# 2.

## *Islam, Judaism, and Christianity in Comparative Perspective: An Overview*

Paul Bowles's novel, *The Spider's House*, offers the following musings of a long-time resident in Morocco:

> Stenham smiled: unaccountable behavior on the part of Moslems amused him, and he always forgave it, because, as he said, no non-Moslem knows enough about the Moslem mind to dare find fault with it. "They're far, far away from us," he would say. "We haven't an inkling of the things that motivate them." There was a certain amount of hypocrisy in this attitude of his; the truth was that he hoped principally to convince *others* of the existence of this almost unbridgeable gulf. . . . This pretending to know something that others could not know, it was a little indulgence he allowed himself, a bonus for seniority. Secretly he was convinced that the Moroccans were much like any other people, that the differences were largely those of ritual and gesture, that even the fine curtain of magic through which they obscured life was not a complex thing, and did not give their perceptions any profundity.[1]

Bowles is right on target. There is a deep-rooted Western tendency to obscure Islam and Muslims through veils of esoterica and—in extremis—even to suggest that entirely different rules of logic and evidence are required to take the measure of Islam and Muslims. This is nonsense. Muslims *can* be understood, just like other people. They can also be misunderstood, just like other people. Avoiding the assumption that Muslims are "not like us," let's proceed comparatively.

## *Islam, Judaism, and Christianity: Some Comparative Generalizations*

Islam should not be all that strange to those who have grown up in a Jewish or Christian environment. It is a sister religion, the last of the three great monotheistic religions, all three of which share a common worldly homeland—the Middle East.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the same God, believe in revelation, holy scriptures, heaven and hell, and have similar attitudes toward history and the role of humankind in fulfilling the divine purpose. If one is to think in global terms, which would seem to be the only acceptable norm in this age, then the most significant dividing line is not among any of the three Semitic monotheistic religions but between all of them and the other major world religions such as Hinduism or Buddhism.

In earthbound historical terms Islam grew for the most part out of a Jewish and Christian heritage. If, from one perspective, Christianity started as a Jewish heresy, then from a similar way of viewing the matter Islam began as a Judeo-Christian amalgam.

This much is even accepted theologicaly by Muslims, although of course the fact of Islam's largely Judeo-Christian matrix is expressed differently. In theological terms Muslims view Muhammad as the last in a line of prophets beginning with Abraham and continuing through Jesus. Muslims believe that Muhammad brought God's final revelation, the "seal of prophecy."

Muslim theologians take the position that God began with a partial revelation contained in the Old Testament (the Hebrew term, *Torah*, being used in the Qur'an) deeming in His wisdom that such was all His human believers were then able to absorb. More of His revelation was later given through Jesus in the New Testament (the Arabized form of gospel—*injil*—appearing in the Qur'an). Later, having determined that the world was ready, God gave the final and perfected revelation through His chosen messenger, Muhammad. This was the Qur'an.

Anyone with even a passing knowledge of the way the early Christian Church distinguished itself from Judaism should be able to follow such Muslim theological reasoning with a sense of both familiarity and empathy.

Accordingly, many of the most venerated names in the Bible figure with equal holiness in the Qur'an in their Arabized form. These include Abraham (Ibrahim), Moses (Musa), Jacob (Ya'qub), David (Dawud), Solomon (Sulayman), John the Baptist (Yahya), and Jesus, ('Isa) who is revered as a prophet but not as the son of God.

Islam, thus, offers an abundance of familiar signs along the way to any Jew

or Christian. It can be argued that the more Jews or Christians know of their own religious heritage the better able they are to understand Islam. Not surprisingly, many of the most perceptive studies of Islam by non-Muslims have been made by those well conversant with their own Jewish or Christian tradition. Such would include, from an earlier generation, the Jew, Ignaz Goldziher, the Protestant, Duncan M. MacDonald, and the Catholic, Louis Massignon. Another famous triad of contempories would be the Jew, S. D. Goitein, the Protestant, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and the Catholic, Louis Gardet. The late Marshall G. S. Hodgson deserves special mention.[2] Hodgson's devout Quakerism, with the Quaker emphasis on the "inner light," certainly would appear to have helped him appreciate the distinctive Islamic mix of legalism and mystical devotionalism, of practicality and piety. Moreover, experiencing Christianity from within the tradition of Quakerism, which largely rejects the notion of a clergy, Hodgson was well placed to interpret an Islam that has neither clergy nor any equivalent of the Christian sacraments.

Why, then, is Islam so poorly understood in the West? Or, even worse, why is it so often distorted? The sad history of Christian-Jewish relations suggests the answer, reminding us that common religious origins and even many shared religious values do not guarantee fellow feeling.

When groups of people (whether religious communities, political parties, or nation-states) share a common origin but split away from each other to form organizationally separate entities, the more normal human result is acute antipathy if not downright enmity. The Stalinist rage against Trotskyites, the brutal Pakistani repression of what later emerged as the new nation of Bangladesh, and the harsh Christian polemics and Christian conduct against Jews over the centuries all illustrate this theme (and many other examples, religious and secular, could be cited). When the issue revolves around ideological and organizational integrity (in a word, group identity), the bitterest enemies are the former fellows who refused to go along. The most brutal fights are often between kinsmen, not strangers.

Islam, throughout most of the long history of Christian-Muslim encounters, has been the enemy. In Christian eyes Islam has been a heresy that, to make matters worse, was until modern times also often a military threat.

The Jewish view of Islam (as of Christianity) was necessarily different. It was the perspective of a vulnerable small minority living among and accommodating as best it could to a dominant majority. Jewish history thereby provides a significant minority view-from-within perspective on both Christendom and *Dar al-Islam* (as does the history of minority Christian communities living in Islamic countries), but in terms of global politics the great confrontation was always between Islam and Christendom.

Nor was the animosity any less from the Muslim side as regards the Christian West. Or if animosity was less from the Muslim side in earlier centuries it was largely because the Christian West did not threaten the Muslim world militarily nearly so much as Muslim political power threatened Europe. The Crusades were something of a sideshow seen from the Islamic heartland. The infinitely more important military concern of Muslim peoples during those years centered on the martial nomadic tribes in Central Asia who reached a peak of power under the Mongols.

Equally, the Reconquista, which cleared the Iberian peninsula of Muslim control, was more than matched during those centuries by the steady Muslim destruction of the Byzantine Empire with the accompanying Islamization of Anatolia (the fall of Constantinople in 1453 was the dramatic climax to a process that had been going on for centuries) and the penetration of Islam deep into southeastern Europe. Armies of the Ottoman Empire even laid seige to Vienna in 1529 and again as late as 1683.

The Muslim reaction to the West in modern times, which may be seen as ranging from ambivalent admiration to suspicious antipathy, is in many ways a great reversal of roles between the two sister civilizations. Just as medieval Christendom deemed Islam a heresy and feared Muslim military power, so the Muslim world in modern times sees the Christian West as stubbornly clinging to an incomplete revelation but frightfully powerful militarily and technologically.

The one constant element in Muslim-Western relations throughout the centuries is that of religious suspicion and politico-military confrontation. The kinship binding together Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is a demonstrable fact, but the antipathy dividing them politically is an equally powerful fact. For this reason the handful of theologically trained Jewish and Christian scholars who have made, and still make, important contributions to our understanding of Islam have been vastly outnumbered throughout the centuries by both theologians and the laity who approach the subject with a marked animus. The same holds for Muslim perceptions of Judaism and Christianity and, by extension, of Western civilization.

The burden of this sad legacy must not be minimized. Confining our attention to Western perceptions of Islam (and not the reverse, equally fascinating but best left to another occasion), a sensitive individual who begins to watch for subtle signs of Western bias regarding Islam can only be dismayed. From the greats of our literature (e.g., Dante) to the stereotypes of present-day political cartoons, the legacy lives on to distort our image of Islam, a sister religion and culture.

We must be fully aware of these pervasive cultural biases concerning

Islam and Muslims, but we can—with conscious effort—manage to see things clearly. One of the most encouraging developments in modern scholarship has been the rise of the scientific study of religion, including the comparative sociology of religions. Although resisted and misunderstood by traditionalists in all religions, this scholarly approach is not antireligious or even irreligious (although, admittedly, many of its practitioners do adopt intellectual postures ranging from skeptical to disdainful). The comparative study of religions provides a scientific methodology and a shared vocabulary for analyzing and interpreting the impact of religion in this world. Equally important, it gives us a common base—that transcends any single religion or culture—from which to study any particular religion or religions in general.

This seemingly simple step marks a decisive turn in religious history. Instead of studying one's own religion solely in order to strengthen one's faith, and instead of studying other religions in order to proselytize or to resist the proselytizing efforts of others, the purpose of the scientific comparative study of religions is to advance knowledge and understanding. Such knowledge and understanding will not undermine religious faith, nor will it necessarily strengthen religious faith. It does, however, provide a clear path for the inquiring mind to transcend the limits of an individual's own culture and thus to see that culture in the context of other cultures, *sub specie aeternitatis*.

In this spirit let us begin with a very broad-ranging comparison of the three great monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, keeping in mind the cultural burden of the past, but consciously transcending this obstacle to understanding by adopting a scientific value-free outlook.[3] These general points of comparison between the three religions can serve to set the stage for our discussion of Islam and politics.

To begin with an important general finding, a comparison of the three Semitic religions readily reveals that Judaism and Islam have much more in common than either does with Christianity. Judaism and Islam posit a much more transcendent deity and a more rigorous monotheism. They have nothing equivalent to the Christian notion of the incarnation. This is why the old usage *Muhammadan* to label Islam or Muslims is incorrect and even abusive. It assumes that Muhammad is to Islam as Christ is to Christianity. Not at all, for to Muslims Muhammad was fully human with no divine attributes. Indeed, the Islamic religious outlook makes it extremely difficult for Muslims to understand the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, even less to

view it sympathetically. To Muslims the idea of God-in-man comes across as *shirk* (literally, association, thus meaning the linking of any person or thing with the ineffable God), and *shirk* is the gravest of sins in Islam. Some years ago I sat in on a discussion between an eminent Egyptian *'alim* and an equally eminent Catholic priest famed for his rich, nuanced scholarly study of Islam. An exhilarating atmosphere of mutual respect and mutual understanding reigned, but then the 'alim raised the issue of the Trinity, bringing in its wake a discussion characterized by misunderstanding and even animosity poorly papered over by scholarly politesse on both sides.

This antipathy to any idea of an immanent God well characterizes Sunni Islam, but the exalted role of the imams in Shi'i Islam, by contrast, does bear some comparison to that of Christ in Christianity.

Islam and Judaism both place great emphasis on the law. Both religious systems conceive of a comprehensive religio-legal system covering all aspects of the individual's relations to others and of the individual's relation to God. Everything is taken into account and set out in detail—times of prayer, foods that may be eaten and manner of ritual slaughter of animals, almsgiving, inheritance, and even such minor details as the use of a toothpick.

This emphasis on the religious law in both Islam and Judaism is to be contrasted with the Christian concept of liberation from the curse of the law (Galatians 3:13) and of justification through faith alone, all this being especially the theological contribution of Saint Paul.

What are the practical social and political implications of these distinctions? Islam and Judaism may be seen as giving more emphasis to obeying the rules, Christianity to the intent that lies behind action, to faith. It has even been suggested that the hallmark of Islam is well summed up not so much in its emphasis on orthodoxy (right thinking) as on orthopraxy (right conduct). The same can be suggested for Judaism.

In another sense, Islam and Judaism emphasize rather more the running tally of a believer's deeds and misdeeds, with the implication that the more favorable the balance the stronger the individual's position before God.

Christianity places more emphasis on the disjuncture between God's grace and man's deeds. One cannot earn a place in heaven. Salvation is an act of divine grace, a theological position reaching its logical extreme in Calvinism. This aspect of Christianity may be seen in the importance Christians give to the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 35:11–32) or of the shepherd leaving his ninety-nine sheep to find the one lost sheep (Luke 15:4–7).

Islam and Judaism stress instead the virtue of consistent, constant fulfill-

ment of God's law. The Orthodox Jew embracing the "yoke of the law" as being in itself a liberating and fulfilling experience is matched by the Muslim regard for the *Shari'ah* (the entire corpus of Muslim religious law). The Christian image of the law has an almost opposite sense (e.g., Romans 3:28, 7:6, and 10:4).

The very word, *Shari'ah*, has the original sense of the path to the watering place, a striking image for a religion born in arid Arabia, where one's very life depended upon planning itineraries to reach the rare oasis in good time. The this-worldly and social implications of Islam, as of Judaism, may be compared to an extended journey across a difficult but passable terrain. To arrive safely at the destination one must plan ahead and reach the various intermediate stages in good time. The Shari'ah may be seen as the map setting out the route for this worldly journey. Another powerful Muslim expression that conveys the same sense is *sirat al-mustaqim* (the right path). It figures in the opening prayer (*al-Fatihah*) of the Qur'an.

This similarity between Judaism and Islam and the contrast of each to Christianity deserves emphasis. Let a few modern scholars help to nail down the point. With her flair for the striking phrase, Patricia Crone has written: "If Christianity is Judaism gone soft, Islam by contrast is Judaism restated as an Arab faith: like Judaism, it is strictly monotheist where Christianity is trinitarian, it is shaped as an all-embracing holy law where Christianity is antinomian, and it finds its social embodiment in a learned laity where Christianity has its priests."[4]

"It is now fairly well known," Seyyed Hossein Nasr has observed, "that the very concept of law in Islam differs from what is prevalent in the West and that sacred law in Christianity refers to the spiritual and moral principles enunciated by Christ, whereas the sacred law, *Shari'ah* in Islam, involves not only principles but also their application to daily life in the form of legal codifications."[5]

To Marshall Hodgson Islam is "the religion of sober moderation, and most Muslims would distrust Paul's grand defiance of reason and of nature or an exaltedly private *credo quia absurbum*." The Muslim, he notes, "seeks not so much consolation as *guidance* from his faith." In comparing the opening sura (chapter) of the Qur'an, the *Fatiha*, with the Lord's Prayer in the Bible, Hodgson points out that the former asks for guidance, the latter for forgiveness.[6]

Such general comparisons of the three monotheistic religions necessarily involve some distortion. These three rich, complex, and long-lived religious traditions cannot be so neatly categorized. Many exceptions are to be found. Nor do the distinctions adequately envelop the total action and

lifestyle of even the quintessential Jew or Christian or Muslim. The Christian does care about compiling a record of piety and good deeds. The Jew and the Muslim affirm God's omnipotence and thus His ability to save whom He wills. In crasser terms, Christianity is more than seeking salvation at the last moment after a long span of hell-raising.[7] Judaism and Islam are more than religions of calculated prudence. Still, as broad brush portraits they may have some utility.

In one important respect Judaism is the exception while Christianity and Islam are similar. Both are proselytizing religions. This statement, in turn, evokes the hoary Western image of militant Muslims offering the infidel the harsh choice of conversion or the sword. And what about the Islamic doctrine of jihad, which can be translated as holy war, that is, religiously mandated war, against the infidel?

This much can be said for present purposes: the Muslim concept of jihad is an important principle of the faith. Indeed, the scholarly consensus is that jihad just missed becoming the sixth "pillar of Islam," joining the five canonically sanctioned "pillars" (profession of faith, prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and pilgrimage). Moreover, Islam provides for a clear "we-they" bifurcation between the Muslim community, the Dar al-Islam and everybody else, or the *Dar al-Harb* (literally, the abode of war). Nor can it be denied that from its earliest years the Islamic community by means of an amazing series of conquests became a religio-political community, indeed an empire. This status was attained by Christianity only some three centuries after Christ with the conversion of Constantine in 312 C.E.

On the other hand, the historical reality is that political authority in the early Muslim empire made little effort to convert. Indeed, at times political authority sought to slow down those voluntary conversions for the most practical (or, if you prefer, basest) of reasons—to maintain the aristocratic status of the Arabo-Muslims and to avoid losing tax revenues (the *jizya*, or special tax, paid by non-Muslims in return for protection [*dhimma*] and freedom from military duty). Moreover, the principle of "no compulsion in religion" (Qur'an 2:256) has stood throughout the centuries as a bar against forced conversions.

Jihad can in fact be compared to the Christian doctrine of just war.

> Jihad, like just war, was conceived by its early theorists basically as a means to circumscribe the legitimate reasons for war to so few that peace in inevitably enhanced. Jihad, like just war, is grounded in the belief that intersocial relations should be peaceful, not marred by constant and destructive warfare. The surest way for human beings to realize this peace is for them to obey the divine law that is imprinted

> on the human conscience and therefore accessible to everyone, believers and unbelievers. According to the medieval view Muslims are obliged to propagate this divine law, through peaceful means if possible, through violent means if necessary. No war was jihad unless it was undertaken with right intent and as a last resort, and declared by right authority. Most Muslims today disavow the duty to propagate Islam by force and limit jihad to self-defense. And, finally, jihad, just like just war, places strict limitations on legitimate targets during war and demands that belligerents use the least amount of force necessary to achieve the swift cessation of hostilities.[8]

A good first step in comparing the three monotheistic religions is to accept that all three contain a militant, even violent, tradition. One need only read Deuteronomy 20:16–17: "In the cities of those nations whose lands the Lord your God is giving you as a patrimony, you shall not leave any creature alive. You shall annihilate them." Or, skipping millennia, one comes to the period of the Crusades and then in modern times such symbolic markers as the rousing "Battle Hymn of the Republic" or "Onward, Christian Soldiers."

All three religions have, however, evolved rules (honored, alas, often in the breach) to restrict under what circumstances one can legitimately engage in warfare as well as what restraints apply in the conduct of war.

As for the two proselytizing religions, Christianity and Islam, it can be suggested that both claim the right to seek converts but neither now goes so far as to champion the right to use military forces against those who would resist such peaceful proselytizing. Interestingly, the more violent and activist modern-day Islamists, in any case, see themselves as engaged in a desperate defensive battle against the religious (or secular) West. They are not so much bent on seeking new converts. The major thrust of their message can be summarized as defense against the outside infidel and jihad against the internal infidel (that is, those Muslim rulers deemed to have strayed from the true Islam).

In terms of class analysis traditional Islam is marked by an urban bourgeois outlook. It is a religion of carefully elaborated rules, of contractual relations, of keeping accounts and weighing in the balance. Christianity, especially during its formative period, was the religion of a proletariat. Later, with the alliance of church and empire, the situation became more complex, but certainly something of Christianity's nonbourgeois (antibourgeois?) origins remained. The Muslim scriptures, like the Jewish Bible, contain what might be labeled bourgeois images.[9] By way of illustration, Judaism: "You have been weighed in the balance and found wanting"

(Daniel 5:27); Islam: "Give full measure and full weight, in justice" (Qur'an 6:153); Christianity: "And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.' At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions" (Mark 10:21–22).

This point, in turn, may serve to clear up one tenacious Western misconception about Islam. This is the notion of Islam as the religion of the desert, Islam as the religion of nomadic simplicity. In actual fact Islam grew up in the cosmopolitan trading city of Mecca, and its principal early leaders were sophisticated Meccans. Islam evolved in this world not essentially as a religion of the desert and of nomads but as a religion of oasis urbanites living in symbiosis with the desert and the nomads.

The nomadic tribes of Arabia did provide the manpower for the early Muslim conquests, but leadership came from the cities. Moreover, the nomadic contribution to the growth of Islam rapidly decreased while that of the urban and sedentary areas continued to grow. Early on, the political center of Islam left Arabia for the much more urbanized and sedentary Fertile Crescent with Damascus as capital of the Umayyads (661–750) and Baghdad created by the Abbasids (750–1258) as their capital.

Thereafter, Islamic political fortunes were always linked to great cities commanding well-populated hinterlands—Cairo, Cordova, Isfahan, Delhi, Fez, Istanbul. Thinly populated Arabia was the cradle of Islam, its two holy cities—Mecca and Madina—remain the religious hub of Islam, and Arabia has from time to time sent out or nurtured other Muslim messengers (the last major example being Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the eighteenth century), but within less than a generation after the death of Muhammad Arabia had lost its political centrality and was never to regain it.[10]

Finally, on this point of the urban and bourgeois nature of Islam it is well to note that Islam is the only major world religion to have been founded by a successful businessman. The prophet Muhammad before his "call" (the Christian usage is appropriate to the Muslim context as well) had been an active participant in Mecca's caravan trade. This was a complex business offering seventh-century equivalents of joint-stock enterprises, long-term and high-risk investments with the possibility of significant gains given good organization and effective market analysis. A caravan with as many as one thousand camels would be en route from, say, Mecca to Damascus for some forty days, and careful long-range planning for provisions and protection on the journey was required. Not surprisingly, many of the religious messages in Islamic scriptures have been expressed in the language of merchants.

Another matter linking Islam and Judaism while distinguishing both from Christianity is the role of the religious specialists, or—using the Christian term—the *clergy*. In the sense that Christianity uses this word there is no clergy in Islam or Judaism. There is no equivalent body of specially trained individuals, institutionally separated from the rest of society, organized in a chain-of-command hierarchy from parish priest to pope and given monopoly control over significant religious acts (the sacraments) as well as over the interpretation of dogma.

Every religion, however, and certainly every scriptural religion does possess a clergy in the sense of identifiable religious specialists with some authority (even if ill-defined and less than total) over the faith and the faithful. Such a group in Islam, comparable to the Jewish rabbinate, are the *ulama* (singular *'alim*). The terms translates literally as "the learned," i.e., learned in Islamic religious studies.

Throughout the centuries and to the present day those who would become ulama must spend many years of study, usually as seminarians, slowly absorbing a large and—in theory —unchanging corpus of religious knowledge. Their status as learned men is earned through book learning of a very traditional sort.

They are the guardians and transmitters of the bookish religious tradition. They are the teachers, the theologians, and the pastoral priests of Islam. From their ranks come also those called *fuqaha*,[11] those learned in the science of *fiqh*, or Islamic law, who provide the qadis (judges) and muftis (jurisconsults) of Islam.

In this sense there is certainly a Muslim clergy, but these religious specialists of Islam are more comparable to Jewish rabbis than to Christian clergy.

Another major category of Muslim religious specialists are the sufi leaders. What is the difference between an 'alim and a Sufi shaykh? In simplest terms the ulama are the guardians and expositors of the Islamic theological and legal tradition, the sufis the champions of the Islamic mystical tradition. The latter may be seen as the Muslim equivalents of holy men or gurus or shamans or saints. Their followers are usually grouped into special religious fraternities or *tariqa*s (interestingly, yet another word with the meaning of "path"). The Sufi leader—who may be called shaykh or *pir* or *baba* depending on the prevailing linguistic/cultural tradition in the different parts of the Muslim world—is also a religious specialist, a learned man but in his case well versed not so much in the scriptural *'ilm* of the ulama as in *ma'rifa* (which can be well conveyed by the Christian term *gnosis*, or esoteric, direct, illuminist knowledge of the divine plan).

Here, again, Islam is more like Judaism than Christianity. Sufis are not

organizationally linked to the ulama. There is nothing equivalent to the way in which the Catholic Church was able to channel and control mystical tendencies by permitting different religious orders to develop, nothing equivalent to the Catholic distinction between secular and regular clergy (the former being pastoral priests, the latter members of special religious bodies such as the Dominicans, Franciscans, or Jesuits).

Nor does Islam, any more than Judaism, offer an equivalent to the pronounced tendency within Protestantism wherein those of more antinomian or gnostic or immanentist persuasion reject the existing established churches and form separate sects.

In Islam, just as in Judaism, there is the potential for tension between the religion of the ulama and the sufis, the religion of the head and the heart, the religion of law and of illumination. This potential tension is sometimes realized (the anti-Sufi stance of the Wahhabis in modern times being an example), but usually the two religious tendencies, personified by the ulama and the Sufi shaykhs, have managed to reach a working accommodation, at times even a symbiotic relationship.

Looking at the matter sociologically, a clear distinction emerges between the organizational path chosen by both Islam and Judaism as opposed to Christianity. Islam and Judaism make no attempt to bring all such tendencies together into an explicit organizational hierarchy. Islam and Judaism, instead, settle for a more unstructured approach to the basic issues of organization and hierarchy to be found in all religions.

What then is the specifically Muslim form of "church government," and what influence does this pattern of religious organization have on politics and society in Muslim lands? We next turn to those questions.