

CHAPTER 4

JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF ISLĀM

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I. Foreword

We meet today in a climate of tension caused by recent events in Iran. The whole world erupted in protests and appeals. The Pope sent an emissary to the Iranian ruler appealing for the release of those taken as hostages at the embassy of the United States in Tehran. The Security Council of the United Nations took a unanimous resolution calling for the immediate release of those hostages. Similar appeals and voices of condemnation are heard aloud elsewhere.

We do not by any means advocate or even condone the practice of taking hostages as a measure of attaining legitimate aspiration; but the recent events in Iran have aroused in us, as well as in any serious and honest humans, deep reflections— nay anxieties — over past events of recent history. For decades the Muslims of Iran were tyrannized over by an inhuman dictatorship which slaughtered, tortured and maimed them with the full blessing — even collaboration — of the West. Palestinians were driven from their own home *en masse* by Zionists or Western Jews seeking to capture a land and empty it of its people in order to repopulate it by strangers. The process by which this genocide has been accomplished was cultural, political as well as military. After massacring inhabitants and dumping their bodies in the village well (as happened at Deir Yasin), or killing a few and terrorizing the rest and ordering them out of their homes and lands which they had occupied for millennia (as happened and continues to happen every day throughout Palestine), every Arab vestige in the village is wiped out. Tens and tens of thousands of humans have been killed, tortured or maimed while the Christian West furnished all the political and economic support, and supplied the arms and munitions needed by the perpetrators of

genocide. Southern Lebanon's innocent citizens have been bombarded by the most destructive weapons — napalm and cluster bombs — generously given by a nation committed to the so-called Judeo-Christian moral tradition. Moreover, America has spared nothing in its arsenal which it did not give to the perpetrators of these crimes so as to make them invincible even if three quarters of the earth stood against them. Millions of Muslims in the Philippines, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Thailand, Burma, India, Afghanistan, and in many other places are rendered homeless or killed or maimed, either by Christians or by others who are helped, kept in power and armed by Christians. Muslim minorities everywhere are struggling to survive under oppressive regimes that seek to liquidate them.

In all these tragic happenings, no similar protest is heard. No outcry for the violation of human rights. No support for the victims is contemplated except what may enhance the public image of the West. Indeed, the veto is used to abort any world condemnation in the United Nations. Where was, and where is the human conscience of the West that is outraged today at Iran's seizure of the hostages? What does its silence — nay, collaboration — yesterday and outcry today tell us about its humanity? Again, we should like to stress that we disagree with the method of taking an innocent human being a hostage. But are the life and suffering of those millions of Muslims not equally worthy of concern?

This is not unrelated to my theme, but is most germane to it. For I maintain that it is the deepest convictions entertained deliberately and consciously, or held in the subconscious by indoctrination in childhood, that make humans behave as they do, whether individually or collectively, these convictions are certainly generated by religious doctrine, by the faith and its attitude to the others.

II. Three levels of Discourse

First, being the youngest of the world religion, and, in its self-understanding, intended to be the religion of all humans, Islām had to relate itself to the religions of mankind, and through them to humanity. Second, being a reaffirmation and re-crystallization of the Semitic religious tradition, Islām had to relate itself to all Semitic religions, i.e., to its predecessors within that tradition. Thirdly, Islām also related itself to Judaism and Christianity in the most intimate way because, again in its self-understanding, it saw itself standing in great affinity with them. Consequently, Islām relates itself to Jews and Christians on all three levels: As humans, as heirs of the Semitic religious tradition, and as Jews and Christians. This relationship was on this account built into Islām's very nature and core. There is no Islām without it, as we shall see in the sequel.

A. The Human or Universal Level

Islām affirms the existence of primordial, natural religion, a genuine *religio naturalis*, which is the gift of God to all humans. It is called *din al fiṭrah*, or the religion of nature or creation. All humans are endowed with it without exception; for it comes to them at birth. It is an integral part of their personality, of their very being. God called this natural religion “His own religion” and commanded all humans to honor and belong to it. “Turn your face to the primordial religion, the religion in which God created all humans. That is the immutable pattern of God” (Qur’ān 30:30). Islām identified this *Ur-Religion* as the endowment of reason and understanding, of the critical faculties. “Only those with knowledge will reason out and understand it” (Qur’ān 29:43). Islām declared the human senses as avenues of knowledge (Qur’ān 90:8-10; 2:269); of the tools of knowledge such as language and writing (Qur’ān 96:1-5; 68:1). All these are “perfections” which God created, which He bestowed, to the end that humans make themselves felicitous by their use. The use of all these faculties or perfections God commanded, must be responsible; i.e., it must lead to the religion of God whose observance is felicity. “Hearing, seeing, and understanding — [all faculties of knowing] must be responsible” (Qur’ān 17:36).

The content of natural religion is universally imperative. All humans ought to fulfill it since they have been equipped at birth with all that is required to know it. As such it constitutes their *raison d'être*. Its first component is the recognition that God is indeed God; that no one else is God. The rest of its content revolves around the creature's creatureliness *vis-à-vis* the Creator, a relationship which can be none other than worship and service. “I have not created humans or jinn but to serve Me” (Qur’ān 51:56) It is the observance of His patterns which are knowable by reason with which He equipped all humans. No human may therefore be justified in his *kufr*, or unGodliness. And no human may be excused for falling into *shirk* or polytheism. Recognition and hence acknowledgment of God as God is everybody's business, everybody's prerogative, everybody's possibility, and everybody's supreme duty. Islām has no countenance for those religions or theories which discriminate between humans at birth, deeming some capable and others incapable by nature of knowing the one God. With such doctrines, the said religions or theories absolve those whom they declare incapable, of the supreme duty of acknowledging and worshipping the one God. They thus rob them of their humanity. In fact, any tolerance or leniency on this point is tantamount to denying the normativeness of the divine Unity, and hence to sharing in the failure. Natural religion is absolutely normative for all humans. By definition, it admits of no exception. While it may not coerce anyone into observing its tenets, it is

categorically opposed to, and necessarily condemning of, those who violate them, or permit or tolerate their violation. It is necessarily proselytizing and missionary. Otherwise it would not be consistent with itself. Islām identified itself with the religion of nature (Qur'ān 2:19). God called it "the religion" and declared it His own (Qur'ān 2:132). It therefore presents its case as a demand of nature, a necessary requisite of reason, a critical truth (Qur'ān 22:78).

The universalism of *religio naturalis* is further buttressed by Islām's understanding of history. Islām affirms that God did not leave mankind entirely to its own resources in the matter of acknowledging Him as God and Creator. In His mercy, He sent prophets to convey to them His divine message that they owe religion to God alone. "There is no people but unto them We sent a messenger... There is no people but We made them recipients of the message that they owe service to God and avoidance of evil" (Qur'ān 35:24; 25:51; 16:36); We sent no messenger but with the revelation that there is no God but God (Qur'ān 21:25). Thus, all excuses fall down. No matter how humans may have denied their humanity by refusing to perceive the truth of God, of His transcendence and unity, they were duly informed and warned by a messenger whom God had sent to them to teach them that truth in their own tongue and idiom (Qur'ān 14:4).

In this respect, Islām recognizes all Jews and all Christians as creatures of God, whom God had blessed with reason and understanding, sufficient to enable them to know God in His transcendence and unity; that being so endowed, they must have recognized God as God, one, transcendent and ultimate. Moreover, Islām acknowledges all Jews and Christians to have received from God messages through their prophet's teaching of the same lesson, so that if, *per impossibile*, they have missed what is natural and hence necessary to them, they were given it gratuitously as a gift from heaven, through prophecy. As such, the Jews and Christians are people with the true religion, the *dīn al fiṭrah*. No Muslim may deny this fact of nature without contradicting the Qur'ān and hence, abjuring Islām. Recognition of this truth is of his faith. Therefore, religiously speaking, the Muslim acknowledges the Jews and Christians to be endowed with the religion of God twice, once by nature and hence necessarily and universally, and once by the grace of God through their prophets.

B. The Level of the Semitic Tradition

Unlike the first level on which Islām regards the Jews and Christians as *de jure* possessors of true religion necessarily, i.e., by virtue of their birth as humans and their receipt of universal prophecy, this level regards them as possessors of true religion by virtue of their inheritance of the Semitic religious tradition. Religiously speaking, the Jews and

Christians are heirs of a genuine religious tradition, perhaps the greatest on account of its numerous prophets. History recognizes them as such. True, being the heir of a legacy is an accident of history, not a matter of necessity. The legacy of history may be denied or abandoned, and a new identity acquired. Belonging to one's legacy is a matter of choice. But the fact that Jews and Christians do belong to the legacy and regard it as their own is incontrovertible. Hence Islām acclaims them as partakers of the religion of God. True, they must accept the legacy and acknowledge it as a legacy of the religion of God. But those who do, Islām honors as possessors of true religion.

The Semitic legacy of religion, Islām holds, began with Noah. "God ordained for you the same religion He ordained for Noah," the Qur'ān affirms (42:13). "God chose Adam, Noah, the people of Abraham and 'Imrān... We have sent a revelation to you [Muḥammad] as We did to Noah and the prophets after him ... to 'Ād and Thamūd and countless others known only to God that came after them, and about whom We did not tell you, to them We sent Our prophets ... that there shall be no doubt in God, the Creator of heaven and earth... We have entered them all into Our mercy ... rehabilitated them and guided them to the straightforward path (Qur'ān 3:33; 4:163; 21:85; 6:86). Ancient history and archeology added to those whom the Qur'ān mentioned the names of Sargon of Akkad, of Lippit Ishtar, Hammurabi and others who promulgated laws which they received from heaven, and called all humans to abide by them in fidelity to God.

The religion of Noah's descendants consisted of principles which were repeatedly affirmed by all Semitic revelations. The first was the transcendence of God, affirmed in His ontological separateness from or otherness than His creation. The second was the relevance of God to His creation, constituting its *raison d'être*, its purpose and ought, the norms by which every creature is to live its life. The third is that this divine relevance is knowable to man, whether by divination (i.e., reading it in the omens of nature), science (i.e., discovering it in the inimitable patterns or laws of nature), or prophecy, the direct revelation of the will of God through words for the ready use of the understanding. The fourth is that humans are capable of fulfilling the divine imperatives, by virtue of the knowledge, actional capacity and subservience of nature to them, which God had endowed to them. The fifth and last is that humans are responsible and hence subject to judgment; to reward in case of compliance and punishment in case of defiance or violation. These five principles are the core and foundation of all Semitic religiosity, from Noah to Muḥammad. All those who belonged to the Semitic tradition acknowledged these principles regardless of whether they observed them or not in their everyday lives. And by doing likewise, the Jews and Christians establish their claim to the religion of

God. And to acknowledge this truth is integral to the faith of Islām.

C. The Particular Level of Judaism and Christianity

The foregoing acknowledgments of Islām, indubitable and unchallengeable to Muslims because they come as divine proclamations in the Qur'ān, were further reinforced by a third kind of justification: the direct kind. The first two levels effected their justification by laying down principles and declaring the Jews and Christians as instantiations of them. The third level confronted the Jews and Christians in their Judaism and Christianity head on, and declared them justified in the eye of God. "Those who believed — the Jews, the Christians, the Sabaeans, and others — who believe in God, the Day of Judgment and do the good works, stand to be rewarded by God. No fear or grief shall befall them (Qur'ān 2:62; 5:72). Say [to the Jews and Christians], we [Muslims] believe in that which was revealed to us as well as that which was revealed to you. Our God and your God is One and the same. We all submit to Him (Qur'ān 29:46) Say, we [Muslims] believe in God, in what He revealed to us, to Ibrahīm, Isma'īl, Ishaq, Ya'qūb and the tribes, to Moses, Jesus and all the revelations of the prophets — without discriminating between them. To God we submit (Qur'ān 2:136)."

This constitutes more than justification of Judaism and Christianity. It is not only similarity, likeness or agreement of Judaism and Christianity with Islām. It is self-identification with them. Obviously no greater justification can be found or given. Islām regards the God of Judaism and Christianity as its own God, their prophets as its own prophets, their revelations and scriptures as its own revelation and scripture. Together, Islām holds the two religions and itself to be one religious fraternity. Nothing more could be asked or desired. Like the other levels of justification, this one too is Qur'ānic, held by all Muslims to proceed from God, *verbatim*.

This unity — nay, identity — of the three religions makes the Muslims regard the Jews and Christians as their brothers in faith in, and submission to the one God of all. Disagreement between them there certainly is; but under the canopy of faith in God and belonging to His religion, all disagreements are domestic disputes. Indeed, there is no single criticism which Islām has addressed to either Judaism or Christianity or their adherents which Jews and Christians have not addressed to themselves or their tradition. The religious wish that Islām entertains regarding Judaism and Christianity is therefore the same wish entertained by countless Jews and Christians across the ages. Islām did criticize the Jews for failure to uphold the Torah (Qur'ān 5:71), for moral complacency (5:20), for excessive legalism and exaggerated authoritarianism by the rabbis (9:31; 3:50), for tampering with the texts

of revelation (4:45; 5:14). These are shortcomings which no honest historian of the Jews and Judaism can deny. Moreover, Islām never condemned the Jewish people *in toto*, since the critical verses stand side by side with those others which justify the Jews, both enjoying the same divine authority. And in order to dispel any such confusion, the Qur'ān explicitly distinguished the righteous from the unrighteous (Qur'ān 3: 113-114).

As to the Christians and Christianity, Islām criticized the deification of Jesus in no uncertain terms (Qur'ān 9:30), as well as the doctrine of trinitarianism (4:171-172), of monkery (57:27), and of exaggeration in matters of religion (4:171). But it has equally praised the Christians for their humility and altruism, their fear of God, and has declared them closest to the Muslims by their warm practice of neighborly love (5:82). True, Islām rejects the Christian claim that the texts of scripture are integral records of the message Jesus had conveyed. In this however, as well as in the other criticisms, Islām is not alone. Countless biblical scholars and theologians have said the same thing. Even among "the Apostolic Fathers," and certainly in the Nicene, anti- and post-Nicene Fathers, countless others have maintained more or less exactly what Islām did.

Now that I have stated how the religion of Islām regards Judaism, Christianity and their adherents, I wish to close with a statement of what we Muslims request of Jews and Christians. We have heard the distinguished speakers tell us what some Jews and Christians have said about Islām and the Muslims. It is disappointingly little. A religion's attitude toward Muslims who constitute almost a quarter of the human race cannot depend upon the opinion of a scholar or theologian whose authority is by nature limited. We salute and thank the Vatican for making a significant improvement of Catholicism's attitude to Islām and Muslims through Vatican II. Although it falls short of justification, the change is an admirable first step. Nothing has yet come from an authoritative Protestant body such as the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches around the world, from the Greek and Russian Orthodoxy, or any Sanhedrin or Rabbinic court. God's call to Jews and Christians still stands, as *à propos* and necessary today as it did when it was first revealed: "O People of the Book! Let us now come together under a fair principle common to all of us — that we worship none but God, that we associate nothing with Him, and that we take not one another as lords beside God" (Qur'ān 3:64). And nothing less than Islām's position will do, namely, the acknowledgement of Islām as religiously legitimate religion by Judaism and Christianity. Until such acknowledgement is made, Muslims will stand far ahead of their Jewish and Christian colleagues in dialogue, goodwill and cooperation.