

# **POINTS OF CONVERGENCE BETWEEN JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM IN THE QUEST FOR METAPHILOSOPHY OF UNIVERSALISM**

by  
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## **Introduction**

The theme of the relations between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is very topical at this point in time when there are religious absolutism and bickerings in many parts of the world. In Nigeria, for instance, there is a surfeit of religious riots: Muslims versus "infidels" i.e., non-Muslims especially Christians; in Bombay, a price has been put on Rushdie's head, the idea of religious-inspired killings has once more become very fashionable. In Rome, on the contrary, Pp. John Paul II has set up a secretariat for non-Christians whose objective is to promote good relations between Christians and peoples of other religious inclinations especially, Muslims. Christianity and Islam are not only world religions but they are the two largest religious families in the world, their followers are in all the continents; and together they make up fifty per cent of the world population.

It matters very much to the world how half of humanity behave towards each other. When we consider that Christians and Muslims live together not only in Lebanon and in Sudan, not only in India and Indonesia, but also in France and in the U.S.A., in the Soviet Union and in China, in Australia and in the Philippines, in Senegal and in Nigeria, in Tanzania and in the Republic of South Africa, then we begin to appreciate better the worldwide dimension of the spread of both religions, and how important it is that their followers should not ignore one another or live in mutual hostility (Arinze F., 1988, p.6).

Each of these religions claims universality and finality yet there is only one divine plan for every human being. Human persons have one origin and one end. Differences arising from religious, cultural or political affiliations are less important in comparison to the unity which is radical, fundamental and decisive (Pp. John Paul, 1987,

p.6). A recognition of this fundamental unity of all human beings in God's plan of creation and redemption argues in favour of inter-religious dialogue. A genuine and sincere inter-religious dialogue is a quest for truth and it is bound to lead to the discovery of common religious tenets, aspirations and ideals as well as rational and theological grounds for **esprit de corps**, peaceful coexistence, and brotherhood of humankind. A heuristic search for truth will highlight the metaphilosophical reason why a person ought to love a fellow human being across a religious frontier. That is, being is one and we are all beings by participation; we all are parts of a metaphysical whole. God is the fullness of existence. Of his fullness, we have all received. As Paul put it, 'it is in him we live and move and have our being'.

### **The Monotheistic Concept of God**

"Is God the God of Jews alone and not of the pagans too? Of the pagans too, most certainly, since there is only one God" (Rom 3:28-30). This is a New Testament or Christian confirmation of the doctrine of monotheism taught by Judaism. Judaism was the first to teach monotheism. As a matter of fact, it is believed that the Jews gave the world the idea of one God. This idea is very central in Christianity and Islam. It was the zeal to propagate monotheism in the Arab nation that prompted Mohammed to found Islam. He believed that he had been sent to destroy the idols of the heathen Arabs and to teach them to worship God. Islam insists on an uncompromising monotheism. Allah is one (Sura CX II:1). It also acknowledges the absolute sovereignty of God. The creed of Islam is expressed in the declaration "There is no god but God (sura XL VII:19) and Mohammed is the messenger of God" (sura XL VIII:29). This statement, composed of two quotations from the Koran, is the most important declaration of faith a Muslim makes (Wagnalls, 1972, p. 463). Thus, just as in Judaism,

The first and very important belief of Islam, and of course of Christianity, is that there is only **ONE GOD**, the creator of Heaven and Earth. "**TO GOD** belongs the East and West, wherever you turn there is the face of God" (Qur'an 2, 115). God is Eternal, without beginning and end; He is everlasting. Both Christians and Muslims believe in God the Beneficent, the Merciful, the Compassionate. God is

worthy to be praised and glorified. Both call Him the Holy One, the Most High, the almighty, the Faithful one. (AECAWA, 1987, p. 101).

So far, the Judaic, Christian and Muslim concept of God is the same. In addition, they believe that God takes care of His creation and keeps it in existence; thus God is providence. However, while Judaism and Islam insist on the singleness of person in God, Christian monotheism upholds the doctrine of the triune personal life of the one God. "Christian monotheism therefore appears always as trinitarian; but the principle of unity remains inviolate." (Schlette, 1977, p. 981).

In summary, it is good to note that the three religions have a theistic concept of God. Their God is personal, immanent but at the same time transcendent; He listens and cares and that is why they are serious with prayers; their God is one and the same God; it is therefore absurd that members of one of these three religions should regard the adherents of the other two as infidels.

O you who believe! do not take the Jews and the Christians for friends; they are friends of each other; and whoever amongst you takes them for a friend, then surely he is one of them; surely Allah does not guide the unjust people (sura V:51).

### **The Faith of Abraham as a Common Denominator**

Abraham, the first of the Patriarchs, the father of Isaac and the founder of the Hebrew people, was a friend of God and he was such an important personality that Abraham's bosom is synonymous with paradise, the place where the just repose after death (cf. Lk. 16:22).

Christians and Muslims together with the Jews, have a spiritual attachment to Abraham as their father in faith, and as a model of faith and submission to God's will and confidence in God's goodness (Arinze F., p. 28).

Abraham's faith was put to the test when God commanded him to sacrifice his own son, Isaac. Abraham rose to the occasion. He put his faith in God and this is known to justify him. He therefore became the model of total submission to the will of God.

The Arabic term "Islam" means submission and "Moslems" stand for those who submit to the will of God. Islam reveres the prophets of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, among whom is Jesus Christ. They too are regarded as Moslems because they accomplished the will of God. Mohammed himself presumed that he was the last and the greatest of all the prophets, "the seal of the prophets". However, Christians regard Jesus not so much as a prophet but as the son of God, the long-awaited Messiah whose coming was foretold by the prophets of old.

... you are, all of you, sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. All baptised in Christ, you have all clothed yourselves in Christ, and there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus. Merely by belonging to Christ you are the posterity of Abraham, the heirs he was promised. (Ga. 3:26-29)

As Jews, Christians and Muslims took up the faith of Abraham, this faith becomes a connecting link between the three religions. Besides, they are also related through physical descent. The founder of Islam, Mohammed was an Arab, who was born in Mecca. The Arabs are descendants of Abraham through his elder son, Ishmael, born to him by Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian slave-girl (Gen. 21:8-21). "Muslims regard themselves as the descendants of Ishmael but maintain that Hagar was the true wife of Abraham, and Ishmael not Isaac was offered for sacrifice" (Wagnalls, p. 461).

On their part, the Jews are descendants of Abraham through Isaac and they are very proud of it. For them, it is something to boast about. In their allocution with Jesus, they asserted: "We are descended from Abraham and we have never been the slaves of anyone; what do you mean. 'You will be made free'?... They repeated, 'Our father is Abraham'. ...Are you greater than our father Abraham, who is dead? The prophets are dead too. Who are you claiming to be?" (Jn 8:33-34, 39, 53-54).

Jesus Christ himself, the head of Christianity, was a Jew and hence a descendant of Abraham i.e., in his nature as man because he is believed to be God as well. John philosophically highlighted this when he wrote:

In the beginning was the Word; the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things came to be, not one thing that had its being but through him. All that came to be had life in him and that life was the light of men, ... The Word was the true light that enlightens all men; and he was coming into the world ... The Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. (Jn. 1:1-14).

And Paul added:

In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus: His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and become as men are; he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. But God raised him high and gave him the name which is above all other names so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld, should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and that every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Ph. 2:5-11).

It was because of this trans-human dimension of his that Jesus Christ's reply to the Jews in respect of the polemic above, was "Your father Abraham rejoiced to think that he would see my Day; he saw it and was glad." When the Jews became indignant that he was not yet fifty and so could not have seen Abraham. Jesus replied: "I tell you most solemnly, before Abraham ever was, I am". (Jn 8:56-58).

If Jesus Christ and his apostles and disciples (the early Christians) were Jews and therefore descendants of Abraham, then like Moslems, Christians have something to do with physical descent from Abraham. It follows then that Jews, Christians and Muslims are kinsmen and the relation between Judaism, Christianity and Islam could be described as consanguinity, if one may say so.

### **Eschatological Mentality**

The concept of hereafter plays a very significant role in the minds of the adherents of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. God is feared as a just judge who will render to every man according to his deeds, punishing wrongdoers in hell but rewarding the good in paradise.

Though, it has to be noted that the term "paradise" does not mean exactly the same thing to the adherents of the three religions. However, the aspiration of everybody is to escape the wrath of the Almighty.

The psalmist articulated the eschatological hopes of the Jews in the expression: "Let them have a surplus to leave their children! For me the reward of virtue is to see your face, and on waking, to gaze my fill on your like" (Ps 17"15). Beatific vision is the principle behind many good religious deeds. A religious Jew feels himself bound in all his actions to Yahweh with all his claims and promises.

For religious Jews in general the observance of the Sabbath and feast-days, the recital of prayers, the keeping of the purity laws, the maintenance of ancient Jewish tradition, the hope of eschatological salvation and so on mean that they are bearing the yoke of God for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, that is, that they are being true to the obligations of the covenant (Clemens Thoma, p. 782).

Many Jews met their death at the hands of foreign governors for the simple reason that they would not eat pork. Eleazer could not even dissimulate in spite of his friend's persuasions. This Jew scorned death. Why? His reason was: "Even though for the moment I avoid execution by man, I can never, living or dead elude the grasp of the Almighty ... The Lord whose knowledge is holy sees clearly that, though I might have escaped death, whatever agonies of body I now endure under this bludgeoning, in my soul am glad to suffer, because of the awe which he inspires in me," (2 Mac 6:27-30). For the same awe which Yahweh inspires coupled with eschatological hope, a Jewess watched the execution of her seven sons in one single day and she even encouraged them all to accept death at the hands of King Antiochus. She persuaded her youngest son in this way:

My son, have pity on me ... Do not fear this executioner, but prove yourself worthy of your brothers, and make death welcome, so that in the day of mercy I may receive you back in your brothers' company (2 Mac 7:27-29).

People are inclined to see Judaism as a religion of law but it has to be remembered that those laws are the command of God. As a result, beyond the apparent Jewish nomocracy lurks a theocracy.

Christianity excels in hankering after eschatology and the kingdom of heaven: "Happy are you when people persecute you and speak all kinds of calumny against you on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven" (Mt. 5:11-12). Christians are said to be in the world but they are not of the world. They are citizens of heaven, children of God and co-heirs with Christ. This radical eschatological mentality informs their actions, sufferings and the practice of virtue. Hence the New testament teachings:

Everyone moved by the spirit is a son of God. The spirit you received is not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into your lives again; it is the spirit of sons, and it makes us cry 'Abba, Father!' The spirit himself and our spirit bear united witness that we are children of God. And if we are children we are heirs as well: heirs of God and Coheirs with Christ, sharing his sufferings so as to share his glory. (Rom 8:14-17).

If you can have some share in the sufferings of Christ, be glad, because you will enjoy a much greater gladness when his glory is revealed. It is a blessing for you when they insult you for bearing the name of Christ because it means that you have the spirit of glory, the spirit of God resting on you. (1 Pt. 4:13-14).

The aetiology of Christians' longanimity is that they think that what they suffer in this life can never be compared to the glory as yet unrevealed which is waiting for them.

Islamic eschatological mentality is much more radical. "Paradise is the reward for those who die in the way of God and the booty ... is the reward of those who survive the war" (Ishak Ibrahim, **Black Gold and Holy War**, 19; cf. Yaro, p. 8).

The killings in the Iran-Iraq war have been so huge that they are literally incalculable, and they have had the added indecency on the Iranian side that tens of thousands of boys have been sent to their death with keys of paradise around their necks. How many others have been killed in Iran itself, without this happy consolation, no one knows, and few people seem to care except the brave Iranian dissidents who have long warned us about the scale of the Ayatollah Khomeini's horror. For them - and for us, may

be - it is a threat on the Hitler dimension. But for the moment I'm concerned about the numbers and the wantonness of the killings. It would be a strange world which drew the contrasted conclusion that the trouble comes from Rushdie and not at all from Khomeini (Michael Foot, 1989 p.5).

The **Koran** commands Muslims: "Go forth light and heavy, and strive hard in Allah's way with your property and persons; this is better for you, if you know" (sura IX:41).

Surely Allah will make those who believe and do good enter gardens beneath which rivers flow; and those who disbelieve enjoy themselves and eat as the beasts eat, and fire is their abode (sura XL VII:12, cf. sura XL VII:15).

"and that (as for) those who do not believe in the hereafter, we have prepared for them a painful chastisement" (sura XVII:10). Muslims do not allow the unbeliever to live his life and wait for the abode of fire. Instead, they constitute themselves into instruments of God's wrath. This is the reason for the wanton killings. Was Gaddafi not quoted as saying:

Killing Mobutu of Zaire and his aids is the duty of every Muslim. You must incite Muslims in Zaire and urge them to engage in jihad so that Mobutu may be toppled. He who kills this man will go to paradise (Yaro 1. T., 1988, back page).

Muslims fear God's judgement and condemnation; like the Jews and Christians, they believe in resurrection. Their religion teaches that life on earth is a period of testing and preparation for the life to come. They believe in angels too.

The angels in heaven record men's good and bad deeds. A person should therefore try his best to be good and help others, and then trust in God's justice and mercy for his reward. Death is the gate to eternal life. Moslems believe in a last, or judgement, day when everyone will receive the record of his deeds on earth. The record book is placed in the right hand of the good, who then go to Heaven. It is placed in the left hand of the wicked, who go to hell. The pleasures and joys of Heaven and the sorrows and tortures



of hell resemble those described in the Bible, except that in paradise, beautiful dark-eyed maidens called houris wait on the men. (**The World Book Encyclopedia**, vol. 9, p.376).

## **Ethics and Morals**

Judaism and Islam are very complex phenomena, embracing religious, social, political and historical elements. Judaism teaches that God is good and requires righteous conduct of His people. "What does the Lord require of thee, only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (Micah 6:8). Ethical conduct is the primary interest of Judaism, and Judaism is latitudinarian. Jews believe that God created man in His image (Gen 5: 1) consequently all men should be treated with respect and dignity. Their Talmud stresses ethical conduct among all peoples; "the righteous of the nations have a share in the world to come" (**The World Book Encyclopedia**, p. 414). As regards moral code, in addition to the ten Commandments, the Jews operated the system of **lex talionis**:

If a man injures his neighbour, what he has done must be done to him: broken limb for broken limb, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. As the injury inflicted, so must the injury suffered (Lev. 24:19-20; Ex. 21:23-25; Deut. 19:21).

Christianity adopted the Ten Commandments and discountenanced the **lex talionis**. Instead it preached forgiveness and posited love as a new commandment. Peter asked Jesus: "Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times? Jesus answered, Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times" (Mt. 18:21-22).

You have learnt how it was said: Eye for eye and tooth for tooth. But I say this to you: offer the wicked no resistance. On the contrary, if anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer him the other as well; ... You have learnt how it was said: You must love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say this to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; in this way you will be sons of your Father in heaven, for he causes his sun to rise on bad men as well as good, and his rain to fall on honest and dishonest men alike. ... You must therefore be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect (Mt. 5:38-48).

Christianity, Yaro said, is a gentleman's religion. Love and forgiveness are fundamental postulates in Christianity. Other values stressed are truthfulness - "Let your yes be yes and your no be no; anything more comes from the evil one" (Mt. 5:37), mercy, purity, peace and justice (cf. The Eight Beatitudes, Mt 5:3-12). Christianity teaches the golden rule namely, treat other people the way you would want them to treat you (Lk. 6:36-38). Even the format for the last judgment is based on charity. That is, a man stands condemned or acquitted depending on how he has treated his fellowmen. Jesus even gave a spiritual and pacifist interpretation to the Old Testament text which zealots used as a military ideology. Zealots fought to establish the absolute sovereignty of Yahweh over Israel, but Jesus taught the kingdom of God is within you, the kingdom of God is righteousness.

The **Koran**, like the Bible, forbids lying, stealing, adultery and murder. It teaches honour for parents, kindness to slaves, protection for the orphaned and the widowed, and charity to the poor. However, in Islam, punishment is based on the Old Testament law of retaliation: "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." Justice is not tempered with mercy. For instance, the **Koran** commands that the hands of any man or woman who steals should be cut off (sura v:38). It has also to be noted that even though Islam forbids lying, "Lies are sins except when they are told for the welfare of a Moslem or for saving him from disaster", said Al Tabaran (cf. Yaro, back cover). This does not make for true justice and for a uniform moral yardstick. It seems that Islamic aggressive proselytic manoeuvres tend to becloud the beautiful virtues which Islam preaches.

### **Conclusion: Universalist Traits**

Religion is the cult of the divine. The divine worshipped by the Jews, Christians and Moslems is one and catholic, the creator and sovereign Lord of all. Their religious hopes are premised on the assumption that God created, redeemed, loves and cares for every human person. Consciously or unconsciously, the three religions seek to spread to all nooks and corners of the earth; they pre-occupy themselves with spiritual matters and their tenets constitute universal beliefs that are valid for all peoples. Reverential awe is a common religious feature among the three religions.

"The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom, they have sound sense who practice it." (Ps 111:10). In the biblical wisdom literature, wisdom is given all pervading, universal and trans-ethereal qualities. For instance, she is pure, she pervades and permeates all things. Although alone, she can do all; herself unchanging, she makes all things new. In every generation she passes into holy souls, she makes them friends of God and prophets; for God loves only the man who lives with Wisdom. She is indeed more splendid than the sun, she outshines all the constellations. Over Wisdom evil can never triumph. She deploys her strength from one end of the earth to the other, ordering all things for good. Her closeness to God lends lustre to her. Yes, she is an initiate in the mysteries of God's knowledge. If in this wealth be a desirable possession, what is more wealthy than Wisdom whose work is everywhere? Or if it be the intellect that is at work, where is there a greater than Wisdom, designer of all? (Wis. 7 & 8).

The terms "all" and "every" are universal quantifiers and hence indices of universalism. As the "designer of all", the universality of wisdom is not in doubt. If philosophy is the love of wisdom, the quest for wisdom and the wisdom sought, then, **a fortiori**, philosophy partakes in the universal traits and the trans-ethereal attributes of wisdom. If so, philosophy as a quest for wisdom implicitly embraces a quest for metaphilosophy of universalism. This quest is a welcome event that is much needed, a step in the right direction.

Our world is in need of genuine peace. The three religions are aware of this need hence their modes of greeting: "Shalom a-leichem - peace be to you," a Jewish greeting that is shortened to Shalom; Christians greet "Peace be with you", while Moslems say: "assalam 'alaikum, peace be to you". Where religion fails to bring about peace, philosophy has to step in. After all, philosophising is above all facing the problem of life and true philosophy is the rational solution to the problem of life (Ferro, p. 11). If there will be peaceful coexistence, mutual acceptance of difference and benevolence in this world, it will be brought about not by people who have partisan mentality but by those who have acquired a universalist method of approach to problems.

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