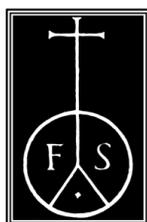


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FROM ABRAHAM'S RELIGION TO THE ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS*

GUY G. STROUMSA

MR. Vice Chancellor, dear colleagues and students, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen, I do not know if it is customary to dedicate an Inaugural Lecture. But as this is the first Inaugural Lecture of the new Chair, I might be forgiven if I not only follow custom, but also seek to establish it.

I should like, therefore, to dedicate this lecture to the memory of my grandfather, Avraham Stroumsa, whose name I also bear. A Hebrew teacher from Salonica, he was murdered in Auschwitz in 1943, together with other members of my family.

I dedicate it, as well, to all martyrs on account of their faithfulness to Abraham, killed, more often than not, by other children of Abraham.

«Deep is the spring of the past. Shouldn't one call it unfathomable?»¹ The opening sentence of Thomas Mann's great saga on Joseph and his brothers reflects the sense of *hybris* which strikes one when attempting to evoke one of the very first persons described in detail in world literature. I do not, of course, claim to possess even a fraction of Mann's gift, which permitted him to draw his magisterial frescoes of the dawn of humankind, at the junction between myth and history. He fleshed out for us those singular figures of the ancient Near East which are, at least as much as Homer's heroes, at the very fount of European culture and identity. The upside is that my text will be a lot shorter than that of Thomas Mann.

To the best of my knowledge, the Chair whose first incumbent I am honored to be is the only one of its kind so far. I say 'so far,' as I am convinced that this new Chair, established through the deep generosity and the visionary boldness of a benefactor who insisted on remaining anonymous, will pave the way to many other similar chairs elsewhere (I am told that one will be established in Cambridge very soon, and we certainly hope to develop strong collaborative links with it). In the Jewish tradition, as well as in Islam and in Christianity, charity is an essential pillar of religious behavior, a cardinal virtue. Moreover, it is a virtue best practiced in secret. The pious donor makes it a point of honor not to reveal his – or her – identity. I do not suggest here, Mr. Vice Chancellor, that you should make anonymity a condition for any gifts to the University, but I do wish to emphasize the fact that such gifts should be recognized as the noblest ones. On behalf of the University of Oxford, let me express here the very deep gratitude that we all owe to the remarkable person who is primarily responsible for the establishment of the new Professorship of the Study of the Abrahamic Religions.

I cannot do here what is usually expected in an Inaugural Lecture: review the progress in the field, hail the work of my predecessors. I cannot even seek to summarize my own work in this domain so far, as my involvement in the study of the Abrahamic

* Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 12 May 2010 by Guy Stroumsa, Professor of the Study of the Abrahamic Religions and Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall.

¹ «Tief ist der Brunnen der Vergangenheit. Sollte man ihn nicht unergründlich nennen?».

religions as such is quite new. What I shall attempt, then, at least in very rough fashion, is to reflect upon the very concept of the Abrahamic religions – upon its origin, and upon its implications for the comparative history of religions. I should perhaps add a caveat at the onset: more than most fields of the Humanities, the study of religion is a highly tricky business, demanding an infinitely delicate balance, like dancing on a tight rope, between the insider's truth and the outsider's insight (between *emic* and *etic*, in contemporary anthropological jargon). While, however, free inquiry is in its essence radical, it in no way entails a lack of respect for traditions and beliefs.

As the first Jew ever to be appointed, I think, a Professor of Theology at Oxford, I will not, of course, attempt to do Christian Theology, although I taught the history of Christian thought for thirty-one years at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Nor will I, being a rather heretical Jew, claim to speak as a Jewish theologian. I was trained as a historian of religions (please remember, in this context, the etymology of 'history', *historia*, i.e., research), which means, first and foremost, that I find in principle all religions, small or big, dead or alive, of equal interest from an intellectual point of view. What counts most for the comparative historian of religions is to reveal the mechanisms through which religions are born, evolve, grow, transform themselves, have an impact on society, and, like all other social realities, eventually die.

Spiritually, we may all be Semites, as noted by Pius XI in 1938, in an emotional rejection of growing anti-Semitism. Culturally, however, we are all, to a great extent, Christians, as I used to tell my students in Jerusalem. And in the study of religion, we should all be methodological atheists, as we must treat religions as social facts, and approach them all with the same criteria. In other words, we should study other people's religions as if they were our own, and our own religion as if it were that of others. Now you may start to worry that it is a Trojan horse that you have introduced into the Faculty of Theology. Let me please seek to reassure you. The comparative study of religions might well be perceived as subversive, but it is a real threat only for a certain kind of theology, which is coiled around itself, ignoring or even rejecting any true, free research about the Divine and its impact on human societies. In other words, the study of religions endangers only a theology which is not genuinely open to the varieties of human experience and to the exercise of rational thought; it is dangerous, therefore, only for the kind of theology which is not welcome in Oxford. Moreover, as I hope to be able to show, the history of religions can also offer a real contribution to theology. It can, indeed, like philosophy, become its handmaid, *ancilla theologiae*. There is in my view, however, and in contradistinction to medieval perceptions, no hierarchy of nobility among the sciences: each one, in its turn, can assist the other, become a *Hilfswissenschaft*.

This brings me to another point: the very title of the chair entails that the 'Abrahamic religions' be studied together, in comparative fashion, rather than in isolation from one another. Friedrich Max Müller, a young German scholar, who, finding in Oxford, in the second half of the nineteenth century, a genuine Republic of Letters, decided to stay there, eventually becoming one of the founders of the modern comparative study of religion. Max Müller famously wrote that he who knows only one religion knows none.¹ In this, he was probably adapting Goethe's aphorism, «He who does not know

¹ F. MAX MÜLLER, *Lectures on the Science of Religion*, New York, Scribner, 1872, p. 11.

foreign languages knows nothing about his own language». ¹ For Müller, in typical Victorian fashion, the most promising way of doing scholarship was to practice comparative analysis, be it of linguistics, mythology, politics or religion. The British Empire at its zenith at once permitted and enhanced the comparative study of phenomena stemming from highly different cultural milieus, throughout the continents. It was believed that the new knowledge of a number of great civilizations around the world, such as those of India or of China, would be reflected in isomorphisms, sometimes hidden from the eye, between seemingly highly different systems. Comparative scholarship, it was believed, would permit a better understanding of the very mechanisms and hidden or implicit patterns of these phenomena. The confidence of such late-nineteenth-century scholars, who sought to reconstruct religious history beyond the affirmations of orthodoxies, was certainly rather naïve. Today, gone are the days of all-encompassing theories and of daring grand narratives constructed out of comparative studies. The more one invokes interdisciplinary studies, the less one seems to practice that dangerous sport. Safe scholarship, with clearly defined boundaries, not to be trespassed, and with no threat of unexpected results, has become the name of the game.

In such conditions, then, the new chair appears to be a bold wager, pointing to what could become a new, promising trend in the twenty-first century study of religions. Such an approach is not obvious. I would indeed not be overly surprised if, beyond polite expression of interest, some collegial eyebrows slightly rose at the mention of the new Chair's title. 'Abrahamic religions'? What's that? And with which tools will they be studied? Can one reasonably be expected to immerse oneself, for years, in the study of a number of difficult languages, and can one be trusted to navigate safely among cultures and histories so different from one another? Isn't such an approach a recipe for superficiality? This, of course, assuming – which might not always be the case – that the very study of religion itself is not deemed a dubious subject, a remnant, as it were, of pre-modern times. It is to the honor of Oxford that, following its benefactor, it accepted the challenge, and did not show intellectual timidity. The new Chair was indeed an urgent desideratum, for reasons both intellectual and directly linked to our present, complex predicament, in societies of at least nominal 'Abrahamics,' where conflicting religious identities too often seem to activate or to fuel violence. In doing so, Oxford also renews ties with its own scholarly tradition.

It was, indeed, long before Max Müller that the comparative study of religions began at Oxford. In 1700, Oxford University Press published a hefty, beautifully produced volume entitled *Historia religionis veterum Persarum, eorumque Magorum*. Its author, Thomas Hyde, who had been Bodley's Librarian, was Laudian Professor of Arabic (as Edward Pococke's successor), Regius Professor of Hebrew, and Canon of Christ Church. His book opened the modern study of Zoroastrianism, by making use, for the first time, of oriental (Arabic and Persian) sources (for ancient Iranian religion had until then only been known to European scholars through the Greek and Latin sources). It is worth noting that for Hyde, who sought to understand Zoroastrianism within the context of ancient Near Eastern religions, Zarathustra was a follower of Abraham's religion, who

¹ « Wer fremde Sprachen nicht kennt, weiss nichts von seiner eigenen », GOETHE, *Maximen und Reflexionen*, Nr. 91, according to Max Hecker's edition (Weimar 1907). Christoph Marksches reminds me of Lichtenberg's dictum: « Wer nur etwas von Chemie versteht, versteht auch Chemie nicht ». Joseph O'Leary points out to me that Ninian Smart used to quote Kipling's aphorism: « And what should they know of England who only England know? » (*The English Flag* [1891]), replacing 'England' by 'Christianity'.

had rejected the star worship of the mythical Sabians. Hyde was there, like many other seventeenth-century scholars, following Maimonides.¹

Of course, our own knowledge of ancient Iranian religion is today incomparably richer than it was in Hyde's time. Hyde belongs to the heroic generation of the first modern orientalists, who were, *inter alia*, establishing the foundations of the modern, comparative study of religions long before the creation of academic Chairs in the late nineteenth century.² And yet, we do not seem to know much more than Hyde about Abraham's own religion.

Although I am no Biblical scholar and no student of the Ancient Near East, I cannot avoid starting the investigation of the roots of the concept of the Abrahamic religions with Abraham himself. What we know about Abraham and his religion is what the Bible tells us, in chapters 12 to 25 of Genesis.³ After the early chapters on cosmogony, anthropogony and the very beginnings of humankind, up to the Tower of Babel and the story of Noah and his sons, it seems that it is with Abraham that Genesis starts in earnest the history (or the pre-history) of the Hebrew nation. Originally from the Chaldean Ur (south-eastern Mesopotamia), Abraham, or rather Abram, as he is still called, an Aramean who leads a semi-nomadic life, moves from Harran (north-western Mesopotamia) to Canaan, following a divine call. He will send his servant back to Harran in order to find a wife for his son.⁴

The Biblical saga of Abraham will of course be echoed, amplified, and ramified throughout the ages, from Jewish apocryphal literature (the *Book of Jubilees*, the *Testament of Abraham*, for instance), to Philo, who devotes two books to Abraham, the New Testament, with its numerous references to the figure of the Patriarch, *midrashim* and Rabbinic literature, the Church Fathers, and, last but not least, the Qur'an and its classical commentaries, the *tafasīr*.⁵

In all these various kinds of literature, from Bible to Tafsir, it is not one Abraham, but – as should be expected – different figures of the Patriarch, that are presented to us. The Jewish Avraham is no more the Christian Abraham than the latter is the Islamic Ibrahim.⁶ And there is more than one Jewish (or Christian, or Muslim) Abraham. While Abraham is mainly presented in Genesis as the father of the Hebrew *ethnos*, he is also the forefather of a series of other peoples: the Ishmaelites, obviously, but also,

¹ On Maimonides and the Sabians, see SARAH STROUMSA, *Maimonides in his World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker*, Princeton-Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2009, pp. 84-124.

² On Hyde, see GUY G. STROUMSA, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2010, pp. 101-113 and notes.

³ For a crisp presentation of those chapters, see THOMAS C. RÖMER, *Qui est Abraham? Les différentes figures du patriarche dans la Bible hébraïque*, in Idem (ed.), *Abraham: Nouvelle jeunesse d'un ancêtre*, Genève, Labor et Fides, 1997, pp. 13-33.

⁴ See JAVIER TEIXIDOR, *Mon père, l'araméen errant*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2003, pp. 23-38.

⁵ As noted by contemporary Biblical exegetes, the 'interpretive expansion' or *Fortschreibung* of the figure of Abraham starts already in Genesis itself. On Abraham in the New Testament and Early Christian literature, see for instance JEFFREY S. SIKER, *Disinheriting the Jews: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy*, Louisville, Kentucky Westminster-John Knox Press, 1991. On the Islamic traditions on Abraham, see mainly REUVEN FIRESTONE, *Journeys into Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis*, Albany, N.Y., SUNY Press, 1990. For a recent synthetic review, see the various entries on Abraham in the *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception*, vol. 1, 2009, cols. 149-205.

⁶ See RÉMI BRAGUE, *Du Dieu des chrétiens et d'un ou deux autres*, Paris, Flammarion, 2008, pp. 13-47, who argues against the current fashion of speaking about 'the three monotheisms'. See further JON D. LEVENSON, *The conversion of Abraham to Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, in Hindy Najman, Judith H. Newman (eds.), *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2004, pp. 3-40.

among others, the Midianites, the Edomites, or the Amalekites. Historians, archeologists and Biblical scholars alike have wisely given up on trying to pinpoint 'the real Abraham', on anchoring him in a period (for instance around the start of the second millennium B.C.E.). We realize now that the only chronology we can establish is a *relative* chronology, in reference to other biblical events and figures. It is clear, in any case, that the Abraham cycle as we have it is the product of a much later period. Our image of Abraham, then, is informed by those texts through which we meet him. To each person his or her image of Abraham. Kierkegaard's Abraham, for instance, «the knight of faith», is mainly informed by Paul's emphasis (*Gal* 3, 6-8) upon Abraham's faith.

In any case, it is essential to note here that Abraham retains a universal dimension from the start, i.e., from the Biblical text itself, which seems to reflect a reaction against ethnocentric trends in Israelite society. Efforts to fight an ethnocentric perception of Abraham, and to present him as a figure of universal relevance, can actually be found, well before the early Christian Fathers, in post-Biblical Jewish literature, from *Ben Sira* to Philo and Josephus. In the *Testament of Abraham*, for instance, a text stemming from Hellenistic Egypt, 'good works', charity and hospitality are the essential virtues of Abraham, about whom God says: «Take, then, my friend Abraham into Paradise» (20, 14). Philo, too, will call Abraham God's friend (*philos*).¹ Centuries later, the Qur'an will echo this epithet: Abraham is, indeed, God's Friend, *khaṭīl Allāh*. Abraham's infinite sense of obligation and honesty is reflected in his refusal to accept any gift (not even «a thread or a sandal thong» [*Gen* 14, 23]) from the king of Sodom, while his hospitality is mainly represented by his generous reception of the three angels at Mamre, a scene which became topical in Christian iconography as a representation of the Trinity, perhaps nowhere more powerfully depicted than in Andrei Rublev's famous icon. I beg here to offer my own interpretation of the three angels, according to which they represent the three main religions that issued from Abraham: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

It is a sad testimony to the seemingly inextinguishable power of religious hatred that Abraham's city, which retains the name of God's friend in both Hebrew (*Hevron*) and Arabic (*al-Khalīl*), remains to this day a city where that ugliest and most dangerous of human passions reigns. Allow me to evoke here the 1929 pogrom in which sixty-seven Jews lost their lives, and the 1994 murder of twenty-nine Muslims, during their prayer at Abraham's burial place, by a Jewish terrorist who had once sworn the Hippocratic Oath.

A famous midrash recounts that in the early second century C.E., Moses once came to listen to Rabbi Akiba as the latter was teaching the Torah to his students.² At some point, Moses turned to God in surprise: he was unable to recognize his own Torah in Akiba's teachings. The purpose of the midrash, of course, is to tell us something about hermeneutics, about the permanent re-interpretation of the sacred text in constantly changing cultural contexts. Can we imagine Abraham returning incognito to sit on the back bench of a *yeshiva* in contemporary Israel, or of a *madrassa* in Pakistan, or even, I dare say, at a lecture by an Oxford Professor of Theology? He would probably be as puzzled as Moses in Akiba's classroom, and not only because of the millennia that stand

¹ See for instance ERICH FASCHER, *Abraham, physiologos und philos theou: Eine Studie zur ausserbiblischen Abrahamtradition im Anschluss an Deuteronomium 4,19*, in *Mullus: Festschrift Theodor Klauser*, Münster, Aschendorff, 1964 (JAC Ergänzungsband, 1), pp. 111-124.

² Babylonian Talmud, *Menahot* 29a.

between us. Where would he find the slightest echo of his not taking even 'a thread or a sandal thong'? Where would he find someone arguing with God, as he once did, in order to save Sodom from its well-deserved fate? Such people may well exist today, but sadly I doubt one will find them easily in *yeshivot*, *madāris*, or Divinity Schools.

It may be a blessing that the search for the 'historical' Abraham proves to be illusory. Identifying a common Abraham would be tantamount to renouncing the specificity of Judaism, of Christianity and of Islam. Martin Buber, in his detailed analysis of the Hebrew and Greek words for faith, *emunah* and *pistis*, titled his book *Two Types of Faith, Zwei Glaubensweisen*. One wonders whether, if *īmān* (faith, in Arabic) had been added to *emunah* and *pistis*, one could not have spoken of three (and probably even more) types of faith.¹ But one may point out that Abraham's closeness to God, his friendship with Him, might be even more significant than his discovery of God's uniqueness. After all, the idea that God is one can also be reached by philosophers. As Pascal wrote so powerfully in his *Mémorial*, from his mystical night of 23 November 1654: «God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not God of the philosophers and scientists!» («Dieu d'Abraham, Dieu d'Isaac, Dieu de Jacob, non Dieu des philosophes et des savants!»). Pascal is here inscribing himself in a long list of existentialist, anti-rationalist theologians, Jews and Muslims as well as Christians. What he needs, in order to reach the certainty, the joy and the peace that he mentions, is a personal, almost private God, with whom one can speak, even, perhaps, argue. A God with whom one can be, at least in theory, on friendly terms: Abraham's God.²

Although we cannot go back to the religion of the 'historical' Abraham, we know well the concept of Abraham's religion from the Qur'an: «And who has a better religion than one who submits himself to God (*aslama wağhahu li-illāhi*), does right and follows the true religion of Abraham the perennial believer (*millat Ibrāhīm hanīfan*)? God has taken Abraham for a friend (*wa-āttakhadha Allāhu Ibrāhīma khalīlan*)» (IV. 125). For the Qur'an, there is only one religion of Abraham, and it is Islam: «Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a perennial believer and a Muslim (*hanīfan musliman*)» (III. 67). For the Qur'an, both Jews and Christians seek to claim that Abraham, the first true believer in God's unity, belongs only to their own respective communities, although their sacred texts, the Torah and the Gospel, are later concoctions which cannot testify about Abraham's original religion.³

This vision of things is very well-known, of course, but I wish to call attention to the fact that it does not appear first in the Qur'an. In the early fourth century, already, Eusebius of Caesarea had argued at the outset of his *Ecclesiastical History*, that «it must clearly be held that the announcement to all peoples, recently made through the teaching of Christ, is the very first and most ancient and antique discovery of true religion (*theosebeias*) by Abraham and those lovers of God who followed him» (I, 4, 9-10). Re-

¹ On 'faith' in the earliest trend of Islam, see FRED M. DONNER, *From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community*, «Al-Abhath», 50-51, 2002-2003, pp. 9-53, as well as his new monograph, *Muhammad and the Believers at the Origins of Islam*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2010.

² See a rare Islamic prayer to the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob, as studied by Ignaz Goldziher, in his *Gesammelte Schriften* IV, hrsg. von Joseph Desomogyi, Hildesheim, Olms, 1970, pp. 340-342.

³ On Abraham in the Qur'an, see the entry on Abraham by Reuven Firestone in the *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, 5-11 (with bibliography). According to a seventh-century Christian source, Muhammad «taught [the Arabs] to recognize the God of Abraham, especially because he was learned and informed on the history of Moses». See R. W. THOMPSON, transl., *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1999, vol. I, p. 135.

garding Abraham, he had just written that «the children of the Hebrews boast [of him] as their own originator and ancestor (*archegon kai propatera*)» (I. 4. 5). The obvious conclusion follows: it is the Christians, rather than the Jews, who are the true children of Abraham and who follow his religion, pure and original monotheism: «It is only among Christians throughout the whole world that the manner of religion which was Abraham's can actually be found in practice» (I. 4. 14). Eusebius, then, argues that the Christians, rather than the Jews, are the real followers of Abraham's pristine religion, a religion later 'hijacked' by the law of Moses, now obsolete. Here, of course, Eusebius follows Paul, for whom the Jews, by obeying the Law of Arabian Sinai, are the spiritual offspring of Hagar (and hence of Ishmael), while the Christians are the true children of Sarah (*Gal.* 4, 21-31). For Eusebius, the Christians should 'bypass' the Jews, as it were, and reclaim for themselves Abraham's true religion, untainted by later additions.¹ We see now clearly that the Qur'an applies exactly the same logic also to the Christians. The Gospel, just like the Torah, is a corruption of Abraham's original religion: «O People of the Book (*Ya ahla al-kitabi*), why do you dispute concerning Abraham, when the Torah and the Gospel were only revealed after him? So you have no sense?» (III, 65).

In the Roman Empire, the figure of Abraham was well-known, extending far beyond the circles of the Rabbis and the Church Fathers. It is no mere chance that Emperor Alexander Severus (AD 208-235) is claimed to have possessed, together with statues of Orpheus and Apollonius of Tyana, one of Abraham (but no statue of Moses).² Emperor Julian himself, arguing against the Christians that, since they claim to be followers of Abraham, they should practice circumcision, adds:

I am one of those who avoid keeping their festivals with the Jews; but nevertheless I revere always the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; who, being themselves Chaldaeans, of a sacred race, skilled in theurgy, had learned the practice of circumcision while they sojourned as strangers with the Egyptians. And they revered a God who was ever gracious to me and to those who worshipped him as Abraham did, for he is a very great and powerful God, but he has nothing to do with you. For you do not imitate Abraham by erecting altars to him, or building altars of sacrifice and worshipping him as Abraham did, with sacrificial offerings.³

Abraham thus seems to have been, in late antiquity, a well-known and highly respected hero of archaic times – not only for Jews and Christians. Moreover, various testimonies point to the existence of a real cult, perhaps even a 'religion', of Abraham. A particularly interesting testimony is that of Sozomen, a Church historian from Palestine, born around 400 near Gaza. Sozomen describes for us a yearly festival (*panegyris*) of Abraham at Mamre, near Hebron, which was attended not only by people from the area but also by «Palestinians, Phenicians and Arabs», sometimes coming from far away. This festival, he says, which is also the occasion for doing business at the adjacent market,

¹ Eusebius develops the same argument in his *Chronography* (the first part of his *Chronicle*, for which the birth of Abraham (in 2016 B.C.) is the starting point of Christianity, a religion, then, older than Judaism. See SIMON PRICE, PETER THONEMANN, *The Birth of Classical Europe*, London, Allen Lane, 2010, pp. 312-313.

² *Historia Augusta* 29, 2. Most ancient historians agree today that the third-century lives in the *Historia Augusta* are largely fictional creations from the late fourth century, informed by contemporary struggles between paganism and Christianity.

³ The text goes on: «For Abraham used to sacrifice even as we Hellenes do, always and continually. And he used the method of divination from shooting stars. Probably this also is a Hellenic custom» (*Against the Galileans*, 354B-356B; 422-423 Loeb Classical Library). See further Marinus of Nablus, a Neoplatonic philosopher who had converted from Samaritanism, who identified the Hellenic tradition with the religion of Abraham (DAMASCIUS, *Life of Isidore*, test. 141, quoted by M. TARDIEU, «Annuaire du Collège de France», 2005-2006, p. 438).

was very popular. It was attended by Jews, who claimed Abraham as their forefather, pagans, because of the angels' visit, Christians, since Christ had appeared to Abraham. Some pray to the God of the universe, others invoke their angels with libations of wine, or offer an animal sacrifice. Sozomen adds that Emperor Constantine, having heard of this scandalous symbiosis between pagans and monotheists, had ordered the altars to be destroyed, and a church to be erected, so that Abraham would be remembered only according to orthodox Christian rituals (apparently, with limited success).¹ It is to be noticed that Arabs, or Saracens took part in this Abrahamic 'ecumenical' festival. About them, Sozomen says elsewhere that they practiced circumcision, refrained from eating pork and observed many other Jewish rites and customs.² Constantine's purism and his violent interdiction of this too rare example of religious toleration and pluralism in what was fast becoming, under his aegis, the 'Holy Land', meant to say that there was only one way of celebrating Abraham, just as there was only one religion of Abraham, Christian orthodoxy.

Sozomen's trustworthy testimony has not remained unnoticed by Islamicists, and some important studies in the last generation have suggested possible trajectories from Abrahamic rituals to the birth of Islam (in particular in the Abrahamic Meccan sanctuary).³ The dearth of conclusive evidence, however, does not allow definitive conclusions, although the new epigraphic material coming to light from the Negev and from Saudi Arabia highlights the importance of Jewish and Judaizing monotheism among the Arabs from the fourth century on.⁴ The modern study of the Jewish and Christian roots of Islam has a long history.⁵ I cannot enter here into a highly technical and highly charged debate, but I wish at least to point out that the Abrahamic matrix and its constant kaleidoscopic transformations, offers a way out from false dilemmas.

Throughout history, Jews, Christians and Muslims have fought for the sole possession of Abraham. For the Jews, he is *Avraham avinu*, Our Father Abraham. Although there is no denying that he was also Ishmael's father, the Jews remained convinced – as

¹ *Ecclesiastical History*, II, 4, vol. 1, pp. 244-249 («Sources Chrétiennes», 306). On this festival, see ARIEH KOFSKY, *Mamre: A Case of a Regional Cult?*, in Arieh Kofsky, Guy G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Sharing the Sacred: Religious Contacts and Conflicts in the Holy Land: First-Fifteenth Centuries CE*, Jerusalem, Ben Zvi, 1998, pp. 19-30. See further ELIZABETH KAY FOWDEN, *Sharing Holy Places*, «Common Knowledge», 8, 2002, pp. 124-146.

² *Ecclesiastical History*, VI, 38, 11, vol. III, p. 242-246 («Sources Chrétiennes», 495).

³ See in particular TILMAN NAGEL, "Der erste Muslim": *Abraham in Mekka*, in Reinhard G. Kratz, Tilman Nagel (eds.), *Abraham, unser Vater? Die gemeinsamen Wurzeln von Judentum, Christentum und Islam*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2003, pp. 233-249. MICHAEL A. COOK, PATRICIA CRONE, *Hagarism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977, ascribe much importance to the figure of Abraham in the late antique background of Islam. On the Late Antique background of Islam, see AZIZ AL-AZMEH, *Rom, das Neue Rom und Bagdad: Pfade der Spätantike*, Berlin, Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2008.

⁴ For Arabia, see in particular CHRISTIAN JULIEN ROBIN, *Le judaïsme de Himyar*, «Arabia», 1, 2003, pp. 97-172, as well as Joëlle Beaucamp, Françoise Briquel-Chatonnet, Christian Julien Robin (eds.), *Juifs et chrétiens en Arabie aux V^e et VI^e siècles: Regards croisés sur les sources*, Paris, Association des amis du Centre d'histoire et civilization de Byzance, 2010. For the Negev, see YEHUDA D. NEVO, JUDITH KOREN, *Crossroads to Islam: the Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State*, Amherst, N.Y., Prometheus, 2003, esp. pp. 186-190. Nevo and Koren highlight the frequency of the name 'Abraham' in the Nessana documentary papyri from late antique Palestine, presumably written by Arabs, who, according to them, might have converted to Christianity from their previous 'Abrahamic' identity. But 'Abraham' is also frequent in papyri from fifth-century Egypt. See further FERGUS MILLAR, *Hagar, Ishmael, Josephus, and the Origins of Islam*, in his *The Greek World, the Jews, and the East*, edited by Hannah M. Cotton, Guy M. Rogers, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2006, pp. 351-378.

⁵ It dates at least from Abraham Geiger's doctoral dissertation, published in 1833: *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* In the second half of the seventeenth century, already, Richard Simon could see in Islam a mixture of Judaism and of Christianity. See STROUMSA, *A New Science*, pp. 62-76 and notes.

indeed did the Christians – that Isaac was his really beloved son, his sole heir. In the Rabbinic conception of Abraham, which emerged in late antiquity at a time of real conflict over Abraham's inheritance, there was no place for the Christian, and later for the Islamic claims on Abraham. Similarly, the Christians, having rejected the Jews' claim of Abraham as their own, would have no room for the Islamic Ibrahim, for them a later perversion based upon poorly understood Jewish and Christian traditions. Finally, the Qur'an, as we have seen, rejected both the Jewish and the Christian claims with the same arguments. In each case, there is one true Abraham and two illegitimate claims based on false prophecy – or, for the Christian understanding of *vetus Israel*, on the misunderstanding by the Jews of their prophets of old. From each of the three major contenders for the inheritance, there is one true heir and two impostors.

Indeed, one cannot find the concept of 'Abrahamic religions' (in the plural) in the traditional theology of Judaism, Christianity or Islam. Whence, then, does the concept come? Although I have not been able, so far, to identify a clear source, all occurrences I am aware of belong to the second half of the last century. In the short entry of the Oxford English Dictionary, the first occurrence of 'Abrahamic faiths' is from 1988. A generation ago, one often heard or read about «the Judeo-Christian tradition». This concept, too, is a concoction of the twentieth century.¹ It made its first appearance before the Second World War, mainly in the United States. It became more common, also in Europe, after the war, obviously in order to highlight the fundamental parental link between Christianity and Judaism, in a rather belated attempt to fight anti-Semitism. The concept of 'Abrahamic Religions' seems to appear even later on the scene, and has become more and more frequent only in the last two or three decades, fast replacing older designations, such as the rather bland 'monotheistic religions',² or the more interesting 'religions of the book', a term coined, it seems, by Max Müller in his *Lectures on the Science of Religion*, in a broadening of the Qur'anic phrase *ahl al-kitab*. One should note here that the partition between 'Indo-European' or 'Indo-Aryan' and 'Semitic' religions in the nineteenth century should have permitted the invention of the concept of Abrahamic religions. But for scholars of Ernest Renan's generation, Christianity was a European religion, untainted, as it were, by its 'Semitic' origins.³ The anti-Semitism of European scholars, thus, pushing back Jews and Arabs into 'the Orient', caused the 'Abrahamic religions' to be born at least a century after term.

This concept, then, is quite new, and represents a real paradigm change. It does not take much intellectual daring to assume that its origin, or at least its common use, is due to honest efforts to broaden the boundaries of European identity, in order to permit the cultural integration of the new Muslim populations of Europe – or, at least, to fight Islamophobia and its dubious arguments about the essentially foreign character of Islam in European culture. Dubious, at the very least since Islam has always remained present in Europe, even after the failure of the siege of Vienna in 1683. Today, the concept of 'Abrahamic religions' is of immediate relevance in the ongoing debate

¹ To be sure, 'Children of Abraham', or 'Sons of Abraham' was in use earlier. See for instance JAMES KRITZECK, *Sons of Abraham: Jews, Christians, and Moslems*, Baltimore, Helicon, 1965. For the 'Judeo-Christian tradition', see MARK SILK, *Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America*, «The American Quarterly», 36, 1984, pp. 65-85, and his *From Christian the Judeo-Christian to Abrahamic: the Shibboleths of American Civil Religion*, forthcoming.

² *Monotheism* was coined by the Cambridge Platonist Henry More in the seventeenth century, while we owe *dualismus* to his contemporary Thomas Hyde.

³ See in particular MAURICE OLENDER, *Les langues du paradis: Ariens et Sémites: un couple providential*, Paris, Gallimard-Le Seuil, 1989.

on European religious and cultural identity and for the attempts to forge a Constitution for the European Union.

The gestation of the idea of the Abrahamic religions is nowhere better exemplified than in the haunting *Trois Prières d'Abraham* of the great Orientalist Louis Massignon, a collection of texts on which he kept working, more or less constantly for fifty years, from 1912 to the time of his death in 1962.¹ The French Massignon, who considered himself the intellectual heir of the great Hungarian Jewish Arabist and Islamicist Ignaz Goldziher, was profoundly Christian; he had felt in his youth the powerful attraction of Père Charles de Foucault, who preached the Gospel among the Touaregs in the Algerian Sahara, and in 1931, he became a third-order Franciscan, choosing 'Abraham' as his religious name. Just like Goldziher, Massignon was deeply drawn to Islam, and like Goldziher, seems to have been at some point close to converting to Islam. *The Three Prayers of Abraham* (texts which do not seem to have been translated into any language) are based upon a close reading of three episodes in the *Genesis* Abraham saga. Abraham's first prayer is the one he prayed near Sodom, for its inhabitants (*Gen* 18, 22-33). The second is the prayer for Ishmael, in Beer Sheva (*Gen* 21, 9-21). The third prayer is the Binding of Isaac, on Mount Moriah (*Gen* 22, 1-19). Massignon was aware, very early on, of the innovative character of his intuitions. He was certain that the Christians, in contradistinction to both Jews and Muslims, were still lacking in 'Abrahamic consciousness'. Even his spiritual mentor, Charles de Foucault, was not willing to accept Massignon's paradigm, refusing to grant Ishmael a part in Abraham's spiritual inheritance. «Do you believe in Islam?». To this question, Massignon answered, leaving his interlocutor, a Catholic priest, deeply unsatisfied: «I believe in the God of Abraham, real, immanent, personal».²

We should now ask ourselves to what extent the concept of 'Abrahamic religions' is useful for the historian of religions, and whether it does not bring with it some epistemological dangers. Even from my earlier – too brief – sketches, the genetic links between the different religions stemming from ancient Israel are as deep as they are obvious – and we should never forget to include in this list, at the very least, Samaritans, Mandeans, Manichaeans, Alawites, Ahmadis, Bahais, Mormons and Christian Scientists, to name only a few in the fascinating spectrum of religions to have sprouted from the margins of the different religious establishments. We should also mention the many Reformation movements, throughout history, within each of the Abrahamic religions. These genetic links are also reflected in striking structural similarities: between Judaism and Christianity, Christianity and Islam, Judaism and Islam.

It is a sad fact of life that family resemblances also breed family feuds, alienation and estrangement. Oddly enough, it is not only the term 'Abrahamic religions', or the Chair devoted to their study, that seems to be new, but also their study itself, as such. Since early modern times, a number of great scholars have delved into the intricacies of Judaism, Christianity and Islam throughout history, and have produced path-

¹ The texts are conveniently edited in LOUIS MASSIGNON, *Les trois prières d'Abraham*, Paris, Cerf, 1997.

² What could appear to European Christian ecclesiastics (and to the Pope himself) as tantamount to a flirtation with heresy would be hailed by others, in particular Christian Arabs, as a new Christian discourse, open to the spirit of Islam, and heralding a new era in the relationship between Christians and Muslims. It is among these pupils of Massignon, such as Father Youakim Moubarac, a Syrian Catholic priest and the editor of Massignon's *Opera Minora*, that I am tempted to see the progressive implantation, at least in French, of the 'Abrahamic' discourse on Judaism, Christianity and Islam. See YUAKIM MOUBARAC, *Abraham dans le Coran*, Paris, Vrin, 1958.

breaking studies of the many contacts and conflicts between them. We possess many magnificent monographs on various topics linking two of these three religions, and a number of imposing synthetic studies. On the Abrahamic religions as such, however, the dearth of scholarly books on our shelves is striking.

What we do have is a plethora of well-meaning books, seeking to show that the differences between these religions are only superficial epiphenomena, while their deep kernel is identical. This 'unitarian' conception strikes me as belonging to interfaith discourse, which is best served outside universities. Such discourse, I argue, is a trap into which scholarship should not fall, lest it forgets that the most interesting aspect of the comparative study of phenomena is not so much the similarities as the differences between them. More precisely, scholarship should mainly focus on understanding how and why genetic or structural similarities function differently in related systems. As is well-known, it is precisely resemblances that separate movements, a fact reflected in Martin Buber's *bon mot*, according to which the Bible is for the Jews neither Old nor a Testament.

To the 'unitarian' approach of the Abrahamic religions, I therefore prefer the 'trinitarian' approach. Studying *together* different phenomena, seeking to better understand each of them precisely through comparison, is the proper role of the comparative historian of religions, indeed of the comparative historian *tout court*. More than most, Sir John Elliott has practiced comparative history, at once daringly and carefully. Sir John is well aware of its dangers and pitfalls, and knows that comparative history is no panacea.¹ This certainly holds true for the comparative study of the Abrahamic religions, where one is almost always dependent upon the work done by other, more specialized scholars. The question, then, remains: what is the heuristic value of the comparative study of the Abrahamic religions? How will it lead us beyond the conclusions reached by scholars in each specific domain?

Where phenomena have been studied, so far, in one, or, at best, in two traditions, the comparative study of the three Abrahamic religions can offer a three-dimensional analysis. I wish to mention at least one imperious rule of comparative religious history: phenomena should never be studied out of their historical context. Contextual analysis, which entails also philological care, remains our best safeguard against the vagaries of twentieth-century phenomenology of religion. Contextual analysis should also prevent us from another cognitive fallacy: that of studying the Abrahamic religions in isolation from their 'pagan' contexts: from ancient Near Eastern religions, through the religions of Greece and Rome, of ancient Arabia, and of those of India, to the 'political religions' of the twentieth century.

From the end of late antiquity to that of the Middle Ages, from Baghdad to Toledo, Jews, Christians and Muslims alike, sometimes even in collaboration, succeeded in a major reshuffling of classical culture, its Christianization and Islamization through the translations into Syriac, Arabic, Hebrew and Latin of major works of Greek literature. One often reads these days of 'the spiritual roots' of European identity. I must confess that I am wary of 'roots'. The word points to the past, and more seriously, it entails a self-enclosed identity and reflects centripetal forces. Too often, 'roots' are a code for what Henri Bergson called 'closed religion', to which he opposed the 'open

¹ In this regard, he quotes Marc Bloch: «Elle ne peut pas tout; en science, pas de talisman». See J. H. ELLIOTT, *Comparative History*, in Carlos Barros (ed.), *Historia a debate*. Vol. III, *Otros enfoques*, Santiago de Compostela, A Coruna, 1995, pp. 11-19.

religion' exemplified first by the prophets of Israel, then by Jesus. Rather than roots, I prefer to speak about heritage, about legacy. The comparative historian of religions will find herself or himself working as a historian of culture, or rather, a historian of the intersection and crosspollination between cultures. The Christian and Muslim societies, then, can be perceived, together, as one huge eco-system of sorts, within which religions have constantly informed the cultures, and cultures have informed religions. (This does not entail, of course, that religion and culture be perceived as entities quite distinct from one another.) It is this vast inter-continuum of civilizations, again, from Baghdad to Toledo, at least, which represents our real cultural heritage. In that sense, the concept of Abrahamic religions is a powerful tool for countering discourse on a 'clash of civilizations'.

Throughout the centuries and the continents, the relations between the Abrahamic religions have been cantankerous at best. What started with a conflict of interpretations within the Jerusalem Jewish community in the first century grew first into mutual detestation, and then into the sad, long story of Christian anti-Semitism, up to its modern racial and murderous manifestations. The relationship between Christians and Muslims seems never to have succeeded in overcoming the doubly devastating pattern of Crusade and Jihad. As to the relations between Jews and Muslims, although they were never quite idyllic, not even in the so-called 'symbiosis', or *convivencia* of Medieval Andalus, they seem, today, to have reached a nadir.

My suspicion of 'dual' relationships also stems from a distasteful pattern sometimes discernable in religious dialogues. Too often, interfaith dialogues between Jews and Christians, Christians and Muslims, or Jews and Muslims, seem to work best, or at least most easily, when denigrating the third, absent side. Jewish-Christian dialogues, today, sometimes reflect the renewed old fear of Muslims and angst of Islam. Participants in Islamo-Christian dialogues, for their part, bask in their shared universal mission and world-wide presence, and find it easy to denigrate that small, stiff-necked, obnoxious nation, the Jews. Jews and Muslims, on their side, by tradition readily agree on their shared 'true' monotheism, while spurning what they call Christian polytheistic proclivities. I propose, therefore, that studying the Abrahamic religions *together*, from the point of view of the interaction between cultures, and as an essential part of our cultural memory, might offer a way out of the exclusiveness of conflicting religious identities.

Aulus Gellius, the second-century C.E. Latin polymath, wrote about the poet Ennius that he possessed three hearts, *tria corda*, as he spoke Greek, Oscan and Latin. One wishes we could reach a similar familiarity with the three Abrahamic religions and their languages, one dreams of a world in which one could claim to feel equally at home with each of them. Elias Canetti, who earned the Nobel Prize for Literature for his German works, but who shared with my parents Ladino as his mother tongue, wonders in Goethean fashion why it is that one should limit oneself to having only one religion.¹ I too, sometimes find myself imagining a world in which one could pray in a synagogue in the morning, prostrate in a mosque at noon, and sing in a church in the evening, a world without walls, in which the words of David's psalm would carry a new meaning: «The princes of the peoples gather, as the people of the God of Abraham...» (*nedivei 'ammim ne'esafu, 'am elohei avraham...*, *Psalms 47, 10*).

¹ ELIAS CANETTI, *Die Provinz des Menschen, Aufzeichnungen 1942-1972*, Munich-Wien, Carl Hanser, 1972, p. 10: «Wie unfassbar bescheiden sind die Menschen, die sich einer einzigen Religion verschreiben! Ich habe sehr viele Religionen, und die eine, die ihnen übergeordnet ist, bildet sich erst im Laufe meines Lebens».

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