews and Muslims, especially among the younger generation, for constructive communal exchanges. Indeed, the recent creation of the *Centre for Muslim-Jewish Engagement*, a joint initiative of the Omar Ibn al-Khattab Foundation and Hebrew Union College, reflects these very feelings.<sup>3</sup> This sentiment was also expressed by Rabbi Marc Schneier of the *Foundation for Ethnic Understanding*, quoted in Israel's *Haaretz* newspaper as stating, "Now we must move beyond the myopic focus on Jewish-Christian

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this distrust, see Firestone's excellent treatment (235-236).

<sup>3</sup> A survey conducted by the Centre in 2009 found a noticeable increase of interest in Jewish-Muslim dialogue within both communities at the grass roots level, especially after 9/11 (Firestone: 232).

relations and face the real challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Jewish-Muslim Dialogue.” But he went on to acknowledge, as perhaps any realist would, that the “battle will be uphill, the struggle difficult, the discomfort inevitable” (March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2009).<sup>4</sup>

The inevitability of the discomfort he was referring to has much to do, no doubt, with the current political climate of the Middle-East, the stalemate, even deterioration, of Arab-Israeli relations. If, however, the political issues could to be bracketed out, at least for the purposes of dialogue, then Jews and Muslims might be able to pause and appreciate just how much they have in common. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that as far as beliefs and practices are concerned, Judaism and Islam are closer to each other than any other world religion. It was these very commonalities that allowed for a Judeo-Islamic tradition to develop in the pre-modern Islamic world which was, in the words of Norman Stillman, “parallel to and no less real – perhaps in fact even more real – than that of the Judeo-Christian tradition” (9-10). By the “Judeo-Islamic tradition” – which is not Stillman’s term – he was referring to that particular cultural and intellectual tradition of Islamicate civilization which comprised a “creative symbiosis” of ideas and even practices between Judaism and Islam, made possible, as noted, by the remarkable degree of religious similarities between the two religions in question.<sup>5</sup> This tradition was not a syncretic fusion of Islam and Judaism but a historical phenomenon of religious exchange which influenced the scholarly, devotional, and mystical trajectory of both religions and which spanned a period of more than a millennium. In our contemporary North American context, the Judeo-Islamic tradition may provide us with something of a precedent for interfaith relations, [and illustrate the potential for amicable exchanges between two communities which, in recent decades, have often been at loggerheads]. It is to these similarities and the manner in which they contributed to the medieval and late medieval symbiotic exchange between the two religions that I would like to devote much of the remainder of this paper. There are three major areas of structural overlap I will briefly analyze: (i) theological, (ii) legal, and (iii) mystical. I end by (iv) exploring the experience of “otherness” shared by both traditions in the West, drawing on some of the insights of Edward Said regarding historical European representations of the Semite, and with a special focus on the views of Hegel, Ernest Renan and Abraham Kuenon. The analysis below is by no means exhaustive; it is meant, instead, simply to shine a light on certain areas of convergence between two religions which are all too often overlooked or insufficiently acknowledged, even within segments of the scholarly community.

### **Theological Intersections**

By far the most significant religious intersection between Islam and Judaism, particularly post-biblical Judaism, is the virtually identical concept of God that lies at the heart of both faiths. It would be difficult to find theologians of any other religion who understand the nature of the divine in the same way that Jews and Muslims do. Christianity, which is also monotheistic, sets itself apart from the Abrahamic family of which it is a member by virtue of certain distinctive

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<sup>4</sup> Despite the Rabbi’s honorable intentions, he unfortunately concluded his statement rather unamicably, “Muslims leaders have the opportunity to echo the historic declaration of the Vatican’s *Nostra Aetate*,” thereby putting the onus for redeeming past wrongs almost solely on the Muslim side.

<sup>5</sup> The best general scholarly overview of this tradition, in the opinion of this author, is still to be found in Bernard Lewis’s *Jews of Islam*.

theological doctrines such as the incarnation<sup>6</sup> and the Trinity which are shared neither by Islam nor Judaism. It was these very doctrines that led many medieval Muslim and Jewish theologians to question Christianity's very status as a monotheistic faith. Maimonides (d. 1204), the medieval Jewish philosopher and rabbinic authority, did not shy away from accusing Christians of idolatry (Novak: 235). Of Muslims, however, he made no such claim. "These Muslims are not idolaters ('*ovdei 'avodah zarah*) at all," he wrote. "It has already been cut off from their mouth and mind. For they are totally and properly committed to the One God (*yihud ke-ra'uy*) without deceit (*dofi*)...[from] all of them, even children and women, idolatry is cut off from their mouths" ([*Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, no. 448, 2:726] Novak: 238; cf. van der Heide: 43). This is one of the reasons why Maimonides allowed Jews to participate in prayer with Muslims because, as he saw it, they worshipped the same God. He did not, however, extend the same privilege to Jews praying with Christians because of the divinity the latter attributed to Christ. It was also for this reason he claimed that a Jew forced to adopt Christianity must prefer martyrdom to conversion, whereas this was not necessarily the case with Islam. This was because, in his eyes, it was more abhorrent to accept the divinity and divine sonship of Christ than it was to accept the prophecy of Muhammad: the former compromised one's monotheism whereas the latter did not (Lewis: 84). This is not to say he was lukewarm regarding conversion to Islam. We know that he not only unambiguously prohibited such a change of faith, but also advocated, in the words of Novak, "rather harsh punishments for such deviants" (248). But on the issue of the Islamic understanding of God, he felt that Islamic doctrine was congruent with that of Judaism, and it was largely for this reason that he considered Islam distinctly superior to all other non-Jewish faiths (Novak: 243). The unique status of Islamic monotheism among world faiths was, for Maimonides, symbolized by the ritual of circumcision which Muslims alone shared with Jews. In the *Guide to the Perplexed*, he wrote:

According to me, circumcision has another very important meaning, namely, that all people professing this opinion – that is those who believe in the unity of God – should have a bodily sign uniting them, so that one who does not belong to them should not be able to claim that he was one of them, while being a stranger [...] circumcision is a covenant made by Abraham our father with a view to the belief in the unity of God (Kasher: 103 [Part III, ch. 49]).<sup>7</sup>

To the extent that classical Islamic and Judaic theology espoused almost identical notions of the divine, it was only natural that they would wrestle with the same logical dilemmas which such a theology presented. The central problem lay in reconciling the transcendence and immanence of God, both of which had their basis in Scripture. As far as transcendence is concerned, both Judaic and Islamic Scriptures postulate a radically unknowable, ineffable deity. In the book of Genesis, God says to Moses, "I am that I am" (26:3). And the Quran declares about God, "There is nothing like unto Him" (42:11). With respect to divine immanence, both Jewish and Islamic sacred texts are replete with seemingly anthropomorphic descriptions of the deity, either

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<sup>6</sup> See note 10.

<sup>7</sup> Novak notes that "the fact that this practice was based on Islamic monotheism seems to have enabled Maimonides to regard it as an acceptable practical application of the Islamic monotheism he so admired in theory," but this, it should be qualified, was because of the Judaic origins of all that he considered to be "truly valid in Islam" (242-243). Maimonides understanding of the Muslim practice of circumcision is a complicated one, regarding which the reader is directed to consult Hannah Kasher's excellent treatment (103-108); cf. Novak (240-246). The passage above may be compared with M. Friedlander's translation of the *Guide* (378).

wrestling with Jacob or resting on the Sabbath, in the case of Judaism, or descending into the lowest Heaven at the last third of the night, affectionately laughing at His servants, or sitting on the Throne, as in the case of Islam. These conflicting images created an uneasy dialectic within Judaic and Islamic theology of affirmation and negation, of simultaneously positing transcendence and immanence, dissimilarity and similarity. The theologians and philosophers tended to emphasize transcendence or otherness, minimizing or metaphorically interpreting away allusions to Divine similarity, without ever successfully denying it altogether. But the more poetic and mystically inclined thinkers did not shy away from the implications of an immanent deity and embraced the use of “cataphatic” language to describe God.<sup>8</sup> Although this tension between divine transcendence and immanence also appears in other monotheistic religions and philosophies, it became a particularly vexing problem in Judaism and Islam because of the sharp ontological distinction both traditions tended to draw between God and the created order, especially in their more Greek inspired philosophical and theological formulations.

Due to the structural similarities which lay at the heart of Jewish and Islamic notions of divinity, it is not surprising to find occasions in which thinkers within the Jewish and Muslim communities influenced each other in some remarkable ways in their attempts to systematically delineate the nature of God, [with Muslim influence, in this area at least, being greater.] We may consider, as but one example, the case of Saadiah Gaon (d. 942), the head of the rabbinic academy in Sura, near Baghdad, and founder of Jewish theology. He explained the divine nature using arguments that were almost identical to that of the Mutalizes, who formed the earliest school of Islamic theology or *kalam*, and advocated a belief in the power of rationality to interpret revelation. This he did in his *Book of Opinions and Beliefs* (*Kitab al-Amanat wa al-I'tiqadat*), the first work of systematic theology to appear in Jewish intellectual history, the format of which follows, particularly in its discussion of God, standard Mutazilite texts. Arthur Hyman did not shy away from describing Saadia as a “Jewish proponent of Mu‘tazilite *kalam* [theology]” (681; cf. *Sirat*: 22). In fact, there were quite a few Jewish Mutazilites in the medieval world, with their influence discernable in both Rabbanite and Karaite circles (Hyman: 681; Stroumsa: 86-87).

The relatively irenic theological exchanges should not lead us to presume that Jewish and Muslim thinkers recognized each other’s approaches to God as entirely equal, or on the same footing. Maimonides’ privileged Jewish over Islamic monotheism on the grounds that the former was original and the latter derivative and secondary, borrowed from Judaism. Likewise, a good number of medieval Muslim thinkers argued that Jewish notions of God had a tendency to tilt too strongly in the direction of anthropomorphism, likening God to creation (*tashbih*), even towards espousing divine corporeality (Shahrastani: 252 [section on Jewish beliefs]; cf. Wolfson: 563). The great Muslim theologian, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209), however, must have been too well-acquainted with Jewish writings to make such a claim. In his encyclopedic Qur’anic commentary, he stated that the Christians are in greater error than the Jews, as far as doctrines are concerned, because they are mistaken both in their views of God (*ilahiyat*) and prophecy (*nubuwwa*), whereas the Jews err only with respect to the latter (vol.12, p. 55).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> According to Novak, Maimonides considered anthropomorphism to be the “ideational corollary of polytheism,” very much in keeping with the Muslim philosophers and rationalist theologians.

<sup>9</sup> And yet the virtually identical nature of God within mainstream Jewish and Islamic theology is sometimes lost even to the most well-meaning of scholars. Consider the remark in an otherwise thoughtfully written introductory

## Legal Intersections

In the legal domain, Judaism and Islam also display a remarkable similarity. Both traditions are heavily orthopraxic, that is to say, concerned with rules which involve proper conduct. This is not to suggest that other religions lack a legal tenor, nevertheless, the extent to which Islamic and Jewish law permeate the life of the believer is not easily matched by other faiths and extends beyond simply the realm of ethical activity. In a work published not long ago, entitled *Judaism and Islam in Practice*, a comparative anthology of Jewish and Muslim legal writings, the editors fittingly described the two traditions in their preface as “monotheisms of law in the service of the All-Merciful” (Neusner et al.: vii). Indeed, jurisprudence consumed most of the intellectual energy of the classical thinkers of Judaism and Islam. Even today, to receive seminary training in more orthodox or conservatively aligned institutions is to receive an extensive education in jurisprudence.

As far as structural similarities go, both traditions possess a written and an oral law: a primal revelation believed to have been received from God by the central prophets of each tradition, embodied in the Torah and the Quran,<sup>10</sup> and an oral tradition that was also later written down and would have a secondary legal importance. Even the actual religious laws of the two faiths are extraordinarily similar, ranging from the rules of marriage and divorce to the dietary prohibitions and regulations taken to ensure animals are killed according to strict guidelines which both preserve the purity of the meat and minimize the suffering of the animal. It is true that the Qur’an states that the “the food of those who were given the book is lawful for you,” (5:5) implying that meat of Jews and Christians is equally lawful. But as Lewis notes, in practice this license was more often than not extended only to kosher meat, because of the lengths to which Jews went to ensure the purity of meat. In the Ottoman Empire it was common for Muslims to purchase meat from Jewish butchers (205). This same tendency is observable even in the modern West, where Muslims who adhere to stricter, more conservative rules regarding dietary regulations are more prone to consuming kosher meat in the absence of readily available meat slaughtered by fellow Muslims.

The legal vocabulary of both traditions is also strikingly similar. The Jewish *teshuvot*, a formal response to a legal inquiry by a juridical authority, for example, finds its parallel in the *fatwa*. The Arabic *shariah* and Hebrew *halakah*, both of which refer to similar domains have the same meaning, “path.” Bernard Lewis has observed that since the *halakah* originated some centuries before Islam, there would likely have been Jewish influences in the developments of Islamic law (80). But as Rosenthal notes, since Jewish law itself evolved in Muslim lands, the rich tradition of *fiqh* or Islamic jurisprudence exercised an impact on the development of the *halakah*, particularly from the 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Saadia Gaon’s many *teshuvot* and Maimonides’s

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work on Judaism, in which the author, in his attempt to note the various, competing ways in which God is conceptualized across the world’s religions, can only state that in “the Christian faith God is understood as the Father, in Judaism as Lord, in Islam as Allah” (Cohn-Sherbook: 31), failing to recognize the Allah is simply the Arabic word for God, and is used by both Arabic speaking Muslims and non-Muslims.

<sup>10</sup> Muslim and Jewish views of the Torah and the Quran have been described as doctrines of “inlibration,” of the divine word or logos becoming book (liber in Latin), as opposed to the incarnation of Christianity, of the logos becoming flesh (carne in Latin). See Wolfson (1976).

*Mishneh Torah*, for example, evince clear debts to the patterns of *fiqh* classification (62-63; cf. Lewis: 80).

Related to these legal intersections we may note the parallel status of the *'alim* and the rabbi. Neither of them is officially ordained through a church like institution nor does either hold a sacerdotal office. Both acquire their statuses through study and communal recognition. Their education is also certified through a very similar process, the acquisition of the *ijaza* in the case of the *'alim*, and the *semikha* in the case of the rabbi. And although they are both professional men of religion, neither of them are priests in any sense of the term. In the absence of altars and ordination, there is no function either one of them performs that a sane adult male from their respective communities cannot (Lewis: 79). In this light we can draw attention to a somewhat humorous story cited by Lewis regarding a spirited exchange which occurred between a reform and orthodox rabbi many years ago in the columns of a weekly Jewish newspaper. The orthodox rabbi accused reform rabbis of deviating from tradition by imitating Christians and transforming their roles into that of “Jewish clergymen.” The reform rabbi retorted that if this was indeed the case, then orthodox rabbis, being blindly faithful to tradition, were akin to “Jewish ulema,” recognizing the parallel roles of both religious authorities (79).

### **Mystical Intersections**

When we come to the rich and complex domain of mystical piety and thought, one might argue that affinities in this arena are discernable across the spectrum of world religions and not particularly unique to the Judeo-Islamic nexus. While one does not have to subscribe to the idea of a “perennial philosophy,” or what has been called the “transcendent unity of religions” (Schuon; cf. Nasr; Smith), to recognize that the great mystical theoreticians of the world, particularly the proponents of nonduality, have articulated strikingly similar views of ultimate reality, what is peculiarly distinctive about Jewish and Muslim mysticism is that the forms of devotional piety and practice which serve as the preliminary steps to deeper, more interiorized states of consciousness, are noticeably alike. In other words, the religiously specific “shells” of the mystics, in the case of Judaism and Islam, bear a closer resemblance to each other than other traditions. Paul Fenton has spoken of the “remarkable parallelism” that “exists between Islamic and Jewish mysticism” (2003: 201), while another scholar has argued that a “point-by-point comparison of Sufism and Jewish mysticism would uncover many similarities – structurally, conceptually and phenomenologically” (Kiener: 26).<sup>11</sup>

With respect to these intersections, one may note, as an example, the emphasis placed in both traditions on the role of law in the mystical life. Popular New Age expressions of Kabbalah and Sufism aside, Muslim and Jewish mystics of any historical repute were in agreement about the need to surrender oneself to the precepts of outward or “exoteric” religion in order to ascend into the divine presence, with the former serving as a gateway to the latter. As we might expect, some of the leading figures of both mystical traditions were also noted authorities of jurisprudence. The supposed tension between spirit and law, a recurring motif in Western writings on spirituality, was never as pronounced in Islam and Judaism, where the two aspects of the

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<sup>11</sup> Recently, Thomas Block has brought together the research of a wide range of scholars in the field of Jewish-Muslim mysticism in the medieval Islamic world in *Shalom/Salaam: A Story of a Mystical Fraternity* (2010), a thoughtful and well-written work intended for an educated lay audience.

religious life were symbiotically interwoven.<sup>12</sup> We may also consider the significance that both mysticisms attached to “letter symbolism,” whether it was due to the contributions of such luminaries as Sahl al-Tustari (d. 896) and Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240) in Islam, or Abraham Abulafia (= Abu al-‘Afiya, d. after 1291) in Judaism (Fenton, 2003: 202). The possibility of such a science was in many respects a natural outgrowth of traditions which viewed their central texts as direct, verbatim, word-for-word revelations which had their origin in an infallible divine author, infinite in wisdom and knowledge. No letter within such Scriptures, all the way down to its morphological structure and numerical value, could be without a cosmic significance. The iconography of the divine *logos* led to the creation of mystical practices which involved the prolonged, meditative contemplation of sacred names that were imagined and then visually “held” in the mind of the aspirant. That the communities even shared their knowledge with each other of such esoteric matters is attested to by fact that Ibn ‘Arabi recounts a conversation he had in medieval Spain with a rabbi on the symbolism of the letter *ba*.

The cross-pollination between the two traditions worked in both directions. With the spread of Islamic empire shortly after the death of the Prophet, Muslims found themselves ruling over an extremely diverse range of communities over a large expanse of the Near East, regions of which would have included the great Talmudic centers of Mesopotamia. It is difficult not to see how some of the Jewish modes of mystical piety, especially those of the *Hasidim* or charismatic holy men, could not have diffused into the fledging Muslim populations, either through conversions or close inter-religious contacts, especially among the more ascetically inclined members of the *ummah* (Goiten: 149-150; Fenton, 2003: 203). Aside from the Muslim integration of the tales and folklore of the Israelites, for which there is ample evidence, the exact scope and nature of this diffusion, however, remains confined to the realm of speculation. Less speculative, however, is the osmotic flow of Islamic patterns of thinking and practice into Jewish communities, for which there is a growing body of corroborating data. “Muslim culture,” observed Moshe Idel, “is the primary source of influence upon Jewish mysticism” (Anidjar, 1996: 97; cf. Kiener, 2011: 147; Goiten: 150-151).

A fitting illustration of this influence can be found in *Guidance to the Duties of the Heart (al-Hidaya ila Fara'id al-Qulub)*, one of the most widely read and circulated works of Jewish spirituality in the medieval world. Penned by the great 11<sup>th</sup> century rabbinic authority, Bahya ibn Paquda, the work was translated from Arabic into Hebrew and later into Jewish vernaculars, and remains, to this day, extraordinarily popular. The imprint of Islamic piety on the treatise is evident from its very title: the “duties of the heart” is a theme which Muhasibi (d. 857), the first major moral psychologist of Islam, addressed in his own many writings, usually contrasting them with the “duties of the limbs,” the *fara'id al-jawarih* (Lobel: 196). His intention in drawing attention to this distinction, like that of Bahya after him, was to foster an awareness in the spiritual aspirant of the need not only to remain faithful to the external obligations imposed on him by the revealed law, but also to recognize the value of the higher internal virtues of the heart. While Bahya’s text creatively weaves together strands of Mutazilite theology and Neoplatonic philosophy, the predominant element (besides the obvious Jewish one) is that of Islamic

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<sup>12</sup> The same Andalusian Ibn al-‘Arabi who famously declared, “My heart has become capable of all forms. It is a cloister for monks, a temple for idols, a tablet for the Torah, a Kaba for the pilgrim” (43), could also state, and with no less conviction (though in a much less frequently cited passage), “we have no way to God except through the Law, and whoever says otherwise has spoken falsehood.”



mysticism. The work reads very much like classical manuals of Sufi ethics, broaching such topics as trust in God (*tawakkul*), sincerity (*ikhlas*), detachment (*zuhd*), and repentance (*tawba*), with the subject matter of each chapter corresponding roughly to the itinerary of the soul's journey to God, beginning with an understanding of divine unity (*tawhid*) and culminating in a state of genuine love (*mahabba*). The full extent of Bahya's debt to Muslim sources, however, is only discernable when the *Fara'id* is closely read alongside Sufi manuals of a similar genre in Arabic.<sup>13</sup> I recall showing the work to a scholar of Islamic studies years ago who initially thought he had before him a medieval text of Islamic mysticism, until he noticed the Hebrew biblical passages which intersperse its Arabic pages in very much the same manner as the Quranic quotations that permeate Sufi literature. Indeed, it would not be an overstatement to suggest that were all the uniquely Islamic or Jewish Scriptural references removed from many of the medieval Jewish and Muslim mystical works written in Arabic, it would not be easy to determine the religious affiliations of the authors. And why is this so, if not because of the deep structural affinities between the two religions?

Perhaps the most curious feature of Bahya's work is that he does not shy away from quoting Muslim authorities (albeit anonymously) when he feels it is necessary to give persuasive, rhetorical force to his arguments. Judiciously, he preempts any criticism that might be leveled against him by co-religionists for his use of such sources by relating the Talmudic proverb, "Whoso pronounces a word of wisdom, even a gentile, is to be called a wise man." This allows him to go so far as citing, on more than one occasion, even the very prophet of Islam, as when he quotes the famous hadith, "we have returned from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad [the jihad against lower soul]," attributing it to the "sage" (Fenton, 2003: 205; cf. Lobel, ix).<sup>14</sup> Usually, however, his use of Muslim sayings is preceded simply by *qila*, "it has been said." Some later writers, however, were more transparent in their use of extra-Judaic Islamic material. Ibn 'Aqin (d. 1220) in his *Medicine of the Soul (Tibb al-Nufus)*, did not refrain from referring to well known masters such as Ibrahim b. Adham (d. 778-9) and Junayd (d. 910) by their Sufi epithets. We also know that 15<sup>th</sup> century Yemenite Jews freely quoted the poetry of the mystic-martyr Hallaj (d. 922) (Fenton, 2003: 205).

The theological reasoning behind the use of Jewish material by Muslims, and vice-versa, although slightly different in character, bore a curious resemblance. On the Muslim side, the justification for the extensive use and integration of the "tales of the Israelites," the famous *isra'iliyat*, into pietistic and mystical discourses relied (at least partially) on the hadith, "Relate (the tales) of the Children of Israel; there is no harm."<sup>15</sup> The tradition gave Muslims some degree of license to recount edifying stories circulating in the Near East, many of them likely of Talmudic origin, to encourage the faithful to piety, sincere devotion and the love of God. The underlying belief in the use of these narratives was that they had their origin in the lives of previous prophets, and were therefore, in this respect, relatively authentic residues of earlier revelations. So long as the tales did not conflict with theological doctrine, there remained no danger in retelling them, especially because of the inspiration the faithful could draw from them.

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<sup>13</sup> Lobel has done this admirably in her recent study, *A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue: Philosophy and Mysticism in Bahya Ibn Paquda's Duties of the Heart* (2007).

<sup>14</sup> And in Bahya's chapter on repentance, we find another prophetic tradition, "he who repents from sin is as if he had never sinned" (*al-ta'ib min al-dhanb ka man la dhanb lahu*) (296).

<sup>15</sup> *Haddithu 'an bani isra'il wa la haraj* (Abu Dawud [book 25, #3654]).

On the Jewish side, the reasoning was not all that different. The aspects of the Sufi tradition which were integrated into Jewish practice were, or so the argument sometimes went, not of Muslim but Jewish origin, and therefore part of a lost heritage that had appeared among the “Ishmaelites.” Abraham the son of Maimonides, the leader of Egyptian Jewry, and one of the most well-known advocates of a form of Jewish Sufism made this very claim when he wrote of the customs of the Muslim mystics, “Observe then these wondrous traditions and sigh with regret over how they have been transferred from us and appeared among a nation other than ours, whereas they have disappeared from our midst.” “My soul shall weep,” he adds, “because of the pride of Israel that was taken from them and bestowed upon the nations of the world.” He blamed the “iniquities of Israel” for the loss of this heritage (Fenton 1997: 89-91). What both Jews and Muslims had in common was a belief that they were not transferring foreign elements into their own respective faiths, but rather reintegrating what was truly their own to begin with. This argument of indigenous origins, needless to say, did not always convince their coreligionists.<sup>16</sup>

### Shared Otherness

The final intersection I will draw attention to has less to do with internal similarities and more to do with the unique relation of both faiths to the historical development of the so-called West. This unique relation situates both Islam and Judaism in parallel positions to Christian and much of post-Christian civilization. What I mean to say is that whereas Judaism has historically played the role of the West’s internal other, of a marginalized religious and cultural minority, Islam has been its external other ever since its emergence in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, a political and religious foe which stood immediately outside of its own geographic boundaries. In this sense Islam and Judaism have for much of their history shared an otherness in a society that both Jews along with diaspora and convert Muslims now call their own. This shared otherness was observed more than thirty-five years ago by Edward Said when he wrote in the introduction to *Orientalism*, “by an almost inescapable logic, I have found myself writing the history of a strange, secret sharer of Western anti-semitism” (27). But Said was not the first to make this observation. Norman Daniel in *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, published almost two decades before Said’s seminal study, also took note of some rather peculiar instances in medieval European history of the conflation of Islamic and Jewish otherness, as in the Middle Age rumor that Muslims worshipped in synagogues known as *mahomories*, that the Prophet of Islam was the son of a pagan father and Jewess, or that he was instructed by a Jewish astrologer and magician (102-108, 213-218; [add]). The theological reasons for the othering of these two faiths within a medieval European context were rather obvious: the Jews were guilty not only of rejecting the Messiah, but of the graver crime of deicide, while Muslims, along with denying the true nature and divinity Christ, adhered to a faith in which strands of Judaism, Christian heresy and paganism had been disingenuously strung together by a false prophet – a charlatan who, for the reformer

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<sup>16</sup> On the Muslim side, opponents of the use of *isra’iliyat* sometimes argued that the traditions which could be related were those confined to what the Prophet himself explicitly taught. On the Jewish side, the argument was that there was no way of determining whether Muslim practices which also formed part of Sufi customs were actually part of a lost Jewish heritage (Goiten: 182-184). This same argument was also made by Muslims who objected to the free use of *isra’iliyat*, and came to exert greater force in the later Islamic tradition. An example of this tendency today can be seen in an otherwise well-edited edition of Abu Talib al-Makki’s *Nourishment of Heart* authored in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The editor excised some of the *isra’iliyat* in the original text which he felt conflicted with the spirit of Islam (see bibliography).

Martin Luther, was “far too gross” even to be identified with the Antichrist (Levin: 107). And yet both monotheistic religions contained enough truth in them to pose a sufficient threat, at least to the weak minded, to warrant frequent censure and rebuke, unlike the indigenous “pagan” religions of Europe, which had been wiped out, or the Far-Eastern religions which were too remote, obscure or unknown to present a real, concrete danger.<sup>17</sup>

As Ivan Kalmar has recently shown, developing Said’s initial insights, the cultural and intellectual tendency to conflate Jewish and Muslim otherness was transmitted into modern European thought, but in a manner which was gradually altered to suit the shifting philosophical and theoretical currents of the day (135-136). The underlying prejudices, however, remained. As an example, one may consider Hegel’s (d. 1831) classification of the world’s religions in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, and other works, in which Judaism and Islam are included in the same category as instantiations of the “religion of the sublimity.” While Hegel’s assessment was not entirely negative, the underlying characteristic of these religions, in his eyes, was that they were marked by belief in a wholly transcendent deity whose supreme power, judgment, and wrath evoked feelings of awe, servitude, abasement, and consternation. Of the Jews he wrote, “[t]he people of God is accordingly adopted by covenant and contract on the conditions of fear and service.” Islam for him was simply a Judaism “purified from the idea of nationality” (2:211-212). Both of these religions could not match the ancient Greek “religion of beauty,” much less the “consummate” or “absolute religion” of Christianity. Additionally, since Jewish and Muslim piety was, for the German philosopher, marked by a blind adherence to divine commandments, the two religions were unable to offer their adherents, shackled as they were by a stifling nomocentrism, freedom in the true sense of the term. In Christianity, on the other hand, such freedom stood as the cornerstone of one’s relationship with God. While Hegel’s understanding of the place of the faith of Europe among world religions was more ecumenical in spirit than his medieval predecessors, the similarities that he felt characterized Judaism and Islam were used, in the final analysis, to buttress his arguments for the intrinsic superiority of his unique (and for some, heretical) interpretation of Christianity. The highly sophisticated caricature of the Judeo-Islamic religion of sublimity functioned as a straw man of sorts in the overall scheme of the hierarchy of religions proposed in his philosophical-theological system.

As racial anthropology emerged to play a prominent role in the intellectual conversations of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, largely due to developments in philology and the study of languages, Judaism and Islam soon came to be perceived as emblematic examples of the religion of the “Semite” – a category that was initially introduced in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century by German scholars to classify a biblical language group (primarily Hebrews but also Arabs), and which was later used to designate a more distinctly ethno-racial community (Kalmar: 186). Two of the most prominent thinkers of the time to explore this issue in detail were Joseph-Arthur Comte de Gobineau (d. 1883) and the well-known Hebraist, Arabist, and historian of religion, Ernest Renan (d. 1892), in both of whose writings we find more secularized strains of earlier medieval thinking. To the latter Said devoted considerable attention in his critique of Orientalism (123-148).

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<sup>17</sup> To be fair, the tendency towards polemical criticism of the other monotheistic faiths can be found in each of the three Abrahamic traditions. The strategy is usually a necessary one in light of a religious tradition’s desire to justify the uniqueness of its own existence in the face of competing alternatives.

Renan, more important for our present purposes because of his respected academic status and far-reaching scholarly influence, believed that the well-spring of human civilization originated from two sources, the Semitic and Aryan races. In comparison to each other, however, the latter far surpassed the former, intellectually, artistically and culturally. Like many other intellectuals of his day, Renan argued that while the Semites had made important contributions to the development of religious and moral thought, they were incapable of growth, evolution and maturation. Entirely lacking in creativity, and marked by a fixed and sterile mentality, they could not develop philosophy, art, and science. On the other hand, the Aryans, rich in imaginative power, had an ability to change, grow, and mutate; they possessed “freedom of thought” and “a probing mind,” both of which were necessary for advancements in science, philosophy, and art (Olender: 57-68; cf. Arvidsson: 338). “One sees that in all things the Semitic race appears to us to be an incomplete race, by virtue of its simplicity,” he observed. “This race – if I dare use the analogy – is to the Indo-European family what a pencil sketch is to painting; it lacks that variety, that amplitude, that abundance of life which is the condition of perfectibility.” “Perfectibility” of course being reserved not just for Indo-Europeans, but the peculiar European branch of the Aryan family – “a race of masters” fit to set the course of future human history (Said: 149; Olender: 63).

Perhaps the most intriguing feature of Renan’s thought was the manner in which he sought to strip Christianity almost entirely of its Judaic spirit. This was the only way he could account for its success and superiority within the broader framework of his theories of race, human history, and modernity. “The victory of Christianity,” he observed, “was not secure until it completely broke out of its Jewish shell and again became what it has been in the exalted consciousness of its founder, a creation free from the narrow bonds of the Semitic spirit.” This is why “those who consider Christianity to be an Aryan religion par excellence are in many respects correct.” Jesus, its founder, was only a Jew in form; in spirit he was Aryan. And like Hegel before him, Renan too argued that the “continuation of Judaism was not in Christianity but in Islam” (Olender: 69-70). Judaism and Islam were kindred spirits, Semitic sisters which could not match the richness and superiority of the fundamentally distinct Aryan religion of Christianity, grown on the fertile soil of Europe and the ancient Hellenized world.

A similar though less extreme line of argumentation was found in the writings of the well-known Dutch Arabist and biblical scholar, Abraham Kuenon (d. 1891). In his *National Religions and Universal Religions*, published almost a decade before his death, he sought to explain the difference between truly global, world religions, capable of harmoniously unifying diverse racial, ethnic and cultural stands of the human population into a single faith, and those which were ethnically and nationally bound, unable, owing to a more primitive, parochial mindset, of accomplishing such a task. Christianity and Buddhism, two Aryan religions, were for him examples of the former; Judaism and Islam, two Semitic religions, were examples of the latter.<sup>18</sup> Naturally, there were some obvious problems he had to resolve in order to defend his peculiar taxonomy of world religions. The first was that he had to explain how an ethnic, nationally straight-jacketed faith such as Judaism could have given rise to a religion of such global proportions as Christianity. And second, he had to account for Islam’s spread across nations as diverse as that of “Semites, Aryans, Tartars, Malays and Negroes” (6). As we would expect, his

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<sup>18</sup> However, as Masuzawa explains, when Buddhism was adopted by non-Aryans, it lost, for Kuenon, its universal quality (194)

explanations reflected not only some of the prevailing views of race in Europe, but also the tendency, going back centuries, to merge Judaism and Islam into a single category which stood outside of European selfhood, and press those differences which allowed one to highlight the superiority of the dominant faith of the continent.

In response to the first problem, Kuenon argued that Judaism contained within itself, in its deepest recesses, what he described as an “internal leaven of universalism.” But this universal element, one which betrayed the very Semitic spirit of the people who carried it, could only be realized once it was carried over into Christianity. In other words, there was an aspect of the Jewish faith which transcended the stifling Semitic, Judaic mentality of which it was a part, and which, as long as was confined to the Jewish people, remained in a state of dormancy. Only when it was transferred to those who were not ethnically Jewish themselves, could this element manifest itself, in all its social, cultural and theological ramifications, and this it did through Christianity. Expressed differently, there was, for Kuenon, at the heart of Judaism a contradiction between its universalism and Semitic ethnocentrism, a tension which was resolved by a transfer of this universal essence outside the boundaries of Israelite religion. In the words of Masuzawa, the idea, “as bold as it was astonishing,” was “that there was at the very core of Judaism something not really Jewish” (192-194). As for Islam’s apparent universalism, this was explained by Kuenon through a distinction he drew between religions which were universal in *fact* and those which were so in *quality* (6). Christianity belonged to the latter, whereas Islam – a “kernel of Judaism transplanted to Arabic soil” (28) – belonged to the former, having only the appearance of a universalism. Even though the religion of the Arabian Prophet had managed to spread to a diverse array of cultures, “it by no means follows,” he wrote, that this had anything to do with “Islam itself and its natural fitness for peoples and tribes that differ widely from each other – in a word, in its universal nature” (6-7; cf. Masuzawa: 192-197). A religion as particularly Semitic and belligerent as Islam could not contain within itself, or so his argument implied, the resources or the capacity for a genuine universalism.<sup>19</sup> The religion’s spread was therefore accounted for by an appeal to the common European trope of Islamic violence, thereby confusing the political spread of Islamicate civilization with religious conversion, and ignoring the large number of populations who gradually adopted the faith through trade and other such non-political relations.

The examples of Kuenon, Renan and Hegel offer no more than a glimpse, a small window, into a long and complex history, stretching back more than a millennium, of how the Judeo-Islamic siblings have appeared as cultural, racial and religious others in Western imagination. There is, it must be admitted, some risk of simplification in this characterization, since the otherness was not always shared,<sup>20</sup> nor was it always necessarily negative<sup>21</sup> (even though this was the predominant

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<sup>19</sup> The same argument would be made by the Dutch theologian Otto Pfleiderer (d. 1908) in his *Religion and Historic Faiths*: “Islamism shares the monotheistic rigidly theocratic legal character of Judaism, without its national limitation; with Christianity, it shares the claim and propagating impulse of world-religion, but without the wealth of religious thought and motives and without the mobility and the capacity for development which belongs to world religions. It might be maintained, probably, that Islamism is the Jewish idea of a theocracy carried out on a larger scale...” (274-275).

<sup>20</sup> This would include those rare cases where Jewish and Christian similarities were contrasted with Islam.

<sup>21</sup> As when, for example, what Kalmar calls the “prophetic” element of Judaism was highlighted (as opposed to its “demonic” element [Kalmar: 13]), or the Islamic “Golden Age” contrasted with the material stagnation of Europe in the Middle Ages.

trend). Nietzsche's contrasting views of Islam and Judaism which formed part of his larger critique of modern Europe serves as a case in point. One must also take into consideration the fact that in the post-Holocaust climate of the modern West, particularly the United States – a country whose civic religion is defined as “Judeo-Christian” – the shared otherness is no longer as real as it was in the historical past. Anti-Semitism is now unacceptable, at least within mainstream intellectual and cultural circles. Islamophobia, or what we might call “anti-Islamic-Semitism,” however, particularly in light of the ongoing conflicts in the Middle-East, the unique configuration of global political alliances, 9/11, and the subsequent “war on terror,” is *less* unacceptable<sup>22</sup> (if not, in certain cases, tolerated outright<sup>23</sup>). Moreover, as Kalmar has argued, the anti-Semitic strains of the past which were directed towards both Jews and Muslims have now been rechanneled primarily towards the latter (137). This applies even with respect to stereotypes reserved uniquely for Jews. In this light one can understand how modern anti-Islamic-Semitism “betrays a clear debt to traditional western anti-Semitic stereotypes and hate literature” (Kalmar: 138). Said saw this as far back as the 70s, when in response to the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and oil crisis, he poignantly made the following observation:

Cartoons depicting an Arab sheik standing behind a gasoline pump turned up consistently. These Arabs, however, were clear ‘Semitic’: their sharply hooked noses, the evil mustachioed leer on their faces, were obvious reminders (to a largely non-Semitic population) that ‘Semites’ were at the bottom of all ‘our’ troubles ... The transference of a popular anti-Semitic animus from a Jewish to an Arab target was made smoothly, *since the figure was essentially the same* (italics mine, 285-286).

More recent developments in our contrasting perceptions of Jews and Muslims should not, however, prevent us from recognizing that for more than a millennium the two identities were largely intertwined.<sup>24</sup> To fail to acknowledge this is to belie the facts of history.

## Conclusion

As two remarkably similar religions which have together stood “on the edge” of the West for a greater part of Euro-Christian history, Jews and Muslims have much more in common than they may be aware of, let alone acknowledge, at least within the boundaries of their own confessional settings. One of the ironies of this is that the apprehensiveness felt towards the other in each of the religious communities (recall the Pew study) is in the end directed to a faith tradition strikingly similar to one's own. It is as if the interlocutors, without recognizing it, are gazing at mirror images of themselves. One of the arguments of this paper is that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which seems to have no immediate resolution in sight, and which has now dragged on for well over half-a-century, need not entirely arrest the advancement of Jewish-Muslim relation,

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<sup>22</sup> To quote Firestone, “[w]hile Jews have experienced significant discrimination in America, since the Second World War they have become integrated into virtually all levels and areas of society and culture and project a sense of cultural confidence. Muslims, on the other hand, remain victims of very considerable prejudice in American society and culture, and have not yet achieved the kind of social and political success that Jews enjoy” (235)

<sup>23</sup> The issue of Obama's supposed Muslim faith being a case a point – a recurring theme for a good part of the earlier period of his presidency.

<sup>24</sup> For more on this theme, see Kalmar's recent scholarship, as well as the work as Anidjar (2003); cf. Allan and Helen Cutler (1986).

nor prevent the creation of amicable bonds between communities with deeply contrasting political loyalties abroad. By learning to bracket-out the conflict, and by drawing on the memory of the Judeo-Islamic legacy, those on opposite ends of the political spectrum, especially who cherish their own religious traditions, may be capable of realizing not only the extent of their theological, legal and mystical affinities, but also the common challenges they face as kindred faiths in a steadily changing world. This awareness can then become the basis for the establishment of broader communal ties of fellowship and solidarity.

With the rapid spread of globalization, and the increasing heterogeneity of our societies, inter-religious dialogue should indeed, as Fredericks has argued, be encouraged as a civic virtue. It would be a mistake to imagine that such dialogue should have as its end so ambitious a goal as the “mutual acceptance of the legitimacy and authenticity of the religion of the other as a divinely inspired faith” (Ayoub: 315). To do so would carry the risk of betraying the very integrity and distinctiveness of one’s own religion, even its own *raison d’être*. Moreover, such a goal would likely be incapable of eliciting much support from the mainstream Jewish and Muslim communities to begin with. A more modest and realistic end might be to simply foster a greater awareness of shared values and beliefs, along with mutual respect, ties of friendship and solidarity. This solidarity might even translate into “bilateral dialogue” for the obtainment of common goals and ends (as in the recent debate around the charter in Quebec to ban religious apparel, which brought Muslims and Jews on the same platform). The themes addressed in this paper can offer both Jews and Muslims a variety of avenues through which they may approach such engagements. It remains up to the religious and communal leaders and thinkers of both faiths in the West to harness their own theological and scriptural resources, of which each tradition has vast reservoirs, for such an ecumenical enterprise.

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