



Rabbin Reuven Fajerston (Firestone) je Regenstein profesor srednjovjekovnog judaizma i islama na HUC-JIR-ovom Skirball kampusu u Los Angelesu i pridruženi profesor religije na Univerzitetu Južne Kalifornije (USC). Dobitnik je brojnih istraživačkih stipendija i univerzitetskih poziva. U periodu od ljeta, 2017-2019 bio je istraživač na Humboldtovom univerzitetu u Berlinu, te kao Sigi Feigel gostujući profesor za jevrejske studije pri Teološkom fakultetu Univerziteta u Cirihi (2018). Fajerston je napisao preko stotinu naučnih poglavlja i članaka i osam knjiga, s prijevodima na njemački, francuski, hebrejski, turski, arapski, albanski, bosanski, makedonski, indonežanski i urdu. Rođen je u sjevernoj Kaliforniji, sa porodicom je živio u Izraelu, Egiptu i Njemačkoj, a redovno predaje na univerzitetima i vjerskim centrima širom Sjedinjenih Država, Evrope, Bliskog istoka i Azije. Bio je potpredsjednik Udruženja za židovske studije (AJS) i predsjednik Međunarodnog udruženja za studije Kur'ana (IQSA), a pokrenuo je i nastavlja biti uključen u brojne projekte i inicijative koje okupljaju Jevreje, muslimane i kršćane, Jevreje i Arape, Izraelce i Palestince. Primio je rabbinsko ređenje od HUC-JIR 1982.
E-Mail: rfirestone@huc.edu

Rabbin Reuven Firestone is the Regenstein Professor in Medieval Judaism and Islam at HUC-JIR's Skirball Campus in Los Angeles, and Affiliate Professor of Religion at the University of Southern California (USC). Recipient of numerous research fellowships and university invitations, he is currently a Alexander von Humboldt Research Fellow in Berlin (summers, 2017-2019) and Sigi Feigel Visiting Professorship for Jewish Studies, University of Zürich (2018). Firestone has written over one hundred scholarly chapters and articles and eight books, with translations into German, French, Hebrew, Turkish, Arabic, Albanian, Serbo-Croatian, Macedonian, Indonesian and Urdu. Born in Northern California, he has lived with his family in Israel, Egypt and Germany, and he regularly lectures in universities and religious centers throughout the United States, Europe, the Middle East and Asia. He served as vice president of the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS) and president of the International Qur'anic Studies Association (IQSA) and has initiated and continues to be involved in numerous projects and initiatives which bring together Jews Muslims and Christians, Jews and Arabs, and Israelis and Palestinians. He recieved rabbinical ordination from HUC-JIR in 1982.
E-Mail: rfirestone@huc.edu



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Rabbi Reuven FIRESTONE

“SVETI RAT I HISTORIJA”

“HOLY WAR AND HISTORY”

Abstract

This article traces the idea of a binary between one religious truth and another religious falsehood. The cycle of true versus false religion began with the birth of biblical monotheism. While monotheism of Christianity was neither the first nor the last to fall into this typology, the author argues that its particular location in the historical unfolding of monotheist communities compelled it to become the most exclusive. Thus, Christianity tends toward totalitarianism, whereas Judaism and Islam, although both equally as elitist as Christianity, do not. The article examines the argument between established religion and new religion in the way that Jewish adherents of monotheism opposed the claims of the new Christian monotheists, so did the established Jewish and Christian adherents of their notions of monotheism opposed the claims of the new Muslim monotheists. The author notices that by the seventh century, there were not only two expressions of monotheism, but many, for Jews and Christians had each split into several distinct communities based on differences in theology and praxis. The new divine dispensation of Islam, therefore, did not couch its argument in relation to an established monotheism but to several. Perhaps because of this, Islam does not claim an exclusive truth in relation to prior monotheisms, but rather a *more accurate* truth. Our greatest religious role-models – Moses for Jews, Jesus for Christians, Muhammad for Muslims – characterized and exemplified the divine attribute of ultimate humility throughout their lives. They all suffered. They all triumphed. Throughout, they remained remarkably modest.

Key words: *One God, gods, deities, religion(s), monotheism, truth, polytheism, falsehood, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, internalized trauma.*

HOLY WAR AND HISTORY

Wars of religion did not exist before the emergence of monotheism. Yes, various religious communities fought and killed in the ancient, pre-monotheistic world, and they perceived their gods entering the fray on behalf of their communities of believers.*¹ But these were not wars of religion. They were struggles over the usual material and prestige issues that have always driven human conflict. In the ancient world, where tribe and religion were virtually synonymous, gods were local. They were attached to places, and they were attached to communities.*² So when communities went to war, so did their deities. “Religion” in those days was less a question of beliefs and doctrines and more an issue of cultic activities in which a community engaged in order to secure heaven’s will – to bring rain in its season, encourage fertility of crops and herds, avoid the wrath of tempest or earthquake.*³ People certainly had faith in their gods and in a worldview in which their deities held positions of authority and power. But their faith was not like our sense of faith today, and there is some question even as to whether we can apply our notion of theology to their faith-life and “religion” to their practices.

It was not a world of doctrinal subtlety and had little opportunity for an individual to weigh the merits or truth of a theology. The Egyptologist and historian of religion, Jan Assmann calls this “implicit theology,” a worldview that undergirds the meaning of cult and religion. It differs fundamentally with “explicit theology,” which is a discourse about God and the divine world based on systematic argumentation.*⁴ What we would consider modes of theological thinking were indeed practiced in Greco-Roman antiquity, but by a small cadre of thinkers who were engaged in what was called in those days philosophy.*⁵

¹ James Breasted, *The Annals of Sennacherib*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1924, 2-5; Sa-Moon Kang, *Divine War in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1989.

² Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews* (Yale: 2008), 6-15.

³ Historians of religion are increasingly concerned with the problem of making sense of the ways in which ancient peoples made sense of their religious world. Commonplace contemporary terms such as polytheism and monotheism, not to mention “religion” itself, do not adequately describe the spiritual life of ancients (Peter Van Nuffelen, “Pagan monotheism as a religious phenomenon,” in Stephen Mitchell and Peter Van Nuffelen (eds.), *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2010), 16-33.

⁴ Jan Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 13, 53-75.

⁵ See Fredriksen and Mitchell & Van Nuffelen’s *One God* for the distinction between “philosophy” which functioned more like our religion, and ritual or cult.

Communities in the ancient world were defined, in part, by their loyalty to divine powers, and when people went to war, so did their gods.*⁶ But peoples did not engage in war of religion or *for* religion. That would come with a vengeance along with explicitly theologized monotheism.



ILLUSTRATION ~ Constantine's vision and the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in a 9th century Byzantine manuscript (BnF MS Gr510, folio 440, detail.)

ILUSTRACIJA ~ Konstantinova vizija i bitka kod Milvijskog mosta u bizantskom rukopisu iz 9. stoljeća.

Assmann argues that the most distinctive nature of monotheism is not its practice of honoring one rather than many gods, but rather its insistence on distinguishing “Truth” from “falsehood,” true doctrine from false doctrine.*⁷ This is an interesting observation. Monotheism not only insists on divine unity, but also inculcates a distinct binary to which we monotheists tend to subject the universe: true versus false, right versus wrong.

This particular binary can make much sense when evaluating phenomena that can be tested. But what about faith? A test of faith is a test of tenacity. It is not a test of truth.

⁶ James Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East* Vol. 1 (Princeton University Press, 1958), 209-210, 219-220; *ibid*, Vol. 2 (1975), 108-112.

⁷ Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: the Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge University, 1998); *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008); *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

How can we demand a distinction between truth and falsehood when it comes to religious doctrine? How, for example, can we know the essential nature of God? To take a classic example, a Trinitarian nature for God cannot be proven. If it could, then all who engage in the same reasoning would arrive at the same conclusion. But even those who are convinced of God's Trinitarian nature cannot agree over what that actually means, so there are many different understandings of Trinitarian monotheism. The same applies to non-Trinitarian monotheists. We Jews, Christians and Muslims disagree among ourselves over similar kinds of assertions that are, unfortunately, often regarded as absolute "truths." Some of us are willing to fight, kill, and die in order to protect our assertions.



ILLUSTRATION ~ Any new expression of monotheism maneuvers to usurp and appropriate older and established expressions of monotheism.

ILUSTRACIJA ~ Svaki novi izraz monoteizma izvodi manevre da uzurpira i prisvoji starije i ustaljene izraze monoteizma.

Assmann calls monotheisms "counterreligions." A counterreligion is oppositional, standing in distinction to what already exists. It is also revolutionary. Monotheism not only challenges the status quo, it commandeers it. It replaced the soft and flexible *relative* of pre-monotheistic religious tradition with the rigid *absolute* of monotheism.

Any new expression of monotheism maneuvers to usurp and appropriate older and established expressions of monotheism. Why else would God upend the existing state of affairs by breaking open the heavens in such a dramatic fashion as to offer a new revelation of divine disclosure? How often, and under what conditions, does such a miraculous opening occur?

According to the content of the disclosures themselves, the reason for each toppling of history was that the world needed radical change. What existed previously was mistaken and required correction. In fact, it was in such dire shape that God split the heavens and disturbed the natural order of the cosmos in order to bring a new dispensation, a new way of doing business. Every theophany marks an unexpected break in the status quo, an upending of history itself.

In each case, the divine disclosure was so extraordinary and world-changing that it was carefully recorded and sanctified in what we today call Divine Scripture. But each scripture is ultimately exclusive and abrogative. It claims to surpass what came before and in so doing it denigrates and devalues previous divine disclosure. These moves inevitably invite a negative, reactive response from believers in the religions that existed before

In this natal process, we can observe the basis of never-ending quarrels and discord that, because the stakes are at the highest level, turn frequently to verbal and then physical violence. This unfortunate situation began at the very moment of emergent monotheism. The very birth of religion, while a literal Godsend from the perspective of its adherents, is an act of defiance and rebellion to the believers in religions that already exist. Struggle, discord, and violence are inevitable, built into the very structure of monotheism. Whoever claims a monopoly on truth puts himself in conflict with everyone else.



ILLUSTRATION ~ Biblical monotheism makes an early claim for possession of absolute truth in the One Great God of Israel, but it makes no demands for compliance among other peoples.

ILUSTRACIJA ~ Biblijski monoteizam polaže rano zahtjev za posjedovanje apsolutne istine u Jednom Velikom Bogu Izraela, ali ne postavlja zahtjeve za pokornost među drugim narodima

The cycle began with the birth of biblical monotheism, the monotheism that became dominant in the Hebrew Bible (the so-called “Old Testament”) and has continued to this day. The monotheism of Christianity was neither the first nor the last to fall into this phenomenology, but I would argue that its particular location in the historical unfolding of monotheist communities compelled it to become the most exclusive.

Now this observation may seem disingenuous coming from a Jew who represents a tradition that, from a traditional Christian perspective, is often identified as the ultimate in exclusivism. But consider this:

Christianity tends toward totalitarianism, whereas Judaism and Islam, although both equally as elitist as Christianity, do not.^{*8} It is the serendipity of sequence and an accident of history that put Christianity in this position of rigid exclusivity, not because of any essential nature of Christianity that makes it more prone to snobbery than Judaism or Islam. All three classic expressions of monotheism exude an equal level of elitism that is inherent in what Jan Assmann calls “the Mosaic Distinction,” the distinction between the truth of one’s own monotheistic articulation of religion, and the falseness of all other claims.

Biblical monotheism makes an early claim for possession of absolute truth in the One Great God of Israel, but it makes no demands for compliance among other peoples.^{*9} Rather than pushing its own worldview on its neighbors, the thrust of biblical monotheism was to establish a “safe-haven” where its sense of a stark and difficult divine intangibility would not be threatened by the universal, appealing attraction of the more concrete and enticing practices associated with polytheism. Islamic monotheism makes its own exclusive claim for universal truth, but its scripture leaves room for divine fulfillment among other expressions of monotheism as well.^{*10} It is Christianity that has inherited the legacy of John: “I am the way, the truth and the life: no one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). I know that there is a range of interpretation on this verse, but at this moment I will leave it in its simplest or direct, obvious meaning as I address the serendipitous nature of historical relationship in theological validation.

The monotheism of the Hebrew Bible emerges out of a polytheistic milieu, and it makes its claim within a historical context of polytheistic tribal religions. Polytheism is theologically tolerant. It respects the existence of a variety of powers that run the universe. Polytheism assumes translatability between different religious expressions because the gods have a defined function in the cosmic order. A deity associated with the sun in one community, culture or religion is essentially the same as a god of the sun in another, though they may go by different names and require different procedures of worship. One culture may describe the power that is behind nature’s fertility as Aphrodite, another as Min, another as Ba`al. Those who believed in the reality of one constellation of deities managing the universe could accept the truth of an analogous pantheon, even if the gods were known with different names and required a different set of cultic behaviors.

The Israelites emerged out of this pan- and poly-theist world,¹¹ but they eventually arrived at the conception

⁸ Further, see Stephen J. Patterson, *The Forgotten Creed: Christianity’s Original Struggle against Bigotry, Slavery, and Sexism* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2012), p. 5. Patterson refers to Daniel Boyarin’s *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California, 1994), which treats this issue in depth.

⁹ Some biblical references long for a time when the entire world will recognize the oneness of God (see Isaiah 2, Micah 4), but this is a sense of longing, not a demand, and even in such passages there is hope and recognition that while “each will walk in the name of their gods,” Israel will walk in the name of its own god.

¹⁰ See, for example, Q 2:62, 5:69, etc.

¹¹ See especially the work of Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (1990), *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (2001), and *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (2008).

of one God who alone created and empowered the entire universe. In the view of the Hebrew Bible, the process of realization is couched in both the individual experiences of God among the earliest biblical personages and in the collective experience of the Israelites witnessing the manifestation of God at Sinai. These are all articulated in a scripture that is painfully aware of its larger religious context of universal polytheism in the ancient Near East.



ILLUSTRATION ~ *Belshazzar's Feast*, Rembrandt van Rijn, c.1635 (National Gallery, London).

The message entailed that Yahveh had decided to put an end to the Babylonian Empire, which would fall at the thrust of Medes and Persians.

ILUSTRACIJA ~ *Beltazarova gozba*, Rembrandt van Rijn, oko 1635.

Poruka je podrazumijevala da je Jahve odlučio da stane na kraj Babilonskom carstvu, koje će pasti pod udarom Medana i Perzijanaca.

I mentioned earlier that the polytheist world of the ancient Near East was theologically tolerant. This is true, but it was not tolerant politically. Because the gods were associated with the various polities of tribe, land, village or city, the gods' behavior mirrored the political behaviors of the people that believed in them. When the community went to war over access to material resources or markets, or even over prestige, so did their gods. The so-called patriarchal layers of the Hebrew Bible reflect this worldview in their depiction of God's covenantal obligation to God's people. When the biblical patriarchs found themselves in conflict with their neighbors, their God supported them against the gods of their neighbors and even fought them.^{*12} Although the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is depicted monotheistically, God in the Hebrew Bible often

¹² See, for example, Ex.15:1-6; Deut.7:1-6, 20:1-4. For a parallel treatment for a historical battle between the God of Israel and the God of Ammon, compare 2Kings 3 with the Mesha Stele (<https://www.historyofinformation.com/detail.php?id=5053>)

seems to function like the other gods of the ancient Near East by protecting its “own” people and fighting the deities of its people’s enemies. ^{*13}

The collective experience at Sinai (Ex.12:38) was something greater and more universal than the patriarchal theophanies. But it was the biblical prophets who found the ultimate dominion of God in a “still, small voice” (1 Kings 19:12) that permeates the universe. It served to prove to them the unqualified unity and universality of the One Great God.

That “Truth” was experienced in relation to the implicit theology underlying the ancient cultic practices of polytheism. It was therefore articulated as an absolute, and in contradistinction to the capricious behaviors and expectations of the various powers mistakenly (from the biblical perspective) thought to inhabit, at various times, temples and shrines and representative figurines.^{*14} The monotheism of the Hebrew Bible was absolute and uncompromising. But it emerged in relation to the many lesser powers of deities never thought to control all things. In an implicitly polytheistic world, the particularist truth of monotheism was comprehended by ancient Israel as a faith tradition for a small community that simply wished to practice its faith without interference. Its goal was not conversion of the other, but rather isolation – the desire to fulfil an increasingly explicit (non-systematic but nevertheless explicit) and monotheist theology.

It was only during the Second Temple Period that monotheism truly became triumphant even among the People of Israel. For generations the Israelites continued to hedge their bets by making offerings to other gods.^{*15} The “implicit theology” of the greater Near East continued to inform their understanding of the universe well into this period, beginning around 500 B.C.E.

Until only the last generations before the Temple’s destruction, religious conversion was not a possibility because the notion had not yet been conceived. First of all, virtually the same gods – or deities with the same basic functions – existed in all cultures, so there was no need to “convert” in relation to these. And tribal gods, the totemic deities that provided for their people whom they protected, were essentially part of the tribe. It made as much sense to change one’s tribal god as to change one’s mother.

“Conversion” in an earlier world was something like ethnic assimilation within a sphere sharing a common basic implicit theology. As a result, while Biblical Monotheism insisted in the absolute truth of its belief in the unity of God, it did not insist, require or ever expect the rest of humanity to accept its view of truth.^{*16} Neither Biblical Monotheism nor Rabbinic Judaism has had a totalitarian perspective. While theologically exclusive and internally tyrannical (insisting that all within the community devote themselves only to the “God of Israel”), they did not impose their beliefs upon those outside of the community. The voice of the Hebrew

¹³ Exodus 12:12; Ezekiel 30:13, etc. Further, see Firestone, “Savagery and the Sacred: The Rhetoric of Terror and its Consequences in the Scriptural Monotheisms,” in Peter Herman (ed), *Terrorism and Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2018, 19-36.

¹⁴ Psalms 96:5, 115:2-8, 135:16, etc.

¹⁵ See, for example, Deut. 29:25; Judges 2:11-13; 1Kings 18; Jeremiah 2, etc.

¹⁶ Further, see Reuven Firestone, “Why Jews don’t Proselytize.” *Renovatio: The Journal of Zaytuna College* 3.1 (2019), 13-24. <https://renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/why-jews-dont-proselytize>.

Bible, for example, repeatedly demands absolute loyalty to the “God of Israel,”^{*17} but with rare exception, it did not expect non-Israelite communities to accept the Israelite God.^{*18}



ILLUSTRATION ~ Biblical monotheism insisted on the absolute truth of its belief in the unity of God. Alex Levin, *Praying with Tor*, detail.
ILUSTRACIJA ~ Biblijski monoteizam je insistirao na apsolutnoj istini svog vjerovanja u jedinstvo Boga. Alex Levin, *Molitva s Torom*.

Christian monotheism was different, largely as a result of having been born into a very different context than that of Biblical Monotheism. The birth context of Christianity was the late antique Eastern Mediterranean, a Hellenistic world in which polytheism, monotheism, and pagan philosophy existed uncomfortably together in diverse forms.^{*19} Early Christians argued against the various polytheistic views of Greco-Roman, including those of the “pagan monotheists”, but their most vehement arguments were directed against their Jewish brethren, respected monotheists who refused to accept their view of God in Christ. Jewish refusal to accept

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 28:1-68; Joshua 23:1-24:24;

¹⁸ The exception was a hopeful wish, never a policy. At the end of time, the Psalms/prophets occasionally hope, the entire world will accept the unity of God (as noted above, see Isaiah 2, Micah 4). But the general sentiment was that the nations have their gods while Israel has its own God.

¹⁹ Mitchell and Van Nuffelen, *One God*; Athanassiadi and Freder, *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*.

their core belief threatened the status and success of the new dispensation, for the greatest threat to the success of Christian monotheism was the critique of Jews who were recognized and respected monotheists but refused to accept Jesus' followers' position on the central role of Jesus as Christ. The threat, however, actually moved in two directions. The birth of a new and popular expression of monotheism very seriously threatened the status of established monotheism held by Jews. Why would God cleave the heavens to provide a new monotheist revelation if the established monotheism were adequate?



ILLUSTRATION ~ *The Ascension*, with Christ standing atop a rock at center (Met Museum, DP885890). The Jews wondered why God would split the heavens to provide a new monotheistic revelation if the established monotheism was adequate?

ILUSTRACIJA ~ *Uzašašće*, s Kristom koji stoji na vrhu stijene u sredini. Jevreji su se pitali zašto bi Bog rascijepio nebesa da pruži novo monoteističko otkrovenje ako je uspostavljeni monoteizam bio adekvatan?

This argument was perceived as a zero-sum equation by the devotees of both sides. There had always been various factions among the Jews, different sects or “philosophies” as Josephus described them,^{*20} but

²⁰ Josephus, *War* 2:119–166; *Ant.* 13:171–173; 18:11–22.

they mostly lived together because they were experienced as different perspectives within the same unique monotheist community that existed in relation to an entire world that was polytheist. With the emergence of a perspective based on the divinity of Jesus, the distinction came to be recognized in the simple terms of truth versus falsehood, yes or no; and the partisans eventually identified either as Jews or Christians. The early Christians were actually Jews who followed “the Christ position.” Was he, or wasn’t he the messiah, and what exactly did that mean? The zero-sum nature of the argument sharpened the absolutism of the distinction. Each position threatened the existential identity-belief of the other. The stakes were high. For those who would identify themselves as Christians, right belief had eternal consequences. For Jews of the time, the risks and rewards were mostly a this-worldly issue because eternity for Jews was not the fruit of victory in this argument, nor was damnation the price of failure. The reason behind this is that the notion of reward and punishment in an afterlife had only begun to enter the religious repertoire of the Eastern Mediterranean world toward the end of the Second Temple period.*²¹ It had not become codified in Jewish scripture and was articulated, hesitantly, only in the very last layer of the latest book of the Jewish biblical canon, the Book of Daniel.*²² It would take generations for the notion of reward and punishment in an afterlife to penetrate the old and established religious worldview of Jews, and it would not have a significant impact until it became codified in the early layers of their second scripture, the Talmud, known by Jews as the “Oral Torah.”

Among Christians, however, the very newness of the movement, the freshness of its divine disclosure, and the core preaching within it of a life of eternal happiness or eternal punishment beyond this life, established a binary between salvation and damnation based on the notion of true or false belief. The threat of error’s consequence thus raised the stakes to the highest possible level.

This was a different distinction from that between polytheism and monotheism of an earlier period. Ancient polytheists were not threatened by the small community of Jews who were the only people to insist on their own cult to the exclusion of all others. The Jews’ major goal was not to prove their exclusive truth to the nations, but rather simply to fulfil and consummate the requirements of their unique faith tradition in a safe zone without interference. It seemed not to matter much to Jews whether or not outsiders agreed with them. Eternal salvation or damnation was not at issue.

When Islam emerged into history a half a millennium later, the argument between established religion and new religion was no longer that of a zero-sum relationship. By the seventh century, there were not only two expressions of monotheism, but many, for Jews and Christians had each split into several distinct communities based on differences in theology and praxis. The new divine dispensation of Islam, therefore, did not couch its argument in relation to an established monotheism but to several. Perhaps because of this, Islam does not claim an exclusive truth in relation to prior monotheisms, but rather a *more accurate truth*.

²¹ Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* (Northdale, NY: Jason Aronson, 1994), 41-75; Alan Segal, *Life After Death: The History of the Afterlife in Western Tradition* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 248-281.

²² Daniel 12.

Just as established Jewish adherents of monotheism opposed the claims of the new Christian monotheists, so did the established Jewish and Christian adherents of their notions of monotheism oppose the claims of the new Muslim monotheists. In every case, the birth of a new monotheist dispensation challenged the assumptions of the old because monotheism, by definition, works in categories of truth rather than assumptions of translation found within polytheist traditions. The pattern continued with the emergence of new monotheist expressions within the sphere of Islam. The Baha'is, for example became an ontological threat to many Muslims. Similar to Islam, it claims a more inclusive truth than an exclusive truth. Yet its very existence served to threaten the *status quo ante*.

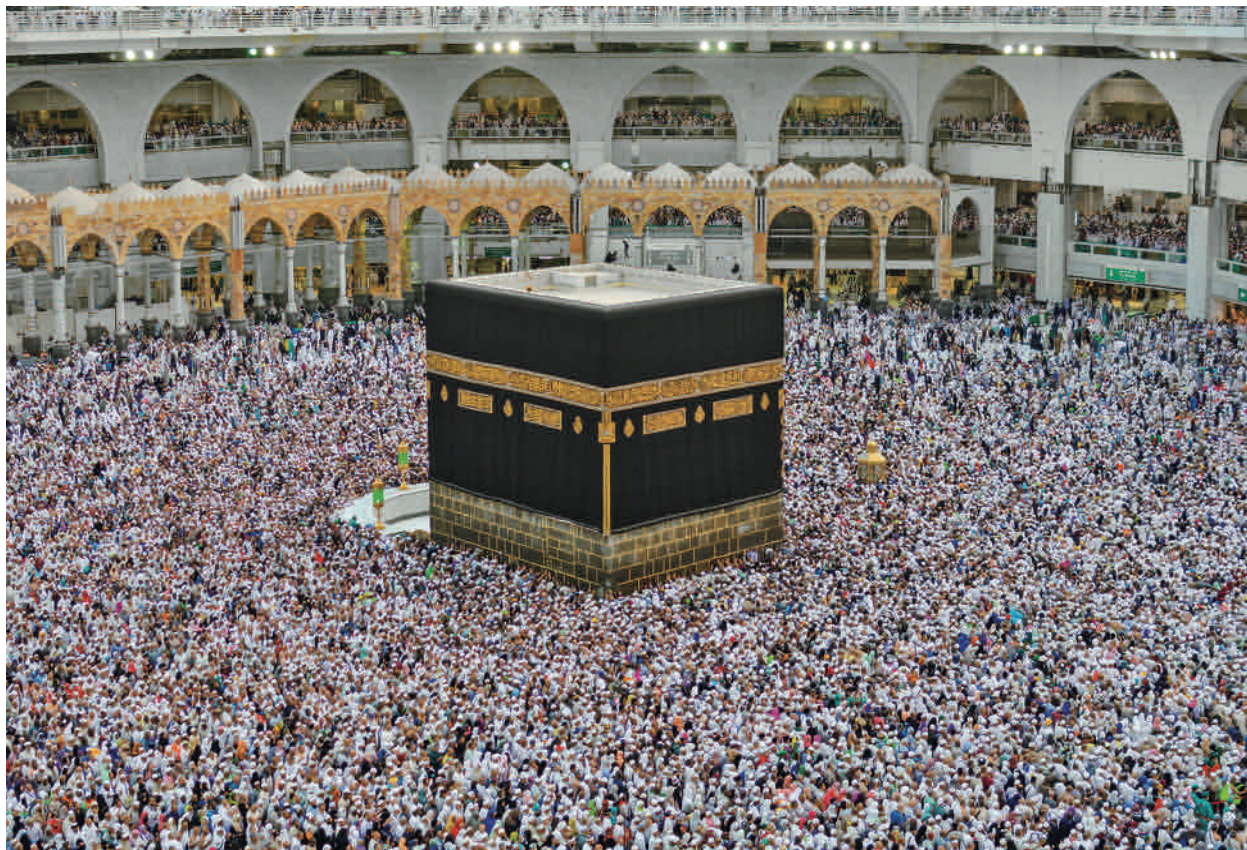


ILLUSTRATION ~Since the new divine dispensation of Islam did not place its argumentation in relation to the established monotheism, but to several of them, perhaps that is why Islam does not claim the exclusive truth in relation to the previous monotheisms, but a more **accurate truth**.

ILUSTRACIJA ~ Pošto nova božanska dispencija islama nije svoju argumentaciju postavila u odnosu na uspostavljeni monoteizam, već na nekoliko njih, možda zbog toga islam ne tvrdi isključivu istinu u odnosu na prethodne monoteizme, već tačniju istinu.

This entire discussion might seem “academic” – interesting perhaps, but of not great consequence. However, because of the powerful reaction of established religions to the threat of new religions, whenever new monotheist religions emerged into history they emerged into an environment of strife and violence that caused them great trauma, and that trauma has come to haunt us all. As noted above, new monotheist religions emerge into history in a context of tension and competition with established religions. From the perspective of the establishment,

the new religion is nothing more than a “cult,” a false religion that does not represent the divine will, a sacrilege that defames the Truth. The more successful a new religious movement, the more threatening it becomes for the established religion, for it draws away believers and supporters. But established religions have powerful resources that can be brought to bear against the new competition. From the perspective of established religions, believers in a new dispensation are mistakenly following a *false* messiah or prophet who does not represent the True God. But from the perspective of the believers in a new religion, they are only responding to the genuine call of the True God. As a result of this classic, tragic conflict, most new religions eventually collapse and disappear. Those that survive bear the emotional trauma of the experience.

Successful new religious communities counter the critique leveled against them with their own criticism and condemnation of the established religions. Within scriptural monotheisms, this argument and competition is recorded in scripture, and always from the perspective of the new religion.*²³ The record of this process can easily be found in the Hebrew Bible, which condemns what it perceives as the attempts of the established idolatrous religions to lure Israelites away from the One Great God.*²⁴ Similarly, the New Testament condemns Jews whom it perceives as trying to delegitimize Jesus.*²⁵ Qur’an perceives Jews and Christians (as well as practitioners of traditional Arabian religions) as trying to undermine the status of its prophet, Muhammad.*²⁶ Each records and condemns the attacks of established religions while articulating counterarguments against their attackers.

Scripture can only look backward in its criticism of prior religions – the establishment religions from their own birth contexts. It cannot look forward to critique the religions that have not yet emerged. On the other hand, scriptures anticipate the emergence of new challengers in general terms and warn their followers not to be led astray.*²⁷

This record of tension and trauma resulting from the inevitable clash between established and newly emergent religion is found in all three scriptures of the Jews, the Christians, and the Muslims. It actually reflects a relatively short period in the history of each religious civilization, but in every case the tension, anxiety, fear and rage remain vivid because they occurred at such a sensitive period and are preserved in the eternal message of holy scripture. The powerful negative emotions then become embedded in the religious culture of the traditions that derive from that scripture. The trauma remains, therefore, even after the events have long passed that gave rise to it, because it becomes internalized through integration into the religious cultures of the faith communities that read their scriptures.

The internalization of trauma within communities is similar to the internalization of trauma within an individual. And in fact, psychologists, psychoanalysts, and social psychologists now understand that

²³ Because new religions only emerge after the canonization of scripture among established religions.

²⁴ Num. 25:1-3; Deut. 7:1-4, 20:20:17-18.

²⁵ Matthew 22:15-46; John 8:31-59.

²⁶ Q 2: 109-111, 120; 3:69-71; 5:51-60.

²⁷ Deut.12:29-30; 13:2-5; Luke 21:8; Colossians 2:8; Q.17:61-64, 33:40.

communities experiencing trauma often exhibit communal responses that parallel those of individuals experiencing trauma. In order to become healthy again, the violence, anger and hatred that are experienced must be worked through in a constructive manner. When communities manage to contend with internalized trauma in positive ways, the tensions, anger and hatred can be managed, and the core existential pain can be healed. When they do not, then trauma festers and can be carried within for generations, only to be released in terrible violence centuries later.



ILLUSTRATION – In the imagination of the Serbian mass murderers in Srebrenica in 1995, this horrific slaughter was a replay (but with a different outcome) of the constructed memory of the catastrophic tragedy that resulted in the destruction of the Serbian kingdom by the Ottoman Muslims in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389

ILUSTRACIJA – U mašti srpskih masovnih ubica u Srebrenici 1995. godine, ovaj užasni pokolj bio je repriza (ali sa drugačijim ishodom) konstruisanog sjećanja na katastrofalnu tragediju koja je rezultirala uništenjem Srpske kraljevine od strane otomanskih muslimana u Kosovskoj bici 1389.

The psychoanalyst of war-torn societies, Vamik Volkan, cites the example of the Serbian Christian genocide of Bosnian Muslims in the early 1990s.*²⁸ In the imaginations of the Serbian mass murderers at Srebrenica, this horrific carnage was a replay (but with different outcome) of a constructed memory of catastrophic tragedy

²⁸ Vamik Volkan, *Blood Lines: From Ethnic Price to Ethnic Terrorism* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 50-80; *ibid.*, Enemies on the couch: *A Psychopolitical Journey through War and Peace* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone, 2013), 273-282.

resulting in the destruction of the Serbian Kingdom at the hand of Ottoman Muslims in the Battle of Kosovo. That was in 1389, 600 years before the genocide at Srebrenica. The memory and experience of the ancient battle's pain, agony and community suffering became internalized and eternalized within the very essence of Serbian national culture through verse and song, portrait and narrative. The Battle of Kosovo appears at the core of some of the finest epic poetry produced by Serbian culture.*²⁹ The trauma that was internalized through these media became an essential aspect of what it meant to be Serbian. Because the trauma was never treated therapeutically, it lay dormant and festered for centuries. Then, when a particular context presented itself, the trauma with its anxiety, fear and hatred was released in a post-traumatic replay in the Serbian imagination against a virtually defenseless and innocent community of Bosnian Muslims who played the role of vicious Ottomans from 600 years before in the minds of the ethnic Serbian perpetrators.



ILLUSTRATION - *Holocaust Testimony* - Revenge on those identified in the Christian imagination as perpetrators of deicide (Department of Defense. Department of the Army. Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 09/18/1947).

ILUSTRACIJA - *Svjedočanstvo o Holokaustu* - osveta nad onima koji su u kršćanskoj mašti identificirani kao počinioci bogoubistva (Department of Defense. Department of the Army. Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 09/18/1947).

When one thinks of Jewish-Christian relations over the millennia, one can imagine a number of parallels to the story of the fear and hatred pent up within the trauma of imagination between Serbs and Bosnians. The death of Jesus, for which Jews were implicated, was experienced as an unforgivable trauma by his followers and their followers, and that trauma became deeply embedded in the foundational narrative of Christianity and the self-concept of what it means to be a Christian. Deeply internalized, the trauma became an essential part of Christian identity. As a result, when Christianity became ascendant and gained the power to enact revenge against those identified in the Christian imagination as the perpetrators of deicide, some pious Christians worked through that ancient trauma by slaughtering Jews. In fact, it was the Holocaust, the most horrendous result of collective

²⁹ http://www.kosovo.net/history/battle_of_kosovo.html.

violence perpetrated against Jews that was instrumental in stimulating perhaps the most significant rethinking of the “Mosaic Distinction” among Christians in the extraordinary Catholic document known as *Nostra Aetate*.

From the fifth century onward, Jews suffered intensely and repeatedly from ascendant Christians acting out their internalized trauma. And that suffering has become a defining aspect of the collective Jewish self-concept. Until 1948, Jews lived for nearly two millennia as a powerless minority under the rule and whim of Christian and Muslim rulers. The trauma of powerless suffering has become deeply embedded in the very essence of Jewish identity. Now that Jews in the State of Israel have attained power, the increasingly violent response among some Jews to what they perceive as Arab aggression may well be a kind of post-traumatic replay of their collective experience of suffering.

Are we then – Muslims, Christians and Jews – destined to replay our collective traumas against one another forever? Are we, as if we are stuck within a Greek tragedy, fated to keep repeating against others the crimes that were committed against us for the sake of the “Mosaic distinction” – the notion that there is one Truth and all the rest is falseness?

Volkan teaches that communities which have experienced group trauma, even large national communities, can create therapeutic instruments to diffuse communal animus and hostility. Opportunities to mourn are a part of that process. One way for a community to grieve is through the erection of a memorial or monument, which can encapsulate the suffering and provide an outlet for suffering through mourning.*³⁰ South Africa and Rwanda succeeded in reducing (but by no means ending) the trauma cycle through *Commissions of Truth and Reconciliation*.

I wonder if we monotheists cannot begin diffusing the tension built up through our respective collective traumas by emphasizing one aspect of our shared values in monotheism: the attribute of humility. Our greatest religious role-models – Moses for Jews, Jesus for Christians, Muhammad for Muslims – characterized and exemplified the divine attribute of ultimate humility throughout their lives. They all suffered. They all triumphed. Throughout, they remained remarkably modest. We are not Moses, nor Jesus, nor Muhammad. None of us have anything close to the extraordinary privilege of intimacy with the divine that our traditions attribute to them. Nevertheless, it seems to me that we must make the attempt at true humility in recognition that, honestly, we really cannot “know” that “capital T” Truth.

We believe in the tenets and doctrines of our traditions because we either grew up with them so they seem naturally correct, or we were attracted to certain aspects that moved us to join our community of faith. We may “know” the truth of our faith tradition in our hearts, but we cannot know that what we believe is *the* “Truth.” For the sake of honesty and for the sake of human survival, we must exert all effort with humility and empathy to transcend the hubris and smallness that lie at the core of the “Mosaic distinction.”

³⁰ Vamik Volkan, *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies: From Clinical Practice to International Relationships* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson, 1988), 159-179. He has also shown how a public memorial with a different purpose can keep alive the trauma of the past and instill it deeper into the hearts of a community (Volkan, *Killing in the Name of Identity* [Durham: Pitchstone, 2006], 137-156).

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