Common Roots or Unavoidable Difference?
Jews, Christians, Muslims and the Riddle of Diversity

by Peter A. Huff

In a time of international war, domestic uncertainty, and growing religious intolerance, I have been tempted in recent months to place all of my emphasis on the themes of unity and commonality. Like many professors of religious studies around the country, I have been invited by numerous church and civic organizations to participate in interfaith panel discussions exploring the common roots of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For the most part I have been more than willing to showcase the striking similarities shared by these traditions. In doctrine, practice, and fundamental spiritual orientation all three historic traditions issue from the same basic insights and concerns of ethical monotheism. It seems as though we are at a stage of evolution when we do not need another person to tell us that Judaism and Christianity are profoundly different, or that Jews and Muslims inhabit mutually exclusive mental worlds, or that Christianity and Islam are the chief rivals on the global religious scene. We have been schooled in difference for far too long. It is time for remedial work in unity.

But the more I reflect on the theme of common roots, the more problematic difference has become for me. Philosopher William James once said that "empiricism inclines to pluralistic views."[1] That is, honest observation of the world seems to bring us naturally to a conclusion making difference primary.

I think this is obvious when we consider the dynamics of families. My brother and I, for example, were born two years apart. We were raised by the same parents in the same house. We attended the same schools and the same church. We had the same teachers and even to a large extent the same friends. We listened to the same music and read many of the same books. We ate the same food. But today, the religious studies professor and the professional opera director are very different people. We live in different parts of the country and vacation in different parts of the world. We eat different kinds of food and wear different sorts of clothes. Our libraries are different, our lifestyles are different, our belief systems are different, our life goals are different. Given our common roots, how do you explain the difference? Or to put it another way, in light of our differences, what possible relevance do the common roots have?

When we turn to the three religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the situation becomes even more complex. It would be something like discovering that my brother and I each had multiple personalities. For many Americans, especially since 9/11, the question has been: What are the common roots of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam? But this rather simple inquiry naturally leads to a disturbing series of incredibly complicated questions. Which Judaism? Whose Judaism? The Judaism of the North American suburbanite or the Judaism of the West Bank settler? The Judaism of the Reform humanist or the Judaism of the haredi separatist? Similarly, which Christianity? Whose Christianity? The Christianity of the West Virginia serpent handler or the Christianity of the Russian Orthodox monk? The Christianity of the North American abortion protestor or the Christianity of the sub-Saharan polygamist? And then we turn to Islam. But which Islam? Whose Islam? The Islam of the business-class North African immigrant or the Islam of the working-class African American convert? The Islam of the knowledge-class Pakistani exile-intellectual or the Islam of the under-class Afghan peasant?

Consider the nearly 2 billion people in the world who self-identify as Christian. To what extent can we say they are all actually practicing the same religion? To dismiss the problem as an

ivory tower exercise and then point to their common affirmation of Jesus as savior raises an additional set of thorny questions: Which Jesus? Whose Jesus?

What we quickly learn when we do this cross-cultural, cross-confessional world tour is: There is no generic Judaism, no mere Christianity, and no monolithic Islam. Rather, these large abstract categories—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—really function as convenient umbrellas for huge clusters or families of religions. This is where we must move from the familiar singular to the awkward but more accurate plural. In the real world there is no Judaism, only Judaisms; no Christianity, only Christianities; no Islam, only Islams.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz spoke of religious traditions as "cultural systems"—patterns of identity, mood, and practice that shape every aspect of life, not just formal belief: food, clothing, sexuality, child-rearing, medicine, education, art, politics, entertainment, war, and many more.[2] When we carefully consider the evidence we find that each of these great Abrahamic traditions represents not a single cultural system but rather a loose global confederation of multiple "cultural systems," or tribes, if you will.

One way to demonstrate this is to focus on what I call "adjectival" theology. The use of adjectives such as liberal, conservative, traditional, progressive, orthodox, radical, and fundamentalist to modify and illustrate a theological stance is now pretty standard in our everyday speech about religion. What this sort of language reflects is our instinctive knowledge that a "religion" is really a dense network of interlocking tribal systems. Of course, some believers resent the use of adjectives and insist that they are simply practicing "real" Judaism or "real" Christianity or "real" Islam, but even in their protests they resort to adjectives, thus unwittingly proving my point.

In *The Restructuring of American Religion*, sociologist Robert Wuthnow has shown that in the United States denominational identity has been waning since World War II.[3] Religious Americans still have a high level of denominational affiliation, but ecclesiastical belonging is not the primary way people identify themselves religiously. In other words, following the conventional boundaries between denominations and between larger religious communities is not the best way to slice the contemporary religious pie. There are significant fault lines within denominations and within religious traditions, and these are the lines that reveal the true shape of religious identity. When we depart from the ideal—the level of official creed and code—and move to the real—the level of experience, the liberal Jew may have more in common with the liberal Christian than she does with other Jews. The fundamentalist Christian may find more affinity with a fundamentalist Jew than she does with others who claim the name Christian. And, *mutatis mutandis*, I think we could say the same of Muslims.

Making the situation even more complex is the burgeoning reality of what many scholars today are calling multiple religious belonging or hyphenated religious identity. As Catherine Cornille has observed, "In a world of seemingly unlimited choice in matters of religious identity and affiliation, the idea of belonging exclusively to one religious tradition or of drawing from only one set of spiritual, symbolic, or ritual resources is no longer self-evident."[4] With an increasing number of Jews practicing zazen and Christians chanting Hindu mantras and Muslims accommodating to what John Berthrong has dubbed the "divine deli" of the North American cultural mosaic,[5] religious dual citizenship may be the wave of the future.

Recently government officials and media celebrities have tried to coach Americans and the rest of the world on how to distinguish between a good Muslim and a bad Muslim. Aside from the fact that most of them are not qualified to make such a distinction and that it is none of

their business in the first place, such a move violates the integrity of religious experience. It is a pitiful and dangerous attempt to ignore the irreducible plurality of Islamic experience. This same irreducible plurality is at the heart of the Jewish and Christian experience.

One could argue that traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism have easily accommodated plurality throughout their respective historical careers (although exclusivist versions of each tradition are steadily gaining ground). For the Abrahamic imagination, however, plurality has always produced a certain degree of theological anxiety. Part of the legacy of the classical monotheistic impulse has been a tension between the universal and the particular. Each of the Abrahamic traditions makes bold universal claims: one God, one universe, one human race, one revelation, one book, one people, one creed, one way of life. But ironically this universal theme is expressed in the context of the particular: the universal message from the universal god comes to a particular tribe in the ancient Near East, or is embodied fully in the particular life of a Palestinian Jewish peasant, or is articulated definitively by a particular illiterate Arabian merchant. Like it or not, the universal becomes linked to particular pieces of real estate, particular ethnic groups, particular events, particular institutions, particular languages (God evidently does not speak Esperanto). It is the particular then that breeds plurality, and despite all of its efforts, the universal cannot get it all together.

And so I return to my inadvertent theme: common roots and unavoidable difference. From my perspective, the principal challenge today is not to identify common roots and shared heritages—as important as these are. More often than not they lead us into the abstract. Rather, we would do well to stick to the concrete. What we need are positive and creative strategies for dealing with and appreciating—even celebrating—difference. Identify all the common roots you can, and Jews, Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims are just going to insist on being different. Personally I would not have it any other way.

Notes

1. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe,* Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1996, p.8.
2. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," *The Religious Situation: 1968,* ed. Donald R. Cutler, Boston, Beacon Press, 1968, pp.639-688.
3. Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988.
4. Catherine Cornille, "The Dynamics of Multiple Belonging," *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belong and Christian Identity,* ed. Catherine Cornille, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 2002, p.1
5. See John H. Berthrong, *The Divine Deli: Religious Identity in the North American Cultural Mosaic*, Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 1999.

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