Comparing Islam with Other Late Antique Religions: Examining Theological Parallels with Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Manichaeism

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Abstract

This article argues that Islamic theological doctrines emerged out of broad late antique religious trends. Such trends were reflected in Judaism and Christianity, but also transcended them. In support of this view, the article systematically examines parallels between Islamic theological doctrines, and those found in the late antique religions of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Manichaeism. It is argued that all of these religions share six basic doctrines: (1) belief in one morally-concerned Supreme Being (2) belief in lesser spirit beings that are good or bad (3) belief in prophets (4) belief in scriptural texts (5) belief in an afterlife (6) belief that the world will end with the triumph of good over evil. It is argued that the preceding six doctrines coherently fit together into a larger perspective on the universe. The article explains how this perspective is central to late antique religions, including Islam.

Keywords: Islam, comparative religion, late antiquity, theology, scriptures

Introduction

Over the past two decades, it has become common for scholars to situate basic Islamic teachings in relationship to the world of "late antiquity" (Fowden 1993; Reynolds 2010; El-Badawi 2014; Al-Azmeh 2014; Crone 2015; 2016; Hoyland 2015; Stroumsa 2015; Salaymeh 2016; Hughes 2017; Anthony 2020; also see Johnson 2012). The world of late antiquity has geographical and temporal dimensions. Geographically, it encompasses the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean regions. Temporally, it extends from the third to eighth centuries CE. During this period, the two aforementioned regions were closely linked. People, ideas, and economic goods circulated between them. The late antique world is marked by a series of major religious developments culminating in the rise of Islam.

Prior to the seventh century, the major religions of the late antique world were Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Manichaeism. Western scholars have long drawn attention to various parallels between Islam and these other religions. Such parallels include theological doctrines, rituals, norms, legal teachings, and institutional structures. Recent decades have witnessed increasing efforts to systematically compare the "Abrahamic" religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Peters 2003; Stroumsa 2015; Cohen 2020; also see Silverstein and Stroumsa 2015). Nevertheless, few efforts have been made to systematically compare Islam, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Manichaeism. The present article takes up this task, by systematically comparing their theological doctrines. The article argues that all these religions share six basic doctrines: (1) belief in one morally-concerned Supreme Being (2) belief in lesser spirit beings that are good or bad (3) belief in prophets (4) belief in scriptural texts (5) belief in an afterlife (6) belief that the world will end with the triumph of good over evil. These six doctrines are not disjointed and independent. Rather they coherently fit together into a larger perspective on the universe. Hence, it is possible to speak of six integrated doctrines that constitute the theological foundation of late antique religions. The six integrated doctrines reflect broad theological trends found across the Middle East and Mediterranean regions. Many studies speak of Islam as emerging from some variant(s) of Judaism or

Christianity (e.g., Judaism, Jewish Christianity, Syriac Christianity: see Geiger 1898; Wansbrough 1977; Gotein 2010; El-Badawi 2014; Crone 2015; 2016). However, it is more accurate and instructive to speak of the Islamic tradition as emerging from broad late antique theological trends which were reflected in Judaism and Christianity, but also transcended these religions. Such a perspective has been put forth by other scholars (see Salaymeh 2016: 100-104; Kiel 2019), and is supported by the material in this article.

Parallels between Islam and other religions have been explained in a variety of ways. Here three explanatory frameworks merit attention. The first framework is widely used by historians of religion, including Orientalists. It explains parallels in terms of borrowing (i.e., Islam borrowed ideas or practices from older late antique religions) (Geiger 1898; Schacht 1964: Wansbrough 1977; Crone 1987; 2015; 2016; Gotein 2010; El-Badawi 2014; Akbar 2020; Pregill 2023; also see Janos 2005; Hughes 2017; Salaymeh 2016: 84-100). Sophisticated accounts of this process emphasize that borrowing is a feature of all religions and cultures. Such accounts also emphasize the complexity of borrowing - noting that borrowing is selective, guided by the borrower's distinctive values, and involves modification/adaptation of borrowed materials. Borrowing can become markedly "creative" to the extent that it is *highly* selective, *tightly guided* by the borrower's values, and involves *significant* modification/adaption of borrowed materials.

The second framework is widely used in the social sciences (e.g., anthropology, sociology, economics). It explains parallels between Islam and other religions by highlighting social, environmental, technological, and economic conditions. Influential studies have uncovered statistical patterns by looking at thousands of different societies from across the world, and across history. These studies indicate that religions which emerge under similar conditions often exhibit parallels in their ideas and practices (e.g., hunter-gatherer religions share similarities, religions in literate societies share similarities) (Swanson 1960; Underhill 1975; Sanderson and Roberts 2008; Peoples and Marlow 2012; Norenzayan et al. 2016; Peoples et al. 2016; also see Murdock 1967; Murdock and White 1969; Gray 1999a; 1999b; Divale 2004).

The third framework is characteristic of recent scholarship in anthropology, psychology, and biology. It explains parallels between Islam and other religions by highlighting psychological tendencies. Drawing on cross-cultural surveys, psychological experiments, and brain scans, it is argued that biologically-rooted psychological tendencies give rise to similar religious ideas and practices – even in unconnected societies (e.g., belief in spirit beings, belief in the afterlife, incest prohibitions) (Boyer 2001; Atran 2002; Haidt 2012; McKay and Whitehouse 2015; Johnson 2016; Nakissa 2021; 2023).

Over the past two decades, scholarship on "cultural evolution" has sought to combine the three preceding frameworks (Norenzayan 2013; Norenzayan et al. 2016; Purzycki et al. 2016; Lang et al. 2019; Henrich 2020). Such scholarship holds that biologically-rooted psychological tendencies produce general kinds of religious ideas and practices, which then take on more specific forms due to social, environmental, technological, and economic conditions. These religious ideas and practices are also shaped by the preexisting cultural and religious traditions found in a given region. Broad late antique theological trends can plausibly be explained in this manner (e.g., the six integrated theological doctrines). However, providing such an explanation would require an extensive and detailed analysis, which is beyond the scope of the present article. Rather than explaining parallels between Islam and other late antique religions, the present article simply describes them. That being said, the article provides information useful for future attempts at explanation.

Theological doctrines in Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Manichaeism, and Islam have changed over time. The present article focuses on the form of these doctrines during late antiquity – especially towards the end of the period. Admittedly, there are intense scholarly debates concerning the precise character of Islamic theological doctrines during the earliest phase of Islamic history (i.e., the seventh and eighth centuries) (Cook and Crone 1977; Donner 2010; Shoemaker 2012; Hoyland 2015; Anthony 2020). Nevertheless, the six basic doctrines

discussed in this article can demonstrably be traced back to the Prophet Muḥammad. All are attested in the Qurʾān, which can be securely dated (more or less) to the Prophet's lifetime (see Donner 2010; Sadeghi and Goudarzi 2012; Sinai 2017; Van Putten 2019; 2020; Sidky 2023).

One final note is in order. Religious adherents generally believe that their theological doctrines derive in some way from a supernatural source. The present article neither affirms nor denies that late antique doctrines ultimately derive from such a source. Rather, the article presents material in a neutral manner, and leaves it to readers to assess the material's ultimate significance.

The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity

Because Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Manichaeism persisted over many centuries, their theological doctrines underwent some fundamental changes. It will be useful to briefly sketch the histories of these religions. Given considerations of space, this will be done in a simplistic manner - and one which partially reproduces standard notions of borrowing and influence found in the relevant scholarship.

By about the tenth century BCE, Judaism began to emerge in the Fertile Crescent out of older linked Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Canaanite traditions (Smith 2001; Hayes 2012; also see Assmann 2001; Bottero 2001). By about the tenth century BCE, Zoroastrianism began to emerge in Persia out of old Iranian (and more distant Indo-Iranian) religious traditions. It became the official religion of the three major pre-Islamic Persian empires: the Achaemenids (550-330 BCE), the Parthians (247 BCE-224 CE), and the Sasanians (224 CE-650) (Boyce 1975; Skjærvø 2011; Stausberg and Vevaina 2015; Magnusson 2023; also see Rose 2011; Payne 2015). In the sixth century BCE, the (Achaemenid) Persian empire extended its rule over Jewish communities, and its Zoroastrian religion began to influence the development of Judaism (see Barr 1985). In the first century CE, Christianity emerged in the Roman province of Judea out of the local Jewish tradition. It then underwent further development as it

spread throughout the Roman empire (Pelikan 1971; Ehrman 2003; Martin 2012). Christianity was eventually embraced as the official religion of the empire in the fourth century CE. From the earliest times, Christians differed over whether Judaism's Torah law was still binding. Pauline Christianity held that the law had been abrogated. However, Jewish Christians took the opposite view. They insisted on continuing to observe the Torah law (as Jesus had done). Pauline Christianity would gain dominance and be endorsed by the Roman empire. However, Jewish Christianity persisted in the Middle East into the Islamic era. The rise of Christianity had effects on Judaism, and Jewish authorities reworked doctrine to better distinguish it from Christianity (Boyarin 2004). In the third century CE, Manichaeism emerged out of Jewish Christianity in the Mesopotamian region of the Persian empire. Manichaeism was also shaped by the Zoroastrian religion of this empire (Tardieu 2008; Coyle 2009; Garnder 2020). It is also necessary to highlight Alexander's conquests in the Middle East and Mediterranean regions in fourth century BCE. Following the conquests, Greco-Roman traditions came to exert an important influence on these regions. As a result, Greco-Roman religious and philosophical concepts were absorbed into Judaism, Christianity, and Manichaeism (Fraenkel 2012; Corrigan and Rasimus 2013). The preceding points illustrate the complex religious and philosophical interactions which gave rise to the major late antique religions.

In the seventh century, Islam emerged in the Arabian peninsula. At this time, Arabia was located between two powerful empires. To the West, there was the (Roman) Byzantine empire, which encompassed Southeastern Europe, the Levant, Egypt, and coastal North Africa. To the East, there was the Sasanian Persian empire, which encompassed Iran and Mesopotamia. Both empires were characterized by strong states, large-scale agriculture, and developed urban centers. As indicated earlier, the official religion of the Byzantine empire was Christianity. That of the Sasanian empire was Zoroastrianism. The Byzantine empire's population was predominantly Christian, although there existed a Jewish minority. The Sasanian empire's population was predominantly Zoroastrian, although there were also significant Jewish, Christian, and Manichaean minorities.

In the seventh century, the central part of the Arabian peninsula was populated by Arab tribes who made their living through pastoralism, caravan trading, and raiding. In this area there was no state, few urban centers, and little agriculture. For hundreds of years, Arabs (and closely related peoples) had been converting to Judaism and Christianity (e.g., Nabateans, Ghassanids, Ḥimyarites). Jewish and Christian communities were concentrated on the northern and southern fringes of the peninsula, although there existed some Jewish communities in the central area – most notably in Yathrib/Madinah. Some communities on the northern fringes were actually Jewish Christian, and Jewish Christianity had a long history of attracting Arab converts (Tardieu 2008: 8; Crone 2015; 2016). Prior to the rise of Islam, many Jews and Christians had come to regard the Arabs as descendants of the Prophet/Patriarch Abraham (*Ibrāhīm*), through his son Ishmael (*Ismāʿīl*) (Hughes 2017: 38-43; Goudarzi 2019: 457-462). A small number of Arabs in the peninsula seem to have embraced Zoroastrianism, and perhaps Manichaeism (Athamina 2004: 201; Salaymeh 2016: 95, 102; Akbar 2020: 89-90).

Most Arabs in the peninsula had a distinctive religious tradition. For many centuries, the tradition had been markedly polytheistic (Al-Jallad 2022). However, even before the coming of Islam, this had changed. By the sixth century CE there was a strong trend towards monotheism or quasi-monotheism (see Al-Jallad and Sidky 2022). At this time, the Arabs acknowledged a Supreme Creator God known as "*Allah*". The primary religious site of the Pre-Islamic Arabs was a cube-shaped building known as the *Kaʿba*. Located in the city of Makka, the *Kaʿba* was dedicated first to the worship of *Allah*, and secondarily to the worship of other lesser gods (e.g., *Hubal*, *Manāt*, *al-Lāt*, *al-ʿUzzā*). Angel worship may have been present as well (Peters 2003: II, 353-354). There was no idol to represent *Allah*, as He was conceived of as transcending forms (Peters 1994: 27). Nevertheless, lesser gods were represented in the form of idols, and such idols were housed within the *Kaʿbah* (Peters 1994: 19-29). At the same time, the Arab religion had developed a minority current that was markedly monotheistic. Proponents of this current were known as "*ḥanīf*s". *Ḥanīf*s believed that *Allah* was the only god, and attributed this

teaching to Abraham (De Blois 2002: 16-25; Stroumsa 2015: 16-17, 155-158).

Muḥammad (570-632 CE) was an Arabian merchant, born in the city of Makka. He was inclined towards *ḥanīf* teachings. At about forty years of age, he began to have visions and other religious experiences. He considered these to be divine revelations from *Allah* transmitted by the angel Gabriel (*Jibrīl*). In these revelations, *Allah* affirmed that Abraham had rejected polytheism/idolatry, and built the *Kaʿba* (along with Ishmael) as a site for monotheistic worship. *Allah* appointed Muḥammad as His final prophet. He ordered Muḥammad to preach Abrahamic monotheism (*tawḥīd*), and related religious doctrines, to all the world. Muḥammad took up this task for the next two decades, until he died. During this period, he built a large community (*ummah*) of religious believers. He also established a sizable theocratic state in Western Arabia, centered in the city of Yathrib/Madinah (350 kilometers north of Makka). Shortly before his death (in 632), Muḥammad succeeded in conquering Makka, and cleansing the *Kaʿba* of idols.

Parallels between Islamic Theological Teachings and Those of Other Late Antique Religions

Let us now turn to the six integrated doctrines that constitute the theological foundation of late antique religions: (1) belief in one morally-concerned Supreme Being (2) belief in lesser spirit beings that are good or bad (3) belief in prophets (4) belief in scriptural texts (5) belief in an afterlife (6) belief that the world will end with the triumph of good over evil. These six doctrines will be considered one by one. Moreover, relations between them will be foregrounded and explained.

(1) Belief in One Morally-Concerned Supreme Being

Since the late nineteenth century, scholarship in the social sciences has commonly analyzed religions using the categories of "animism", "polytheism", and "monotheism". In animism, natural phenomena are

conceptualized as gods. For example, it might be believed that the sun is a god, the ocean is a goddess, and the mountain is a god. Polytheism is concerned with spirit beings. A spirit being possesses a mind but lacks an ordinary physical body. Spirit beings are of many types including gods, angels, demons, and ghosts (see Boyer 2001: 137-167; Atran 2002: 51-79; Barrett 2004: 31-60). In polytheism, there are various spirit beings who use their power to control different aspects of the universe. Thus, perhaps there is a god who controls the sun, another who controls the ocean, and so on. In monotheism, there is one Supreme spirit being who is uniquely powerful. This "Supreme Being" uses His/Her power to create and/or control different aspects of the universe. Not only does S/he create and/or control natural phenomena (e.g., the sun, the ocean). S/he also creates and/or controls other lesser spirit beings. The primary difference between monotheism and polytheism pertains to power. Both monotheism and polytheism associate power with the status of "godhood". The more power a being has, the more "god-like". Monotheism posits that the Supreme Being holds all power (see Hintze 2014: 227). Consequently, S/he is the only true God. Other lesser spirit beings may exist, but they lack power, so they are not real gods.

In reality, there is not a sharp dividing line between monotheism and polytheism. Rather, monotheism and polytheism are better conceptualized as two poles on a spectrum. Complete monotheism ascribes all power to the Supreme Being and absolutely no power to lesser spirit beings. Complete polytheism grants multiple spirit beings independent power. However, there are intermediate positions along the spectrum between complete monotheism and complete polytheism. For example, one might speak of "quasi-monotheism" in situations where the Supreme Being is far more powerful than other lesser spirit beings, but these lesser beings nevertheless have some significant measure of independent power.

Quantitative studies of societies from across the world, and across history, indicate that most religions are best described as polytheism, animism, or a mixture of polytheism and animism. However, a significant minority of religions can be described as monotheism or quasi-

monotheism. Monotheism and quasi-monotheism have developed independently in hunter-gatherer, agricultural, and pastoral societies – although they are least common in hunter-gatherer societies (Gray 1999a; 1999b Divale 2004; People and Marlowe 2012; Peoples et al. 2016)[1]. Interestingly, in monotheistic and quasi-monotheistic religions, the Supreme Being is often unconcerned with matters of human morality. In other words, S/he does not care about promoting the good or punishing evil. Rather S/he just creates the world and then withdraws from it (i.e., as a "Deus otiosus") (Gray 1999a; 1999b; Divale 2004; Peoples et al. 2016).

It should be noted that, over time, a single religious tradition can develop multiple currents/interpretations. A famous example is Hinduism, which simultaneously has a polytheistic current/interpretation and a monotheistic current/interpretation (among others) (see Clooney 2010; Flood 2020).

All of this is relevant to the religious history of the linked Middle Eastern and Mediterranean regions. Prior to late antiquity, these regions were home to ancient Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Greco-Roman religious traditions. These traditions contain some mixture of polytheism and animism. However, they all eventually developed monotheistic (or quasi-monotheistic) currents as well (Polymnia and Frede 1999; Assmann 2001; 2004; Bottero 2001; Mitchell and Van Nuffelen 2010).

The major late antique religions are either monotheistic or quasi-monotheistic. They assert that there exists a Supreme Being with great power, as well as great knowledge. Furthermore, all believe that the Supreme Being is concerned with morality - promoting what is good, and opposing what is evil. The Supreme Being is likewise associated with light. In Zoroastrianism, the names of the Supreme Being include "*Ahura Mazda*" and "*Ohrmazd*" (Hintze 2014). In Judaism, His names include "*El*" and "*Yahweh*". In Christianity, His names include "*Theos*" and

[1] Monotheism and quasi-monotheism are often discussed under the heading of belief in a "High God".

"Jesus". In Manichaeism, His names include "Father of Greatness (*Abba D'rabbutha*)" and "*Zurwan*" (Tardieu 2008: 82-83).

Judaism and Christianity endorse a type of monotheism, wherein the Supreme Being is seen as uncreated, and as Creator of all things. He has virtually limitless power and knowledge, and is a proponent of moral good. Jewish and Christian scripture refer to God as light (2 Samuel 22; Psalm 27:1; also see Jones 2010: 42-43). However, Jewish and Christian monotheism are also complicated. There are older currents within Judaism which (1) espouse henotheism, (2) acknowledge a second lesser god (e.g., Metatron, Enoch) who exists in heaven ("two powers in heaven") (3) view the messiah as a lesser god (Smith 2001; Boyarin 2004: 92; Stroumsa 2015: 13-15; Schafer 2020). Christian monotheism is complicated by a commitment to trinitarianism. Orthodox trinitarianism holds that the Supreme Being exists in the form of three distinct "persons" who have a shared essence (i.e., Father, Son/Jesus, and Holy Spirit). It is held that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. It is also asserted that all three of these persons are different from one another (e.g., the Son is different from the Father and the Holy Spirit). The preceding scheme defies ordinary logic, and is regarded as a divine mystery (Brower and Rea 2005; Bobrinskoy 2008; Emery and Levering 2011).

Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism endorse a type of quasi-monotheism. The Supreme Being is seen as uncreated, and as Creator of many things. He has great (but not limitless) power and knowledge, and is a proponent of moral good. He is made of light. In Zoroastrianism, He is also linked to (light-producing) fire. These teachings must be understood in relationship to "dualism", which is embraced by both religions (see Scibona 2001; Hintze 2014; Stroumsa 2015, 13-15). Such dualism posits that the universe is characterized by an extended struggle between two opposed forces. There are forces of moral good and light, led by the Supreme Being. There are likewise forces of evil and darkness, led by a powerful Satan-like evil spirit being. This evil being is known as "*Ahriman*" and "Evil Spirit (*Angra Mainyu*)" in Zoroastrianism (Hintze 2014). He is known as "*Ahriman*" and "King of Darkness" (*mlek hesuka*) in

Manichaeism (Tardieu 2008: 76, 82; Sundermann 2018). In Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism, the Supreme Being is uncreated. But *Ahriman* is also uncreated. Both figures exist from the beginning. The Supreme Being creates good things, while *Ahriman* creates evil things (e.g., sin, demons, death, disease, ugliness, pollution, and natural disasters) (Skjærvø 2011: 11-12). Dualism is connected to the problem of theodicy, which characterizes simple forms of monotheism. The problem can be stated as follows: "If we assume that the Supreme Being is good, and is omnipotent Creator of all things, why are there evil things in the world? Where did they come from?" Dualism provides an answer by rejecting simple monotheism, and moving closer to a quasi-monotheism. Dualism holds that while the Supreme Being is good, He is not an omnipotent Creator of all things. Rather, *Ahriman* has significant independent power, and he uses this power to create evil things. On the other hand, in Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism, the Supreme Being is still much more powerful than *Ahriman*. Hence, it is known that the former will eventually triumph over the latter.

Islam endorses a comparatively simple and straightforward monotheism, wherein the Supreme Being (*Allah*) promotes good and is seen as the uncreated Creator of all things. The Arabic term "*Allah*" means "the God". Like Ugaritic and Hebrew, Arabic is a Semitic language. The Arabic term "*Allah*" is etymologically related to the terms "*El*" and "*Eloah*" which denote the Supreme Being in Hebrew and Ugaritic, among Jews/Israelites and Canaanites. In Islam, *Allah* is omniscient (*al-ʿAlīm*) (QS 2:158, 3:92, 4:35, 24:41, 33:40) and omnipotent (*al-Qādir*) (QS 6:65, 46:33, 75:40). He created the universe (*al-Khāliq*) (QS 6:102, 13:16, 36:81, 39:62, 40:62, 59:24) and controls everything within it. He is conceptualized as a just king (*al-Malik*) (QS 20:114, 23:116, 59:23), who promotes morality and punishes wrongdoing (*al-Muntaqim*) (QS 32:22, 43:41, 44:16). He is also spoken of as light (QS 24:35). *Allah* is kind (*al-Raḥmān*) (QS 55:1-78). He is responsible for creating all of the beneficial things (*niʿam*) that humans enjoy in life - including their food, health, and shelter. Because humans have enjoyed God's benefits, they are morally obligated to Him (i.e., by the principle of reciprocity or *shukr al-munʿim*). Hence, they are obligated to thank God and remember His blessings in the

context of worship (*ʿibādah*). They must also obey Him and strive to please Him (see Reinhart 1995: 107-120; Nakissa 2020; 2021). Because *Allah* is the source of all blessings, He is the only one who merits worship. Directing worship towards others (*shirk*) is misguided - and strictly forbidden (QS 4:48,116). Other beings have no independent power to create anything or offer any benefit.

In Islam, it is believed that humans, by their very nature (*fiṭrah*), are inclined towards monotheism. Hence, any human can use his/her mind (*ʿaql*) to engage in independent reflection (*tafakkur*) about the universe. One who reflects comes to understand that the universe needed some cause to bring it into being. One also comes to understand that there must be some cause for the exquisite order, and apparent design, found in all aspects of the universe. This type of reflection enables people to arrive at knowledge of the Supreme Being independently. They infer that the cause of the universe's existence and order/design is the Supreme Being (Nakissa 2020). Islam holds that both Abraham and (later) Muḥammad were born among polytheistic peoples (in Mesopotamia and Arabia) but came to embrace monotheism through independent reflection (i.e., before receiving revelation from the Supreme Being). Muslims are likewise encouraged to engage in such reflection. The notion that humans can come to monotheistic belief through independent reflection on the universe was characteristic of the *ḥanīf*s. This notion was likewise common in ancient Greco-Roman philosophy/religion (e.g., Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism), and has some precedents in Judaism and Christianity (Ruse 2004; Schiefsky 2007; Stroumsa 2015: 10-13, 16-17, 155-158; Nakissa 2020). Nevertheless, in contrast to Islam, Judaism and Christianity tend to emphasize that knowledge of the Supreme Being derives, in large part, from specific historical events (e.g., God's self-revelation to the Israelites on Sinai after saving them from Egypt, the resurrection of Jesus).

(2) Belief in Lesser Spirit Beings that are Good or Bad

As indicated above, the concept of monotheism does not posit that there only exists one spirit being. Rather, it posits that there only exists one Supreme spirit being. There may be lesser spirit beings as well, who have less power. In complete monotheism, these lesser spirit beings have (virtually) no independent power. In quasi-monotheism, they have comparatively little independent power.

Late antique religions recognize numerous lesser spirit beings, which differ in rank and power. Spirit beings fall into two general categories. Those in the first category promote moral goodness and aid the Supreme Being. They are associated with light. Those in second category promote moral evil and oppose the Supreme Being. They are associated with darkness.

In Judaism and Christianity, lesser spirit beings are not counted as gods, for they lack independent power. Rather they are created by the Supreme Being and under His control. Whatever power they have comes from Him. Good lesser spirit beings are angels. Some of these occupy high ranks (e.g., the archangels Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael) (see Peters 2003: II, 351-352). Bad lesser spirit beings are demons, and their leader is Satan. Judaism holds that the essence of angels is (light-producing) fire (Jones 2010: 42). Christianity holds that angels are made from light, or are at least linked to light (2 Corinthians 11:14; Jones 2010: 42-43).

In Zoroastrianism, good spirit beings are known as "*yazatas*". The Supreme Being (*Ahura Mazda*) is a *yazata*. As indicated above, His essence is light, and He creates all other *yazatas* from light (Hintze 2014: 231-232). He then serves as leader of these other *yazatas*. Some other *yazatas* hold particular high ranks (e.g., the six *Amesha Spentas*, *Mithra*, *Anahita*) (Skjærvø 2011: 8-21; Hintze 2014; Magnusson 2023: 2-3). Generally speaking, with the exception of *Ahura Mazda*, *yazatas* may be regarded as good lesser spirit beings. Bad lesser spirit beings are known as "*daevas*". A *daeva* is a false god or demon (see Skjærvø 2011: 8-21).

Ahriman is a *daeva* ("*daeva* of *daevas*"). He (rather than the Supreme Being) creates all other *daevas*, and serves as their leader.

In Manichaeism, numerous good lesser spirt beings - both male and female - come forth from the Supreme Being (Father of Greatness) as emanations (e.g., Mother of Life, Great Architect, Living Spirit) (Tardieu 2008: 75-90). The Supreme Being brings them forth to assist Him in struggling against the forces of evil. However, their existence is temporary and they will eventually be absorbed back into the Supreme Being. In this sense, they are not fully independent. Rather they are extensions of God (Sundermann 2002). The Supreme Being is made of light as are His emanations. The forces of evil consist in various bad lesser spirit beings. These are demons, and their leader is the King of Darkness or *Ahriman*. They were not created by the Supreme Being.

Judaism and Christianity reject the worship of lesser spirit beings, and strictly emphasize their subservience to the Supreme Being. Matters are different in Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism. In these latter two religions, good lesser spirit beings are to be worshipped (Magnusson 2023: 2-3). There is also less emphasis placed on their subservience to God. This is one reason why Judaism and Christianity are closer to monotheism, while Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism are closer to quasi-monotheism. (Dualism is the other main reason why Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism are closer to quasi-monotheism).

Islam affirms a system of good and bad spirit beings which most closely resembles that found in Judaism and Christianity. The Supreme Being creates and controls good lesser spirit beings, who carry out His will. These are angels (*malāʾika*) (QS 2:30-34, 285). Some angels have especially high ranks, like *Jibrīl* (Gabriel), *Mīkāl* (Michael), *Isrāfīl*, and *ʿAzrāʾīl* (QS 2:97-98, Peters 2003: II, 353-354). It is held that the Supreme Being created angels from light (Jones 2010: 42-43). He also created lesser demon-like spirit beings known as "*jinn*" from fire (*Qurʾān* 15:27, 55:15, 72:1-28, Jones 2010: 42-43). *Jinn* are under the Supreme Being's power, and they can only do what He permits them to do. *Jinn* are generally associated with moral evil, although some have chosen to be

good. The leader of the evil *jinn* (*shayāṭīn*) is Satan, who is known as "*al-Shayṭān*" or "*Iblīs*" (QS 2:34-36, 6:112, 14:22, 18:50).

It will be noted that in late antique religions, concepts of lesser spirit beings and the Supreme Being are closely linked. Indeed, the concept of lesser spirit beings can only be understood in relation to the concept of the Supreme Being. Lesser spirit beings are defined by their lack of independent power. The reason why they lack independent power is because they are created and/or controlled by the Supreme Being. Moreover, lesser spirit beings are understood in terms of allegiance. Either they are allied with the Supreme Being, moral goodness, and light, or they oppose these things.

(3) Belief in Prophets

Late antique religions ascribe a central place to prophets and prophet-like apostles. The notion of prophets/apostles must be understood in relation to the Supreme Being. Prophets/apostles are conceptualized the Supreme Being's human messengers on Earth. The Supreme Being reveals His teachings to prophets/apostles, who are tasked with communicating these teachings to the masses. Prophets/apostles may also be priests or kings, and often work as shepherds. The most important prophets/apostles may be given a divine law and/or ascend into heaven (the abode of the Supreme Being).

Significantly, many (if not most) religions do not ascribe a central place to prophets/apostles. Rather, they hold that individuals can achieve extraordinary states of consciousness through drug ingestion, ecstatic rituals, or meditation (e.g., shamans, Hindu/Buddhist monastics). In extraordinary states of consciousness, individuals witness or encounter supernatural phenomena, from which they draw knowledge about the supernatural realm. In some cases, it is held that the Supreme Being has a role in revealing this knowledge. But in many (if not most) cases, it is believed that the Supreme Being is not involved. Many religions also have the notion that gods (or god-like beings) come directly to earth to teach

(e.g., Krishna, Siddhartha Gautama, Laozi). As such, there is no need for prophets.

In late antique religions, there are usually multiple prophets, who differ in status. Zoroastrianism's central prophet is Zoroaster (*Zarathustra*). He was a priest belonging to the ancient Iranian religion. He then reformed this religion in keeping with supernatural knowledge that he received (Kreyenbroek 2022: 201). It is held that Zoroaster was given a detailed divine law to establish (see Janos 2005; Macuch 2015). Accordingly, for Zoroastrianism, religion revolves around a divine law (Janos 2005: 320). Zoroastrianism does not have a line of prophets, but it does have multiple figures who gained access to supernatural knowledge. It is believed that, at the beginning of human history, long before Zoroaster, there was a shepherd known as "*Yima*" or "*Jamshid*". He communicated with *Ahura Mazda*, and on some accounts, he was the first human to do so (Shaked 1987: 251). *Ahura Mazda* asked *Yima/Jamshid* to become a prophet and proclaim His divine law, but the latter declined this offer. The task of prophethood and proclaiming the law was thus left to Zoroaster. Nevertheless, *Ahura Mazda* appointed *Yima/Jamshid* to rule over the world as a righteous king for hundreds of years. After Zoroaster, there are also instances in which individuals accessed supernatural knowledge. One of the most famous cases involves the prominent third century CE Priest Kerdir. He is believed to have seen and/or visited heaven. This allowed him to confirm the correctness of the religious teachings that had been transmitted to his generation (Van Bladel 2007: 235-236; Skjærvø 2011: 6; 2012). Judaism's central prophet is Moses. It is held that he was given a detailed divine law (Torah) to establish. Accordingly, for Judaism, religion revolves around a divine law (see Berger 1998; Licari 2019). In Judaism, there are prophets and prophet-like figures before Moses (e.g., Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob). There is also a long line of prophets after Moses—some of which are also priests or kings (e.g., Samuel, David, Solomon, Jeremiah, Ezekiel). Moreover, when the line of prophets ends (with Malachi), a type of supernatural revelation (e.g., *Bat Kol*) is given to Talmudic sages (e.g., Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah, Rabbi Akiva). It is held that prophets and sages after Moses followed his Torah law, although they clarified and expanded upon its rules. In Judaism, prophets often work as

shepherds (e.g., Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses). Some prophets, prophet-like figures, and Talmudic sages ascend into heaven (the abode of God) during their lives (e.g., Moses, Enoch, Elijah, Rabbi Akiva) (Morray-Jones 1993a; 1993b; Van Bladel 2007). Christianity acknowledges the prophets and prophet-like figures in Judaism (but not the Talmudic sages). Beyond this, Christianity holds that the Supreme Being Himself came down to earth to teach in the form of Jesus, before ascending into heaven (after being crucified). In Christian scripture, Jesus speaks of himself as a metaphorical "shepherd", who protects his followers as a flock of sheep (John 10:11-14). Christianity asserts that, for several decades after Jesus's ascension, the Supreme Being continued to send supernatural revelation to Jesus's disciples/apostles and their associates (e.g., Paul, John, Mark, Luke). One of the apostles (Paul) ascended to heaven temporarily during his life (2 Corinthians 12:1-12; Morray-Jones 1993a; 1993b; Van Bladel 2007). As noted earlier, Christians differed over whether Judaism's Torah law was still binding. Whereas Pauline Christians asserted that it had been abrogated by Jesus, Jewish Christians held that Jesus followed this law, and that it continued to be valid. Notably, prior to the seventh century CE, certain strains of Zoroastrianism may have begun to endorse prophets associated with Judaism and Christianity. There is evidence that some Zoroastrians identified *Yima*/*Jamshid* with Solomon, and recognized Abraham as a prophet or identified him with Zoroaster (Shaked 1987: 245, 253-254; Kiel 2019: 27-28). In Manichaeism, there is a line of prophets/apostles, beginning with Adam. It includes Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus, and Paul, and ends with Mani (see Hutter 1993; Stroumsa 2015: 87-99). Mani viewed the line of prophets/apostles in Judaism and Christianity as too narrowly focused on the Jewish people. The line he endorsed was understood as more universal, in that it encompassed revered religious figures from societies across the world (e.g., Buddha, Zoroaster) (Tardieu 2008: 16-18). Although Mani was raised as a Jewish Christian, he came to reject the idea of the Torah law as binding (Tardieu 2008).

In late antique religions, it is believed that the Supreme Being gives prophets and prophet-like figures supernatural powers (i.e., to perform miracles). Prophets use these powers to convince the general population

that their message is truly from the Supreme Being. Zoroaster is credited with special powers which enabled him to heal the sick, and split apart a wide river then cross it (Gignoux 2015). Moses is credited with special powers which enabled him to send plagues upon Egypt, split and cross the Red Sea, and miraculously extract water from the ground (by striking a stone). Jesus's disciples/apostles are credited with special powers which enabled them to heal the sick, cast out demons, and speak in tongues. Mani is credited with special powers of healing, clairvoyance, levitation, and teleportation (Sundermann 2009).

In late antique religions, it is believed that the Supreme Being usually communicates with prophets through lesser spirit beings (although He may communicate with them directly). In Zoroastrianism, it is believed that the Supreme Being communicated with Zoroaster via the *yazata Vohu Manah*. In Judaism, the Supreme Being communicates with prophets and prophet-like figures through angels. For example, angels communicate with Abraham and Moses (Genesis 22:1-19; Exodus 3:2). In Christianity, the Supreme Being communicates with Jesus's disciples/apostles (e.g., John) through angels (Revelation 22:1-7). Angels may also communicate with individuals who are not conceptualized as prophets or prophet-like figures (e.g., Hagar, Zechariah father of John) (see Genesis 16:7-14; Luke 1:11-20). In Manichaeism, it is believed that the Supreme being sent Mani revelations through an angel known as the "*Tawm*" (Tardieu 2008: 9).

Adherents of late antique religions believe that their prophets/apostles were real historical figures. Such beliefs are based, at least partially, on faith. In some cases (but not others) there is sufficient historical evidence to independently verify that such figures existed. Thus, there is sufficient evidence to verify the existence of Jesus, Paul, and Mani. Although some evidence exists, it challenging (and perhaps impossible) to verify the existence of Moses, Zoroaster, and Buddha. Meanwhile, the existence of earlier figures (e.g., Adam, Noah, Abraham) must be based on faith alone.

Islam's central prophet is Muḥammad. Historical evidence makes it possible to definitively verify his existence (Anthony 2020). Islam holds

that Muḥammad was a shepherd, who later became a merchant, before becoming a prophet (Anthony 2020: 59-82). It is held that he received divine revelation through the angel Gabriel (*Jibrīl*). He was given a detailed divine law (*sharīʿa*) to establish. For Islam, like Zoroastrianism and Judaism, religion revolves around a divine law (Hallaq 2009; Nakissa 2019). Muḥammad is credited with miracles. These include splitting the moon, making accurate prophecies about the future (QS 30:2-5), and bringing an inimitable Qurʾānic scripture (*al-iʿjāz*). One of Muḥammad's most famous miracles consists in making a night journey from Makka to Jerusalem and then ascending into heaven (see QS 17:1; 53:12-18; Colby 2008). Islam acknowledges a longer line of prophets (*anbiyāʾ*), to which Muḥammad belongs. This line consists primarily in figures associated with Judaism and Christianity. Thus, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Moses, and David are considered to be prophets (see QS 2:136, 17:55, 19:30-58). Jesus is likewise considered to be a prophet (rather than God) (QS 2:136). It is held that Jesus was the messiah (*al-masīḥ*, QS 4:171); that he was sent to the Jewish people (rather than all of humanity) (QS 3:49, 61:6); and that he upheld Moses's Torah law (rather than abrogating it) (QS 3:50, 5:46). It has often been noted that such views are associated with Jewish Christians (Crone 2015; 2016). Islam also acknowledges Arab prophets outside the Jewish and Christian traditions, such as *Hūd*, *Ṣāliḥ*, and *Shuʿayb* (QS 7:65, 73, 85, 11:84; Wheeler 2006). Significantly, the Qurʾān asserts that God has sent a prophet to each people, to address them in their own language (QS 16:36, 14:4). Accordingly, it is believed that there are prophets sent to various peoples that are not explicitly mentioned in Islamic scripture. On these grounds, some Muslims considered the possibility that Zoroaster was a prophet (Hämeen-Anttila 2021). Muslims are obliged to believe in all past prophets, or at least those who are explicitly mentioned in scripture (QS 2:285). Some prophets are regarded as more important and favored over others (QS 17:55). After Muḥammad, Abraham and Moses are treated as the most important prophets (as indicated by the large number of times they are mentioned in the Qurʿān). Abraham is understood to be the promulgator of a monotheism rooted in human nature. Moses is understood to be a political leader and the giver of a divine law. Muḥammad is understood to combine these features of Abraham and Moses. Islam holds that whereas other prophets

were sent to specific nations (e.g., Moses to the Israelites, *Hūd* to the people of *ʿĀd*), Muḥammad was sent to all peoples.

(4) Belief in Scriptural Texts

Writing technologies profoundly affect human thought and religiosity (Goody 1977; Eisenstein 1979; Ong 1982; Messick 1993). Preliterate societies (i.e., those without writing) obviously do not transmit religious knowledge through writing. Rather, knowledge is transmitted through a combination of memory, ritual chanting, oral commentary, and practice. Thus, religious authorities loosely memorize unwritten sacred texts. They transmit these texts to others by chanting the texts in front of them. This often occurs during periodic rituals. Those who hear the chanted texts usually have difficulty understanding their language, their ideas, or how to apply them in contemporary circumstances. Authorities clarify these issues through oral commentary on the texts. Moreover, religious authorities perform rituals and rules mentioned in sacred texts (e.g., songs, dances, marriage rites, prayers, sacrifices). People learn about these rituals and rules by observing religious authorities practice them. Writing enables individuals to take knowledge from past figures they never met, by reading their books. But this is not possible in preliterate societies. In preliterate societies, knowledge must be passed on through an unbroken chain. Person X transmits knowledge directly to Person Y by chanting texts, commenting upon them, and practicing associated rituals/rules. Person Y then transmits knowledge directly to Person Z by chanting the same texts, commenting upon them, and practicing associated rituals/rules. In this way, Z does not take knowledge directly from X (e.g., by reading X's book). Rather, Z receives X's knowledge through Y. Persons X, Y, and Z form an unbroken chain through which knowledge flows. This gives rise to the notion that religious knowledge is preserved by passing it through an unbroken chain of authorities. In the premodern period, the introduction of writing technologies did not result in the elimination of preliterate methods for transmitting religious knowledge. Instead, written texts came to be integrated with these methods (Calhoun 1993:79; Schoeler 2006). Thus,

even after sacred texts were written down, they were often still memorized, chanted, commented on, and practiced. The notion persisted that religious knowledge should be transmitted in this manner through an unbroken chain of authorities. For instance, this notion is found in the Indic religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. As we will see, it is also found in late antique religions.

Although the effects of writing should not be exaggerated, they are significant. In preliterate societies, religious texts are usually relatively unstable compositions. There is no one definitive version of these texts. Rather they are continually modified when chanted and transmitted, leading to rapid change and diversification over time. The emergence of writing technologies frequently generates the idea that religious knowledge should be preserved in the form of stable written texts, which prevent change and diversification. These written texts are known as "scripture" or "scriptural texts". Late antique societies possessed writing, although some did not possess scriptural texts. For example, the pre-Islamic Arabs had writing (as evidenced in rock graffiti), and formally trained scribes (Van Putten 2023). But their religion did not have scriptural texts. Nevertheless, the major religions of late antiquity did have scriptural texts.

Late antique scriptural texts are usually collections of many smaller texts produced by different authors at different times. The texts are written in multiple ancient languages of which ordinary believers have limited knowledge. This means that only an elite scholarly class can master the texts. Zoroastrianism's central scriptural text is the *Avesta* (including the *Yasna*, *Vendidad*, *Visperad*, *Yashts*, and *Khordeh Avesta*). It is written in Old Avestan and Younger Avestan (see Skjærvø 2011: 1-7). Judaism's central texts are the Hebrew Bible (which contains about twenty-four books), and the *Talmud* (composed of the *Mishnah* and *Gemara*). These texts are written in Hebrew and Aramaic. Christianity's central texts are the Hebrew Bible (i.e., Old Testament) and the New Testament (which contains about twenty-seven books). The latter is written in Greek. Manichaeism's central texts are the Heptateuch, the *Shabuhragan*, and the *Arzhang*. These are written in Syriac and Middle Persian.

The aforementioned scriptural texts persisted over long periods of time. Consequently, later generations had difficulty understanding their language, their ideas, and how to apply them in contemporary circumstances. As a result, these texts developed layers of explanatory commentary (e.g., Zoroastrian *Zand*, Jewish *Midrash*, Christian Patristic commentaries, Manichaean *Kephalaia*). Sometimes, the scriptural texts themselves initially developed as commentaries before being canonized (e.g., Jewish *Gemara* commentary on the *Mishna*).

In late antique religions, it is typically held that supernatural knowledge from past religious authorities (e.g., Zoroaster, Moses, Jesus, Mani) has been accurately passed down through an unbroken chain of scholars. Each scholar takes his/her knowledge directly from another scholar through a teacher/master-student/disciple relationship. Part of the supernatural knowledge is preserved in the form of scriptural texts, and part of it is preserved as an additional "tradition" which is loosely memorized. Scholars draw on this additional tradition when they comment on scriptural texts, summarize scriptural doctrines, and practice scriptural rituals and rules. Students learn the tradition by listening to and observing these scholars. In Judaism, it is held that supernatural knowledge is passed down through an unbroken chain of religious scholars. The chain extends back to Talmudic sages, then to post-Mosaic prophets, and then ultimately to Moses himself. Such knowledge includes the written text of the Hebrew Bible (i.e., "Written Torah"), as well as a loosely memorized tradition (i.e., "Oral Torah"). Some of this tradition was eventually written down in the Talmud (Berger 1998; Peters 2003: II,65-86; Schoeler 2006: 111-141). In Christianity, it is likewise held that supernatural knowledge is passed down through an unbroken chain of religious scholars. The chain extends back to the Church fathers, then to Jesus's disciples/apostles, and ultimately to Jesus himself (e.g., the line of "apostolic succession", see Peters 2003: II,65-86; McGowan 2012). Such knowledge includes the written text of the New Testament, as well as a loosely memorized tradition (i.e., "apostolic tradition") which informs later Church doctrines and writings (e.g., pronouncements of councils and popes, Christian Patristic

commentaries). Both Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism also have the notion of written texts and loosely memorized tradition being transmitted together though an unbroken chain of scholars. However, here the specific details are somewhat unclear (see Janos 2005; Pettipiece 2007; Kreyenbroek 2022).

In Islam, it is believed that particularly important prophets are given scriptural texts to proclaim. Thus, Abraham is given "Scrolls" (*ṣuḥuf*) (QS 53:36-37, 87:18-19), Moses is given the Torah (*Tawrāh*) (QS 5:43-45), David is given the Psalms (*Zabūr*) (*Qurʾān* 17:55, 21:105), and Jesus is given the Gospels (*Injīl*) (QS 5:46-47, 110, 7:157, 57:27). Muslims are obliged to believe in past scriptural texts (QS 2:4, 285). However, it is held that these texts have been tampered with and misinterpreted (*taḥrīf*) by Jews and Christians (QS 2:79, 3:78, 5:13, 41). As such, it is difficult or impossible to follow such texts. Rather, Muslims must follow the scriptural text (*kitāb*) given to Muḥammad; namely, the Qurʾān.

The Qurʾān is Islam's primary scriptural text. It is held that Muḥammad continuously received bits of revelation (*waḥī*) during the roughly 20-year period of his prophetic mission. The Qurʾān collects together these bits of revelation, and is about 600 pages in length. Muslims equate the text of the Qurʾān with the literal words of God. The content of the Qurʾān is somewhat heterogeneous. However, it focuses on theological doctrines, proper norms/laws, and stories of past prophets. Scriptural texts like the *Avesta*, Hebrew Bible, and New Testament were produced by communities, and gradually evolved over long periods of time (e.g., over 500 years in the case of the Hebrew Bible). By contrast, the Qurʾān that we have today may be ascribed to Muḥammad and was canonized within about two decades of his death (Sadeghi and Goudarzi 2012; Sinai 2017; Van Putten 2019; 2020; Sidky 2023).

Islam acknowledges a second type of scriptural text after the Qurʾān known as *ḥadīth* reports. *Ḥadīth* reports can be explained as follows. Muslims hold that not all of the divine revelation received by Muḥammad is contained in the Qurʾān. Muḥammad conveyed some of this additional revelation through his statements (e.g., "men may not wear gold") and

some of it through his actions (e.g., Muḥammad's prayer provides a model for Muslims on how to pray). *Ḥadīth* reports are accounts of Muḥammad's statements and actions (*sunnah*). *Ḥadīth* reports are related to *athar* reports. *Athar* reports are concerned with the earliest Muslim generations (*Salaf*). These are individuals who lived during Muḥammad's life, or in the first two centuries after his death. They include Muḥammad's companions and direct students (*ṣaḥābah*). Likewise included are the direct students of the companions (*ṭābiʿūn*), and the direct students of the direct students of the companions (*atbāʿ al-ṭābiʿīn*). The earliest generations are believed to be especially knowledgeable about Islam because they lived close to Muḥammad's time, and some were his direct students. Between the late eighth and early tenth centuries, Muslim scholars produced large authoritative compilations of *ḥadīth* reports and *athar* reports (e.g., *al-Muwaṭṭaʿ*, *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, *Saḥīḥ Muslim*). Ultimately, only *ḥadīth* reports were granted the status of scripture. However, some Muslims treat *athar* reports as a type of quasi-scripture.

Western scholars recognize that many *ḥadīth* reports cannot, in fact, reliably be traced back to Muḥammad. Rather they represent the views of religious authorities who lived during the first century or two following Muḥammad's death. In other words, *ḥadīth* reports blend together views actually articulated by Muḥammad, with views of very early religious authorities (see Motzki 2002; Brown 2009; Reinhart 2010). Put differently, in many cases, *ḥadīth* reports are actually *athar* reports.

Generally speaking, Islam holds that supernatural knowledge is passed down through an unbroken chain of religious scholars. This chain is known as a "*sanad*", "*isnād*", or "*silsilah*" (Graham 1993; Schoeler 2006; Nakissa 2019: 149-178). The chain extends back to the earliest Muslim generations (*Salaf*), and then to Muḥammad himself. Such supernatural knowledge includes the written text of the Qurʾān. It also includes a loosely memorized tradition. Part of this tradition was written down as *ḥadīth* reports and *athar* reports. The tradition informs later Muslim doctrines and writings (e.g., *fiqh*, *tafsīr*) (Nakissa 2019).

Over time Muslim scholars would produce many commentaries on scriptural texts. Commentary on the Qurʾān is known as *tafsīr*, whereas commentary on *ḥadīth* reports is known as *sharḥ*. Some written *tafsīr* from late antiquity has been preserved (e.g., the eighth century *Tafsīr* of Muqātil bin Sulaymān).

In many religions, revelation is conceived of as a long ongoing process with no clear end. In Judaism, the primary revelation of Moses is followed by revelations given to dozens of other prophets and Talmudic sages. In Christianity, the primary revelation of Jesus is followed by revelations given to the apostles, and then divinely-guided church councils. An ongoing process of revelation encourages continuous religious change. Thus, it is possible to trace major shifts in Jewish theological doctrines (e.g., on the oneness of God, the afterlife, and Oral Torah) and Christian theological doctrines (e.g., on the trinity, original sin, and the two natures of Christ). It is also possible to trace major shifts in Jewish and Christian forms of prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, holidays, and the like (see e.g., Bradshaw and Hoffman 1991; Silverstein & Stroumsa 2015: 429-558). Matters are somewhat different with Manichaeism. There is evidence that Mani declared himself to be the final prophet or "seal of the prophets" - and produced definitive Manichaean scriptural texts during his lifetime (see Stroumsa 2015: 87-99; Tardieu 2008: 13-19, 34, 48-49). If so, then there are parallels between Mani and Muḥammad. Islam asserts that divine revelation ends with Muḥammad, who is referred to in the Qurʿān (QS 33:40) as the "seal of the prophets" (*khātam al-nabiyyīn*). This means that Muḥammad's teachings form a definitive doctrine, and may not to be altered. Compared to other religions (e.g., Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism) Islamic theological doctrines and worship practices are remarkably standardized and stable over time, and can largely be traced to Muḥammad. Examples are belief in one God, in angels, in *jinn*, in heaven, in hell, in a resurrection, in a Day of Judgement as well as specific practices concerning prayer (*ṣalāh*), fasting (*ṣawm*), almsgiving (*zakāh*), pilgrimage (*ḥajj*) and festivals (*ʿīd*). Needless to say, Islam's relative standardization and stability are far from absolute, and it is not difficult to pinpoint various doctrines and worship practices which did develop after

Muḥammad's death (e.g., doctrines concerning the uncreated Qurʿān, caliphal succession, prophetic *ʿiṣmah*, *mawlid* celebrations, Sufi *dhikr*).

It will be noted that in late antique religions, scriptural texts are ultimately based on revelations from the Supreme Being. In this sense there is a relationship between the notion of scripture and the notion of a Supreme Being. Such a relationship is not found in all religions. For instance, in Buddhism, Jainism, and (some versions of) Hinduism, the most important scriptures are not understood as revelations from a Supreme Being (e.g., Pali Canon, *Agamas*, *Vedas*).

(5) Belief in an Afterlife

All (or virtually all) religions have some notion of life after death – likely owing to biologically-rooted psychological tendencies (Boyer 2001: 322-323; Atran 2002: 39; Bering 2011: 111-130). However, there are widely differing views about the nature of the afterlife. For example, after death, an individual might be reincarnated, or persist on earth as a ghost, or go to a special realm (e.g., up into the sky, down below the ground). Many religions hold that an individual's moral behavior affects whether his/her afterlife is pleasant or painful (e.g., the ancient Egyptian and Greco-Roman religions). Late antique religions hold that there is an afterlife, and that an individual's fate depends on his/her moral behavior. Those who have lived a morally good life will experience great pleasure in paradise, where the Supreme Being dwells. Meanwhile, those who have lived a morally bad life will experience great pain in hell. Moral goodness requires living in accordance with the will of the Supreme Being. This typically means having proper beliefs, good actions, and good character.

In late antique religions, conceptions of the afterlife are often unclear. There are two reasons for this. First, it is held that the afterlife has two phases. Immediately upon death, a type of afterlife begins, wherein an individual experiences paradise or hell (or something like them). However, later the world will end. At that time, individuals who have already died will have their bodies resurrected. They will then be subject

to a final judgement, and enter paradise or hell. Nevertheless, religious texts are often vague about how the two phases relate to one another. (In this section and the next, the two phases will be discussed). This brings us to the second reason why conceptions of the afterlife are unclear, especially in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Relevant religious texts seem to put forth two conceptions of paradise. There is a terrestrial conception where paradise is a type of garden on earth. There is also a heavenly conception where paradise is located above the sky. Religious texts are vague about how these two conceptions relate to one another (see Peters 2003: II,347-351).

Zoroastrianism holds that after death, the soul will be subject to judgement by the Supreme Being or the three *yazatas Sraosha*, *Mithra*, and *Rashnu*. Here a scale of justice is used, where good and bad deeds are weighed. If a person's good deeds are heavier, s/he merits paradise. If a person's bad deeds are heavier, s/he merits hell (Akbar 2020: 95-96). The soul must also pass over a narrow bridge (*Chinvat*) suspended above hell. Those who have lived good lives will be able to cross over, and enter paradise where the Supreme Being dwells. Those who have lived evil lives will fall off into hell below (Akbar 2020: 92-93). Hell is conceptualized as a deep well. It is dark, stinking, extremely narrow, and filled with noxious creatures (e.g., snakes, lizards). It is the residence of *Ahriman* and the *daevas*. Within hell, one is exposed to various atmospheric harms, including snow, cold, hail, rain, and burning heat (Gignoux 2012). However, hell and damnation are not eternal. As we will see, Zoroastrianism asserts that at the end of time there will be a bodily resurrection, a transformation of the world, and a destruction of hell.

In Judaism, there is comparatively less emphasis on the afterlife. Moreover, Jewish notions of the afterlife are vague and somewhat contradictory. The Hebrew Bible says little about the afterlife, although it does briefly mention a type of existence after death in a realm beneath the earth (*Sheol*). Both the morally good and bad go there (Peters 2003: II, 341-342). Later Jewish scriptural texts provide a more complex conception of the afterlife. At the end of time, there will be a bodily resurrection, and a judgement. The world will be transformed, and a

paradise will appear. The morally good will then be granted paradise. Paradise will be similar to the Garden of Eden (*Gan Eden*), and its inhabitants will enjoy the presence of the Supreme Being. Although some locate paradise on a transformed earth, there is also a tendency to locate it above the heavens (Peters 2003: II,347-351). The wicked are sent to a fiery hell realm below the earth where they are punished. Most are punished only temporarily (less than a year), although the worst sinners are punished forever. Making matters more complex, there is also the notion of judgement from the Supreme Being once a year during the High Holy Days (between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*). Depending on this judgment, a person may be given more life or made to die.

In Christianity, there is a vague idea that people somehow experience paradise or hell immediately upon death (Peters 2003: II, 343-347). However, much more emphasis is given to what happens later at the end of the world. At that time, Jesus returns to earth, and the bodies of the dead are resurrected. They are then judged by Jesus. The morally good are granted paradise. Paradise is located in a new heaven and earth that the Supreme Being will create at the end of time. In paradise, individuals enjoy the presence of Jesus/God. The morally evil are sentenced to a fiery underground hell realm, and punished eternally.

In Manichaeism, when a person dies there are two basic outcomes. If s/he is morally good, his/her soul escapes the material body and ascends to a spiritual paradise. Things are different if s/he is evil. For Manichaeism, evil is associated with matter, the material body, and addiction to physical pleasures linked with the material body. Since an evil person is tied to matter, s/he cannot escape matter at death. Rather, that person is condemned to be reincarnated in material bodies and experience further worldly suffering. More specially, the person may be reincarnated as a plant, animal, or human. (Similar ideas are found in Indic religions like Buddhism and Jainism, and Mani may have encountered these ideas during his known travels within India). If an individual persists in doing evil s/he is eventually cast into hell (Jackson 1925). As we will see, Manichaeism also posits a transformation of the world at the end of time, with effects on the afterlife.

In Islam, individuals begin to experience a state of pleasure or pain immediately after they die, when they are placed in the grave (e.g., bad people are tormented in the grave by angels) (Peters 2003: II,369-371; Akbar 2020: 91-92). Later on, all humans are resurrected bodily at the end of time (*yawm al-qiyāma*). It is believed that angels monitor humans throughout their lives and keep a record of their deeds, no matter how insignificant. After humans are resurrected, the record is presented to the Supreme Being and He issues a judgement (see QS 75:1-15, 69:13-31, 99:6). This is done with the help of a scale of justice (*mīzān*), which weighs good and bad deeds (Akbar 2020: 95-96). The Supreme Being takes account of a person's deeds, alongside his/her beliefs, and moral character (*akhlāq*) (e.g., humility, generosity, love of God, fear of God). Someone who lacks belief in Islam is condemned to an eternity in hell (at least if s/he lived after the coming of Muḥammad and heard his message). As for those who believe in Islam, there are two possibilities. If his/her good deeds and moral character outweigh his/her bad deeds, s/he is immediately granted paradise for eternity. If matters are otherwise, s/he is sent to hell for a period of time to suffer, and is then granted paradise for eternity. The process whereby an individual reaches his/her final abode involves passing over a narrow bridge (*ṣirāṭ*) above hell. Those who merit paradise will pass over the bridge into paradise without obstacles. But those who are destined for hell (temporarily or eternally) fall off the bridge and into hell (see QS 37:22-24, Akbar 2020: 92-93). Paradise is conceptualized as a garden (*janna*), wherein an individual may enjoy all types of pleasures, including sensual delights (e.g., fine foods, mansions, sex with beautiful virgins) (see QS 2:82, 3:185, 55:46-76, 78:31-36). However, one of the greatest pleasures (if not the greatest) is spending time with the Supreme Being (who is beloved by believers). Paradise has many levels, with the highest levels being the best. These are closest to God's throne, and reserved for the most righteous. Although matters are somewhat unclear, there is a tendency to locate paradise above the heavens (Peters 2003: II, 347-351). Hell (*jahannam*) is conceptualized as a pit filled with burning fire (*nār*), in which individuals suffer extreme tortures (e.g., their skin is scorched with flames, they are made to drink festering water) (see QS 9:35-109, 14:16, 28-29, 78:21-30, Lange 2016).

Hell has many levels, with the lowest being the worst. The degree of pleasure or pain experienced in the afterlife is proportional to one's deeds on earth. Morally better people experience more intense pleasures in heaven, and morally worse people experience more intense punishments in hell.

(6) Belief that the World will End with the Triumph of Good over Evil

Many (if not most) religions endorse a cyclical notion of time. According to this notion, the universe is eternal. Time repeats forever in keeping with a pattern, just like the day repeats (beginning with sunrise and ending with sunset) and the year repeats (with the passing of the seasons). The notion of cyclical time can be found in the Greco-Roman and Indic religions (i.e., Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism).

By contrast, late antique religions endorse a linear notion of time. According to this notion, the world has a beginning and end. Moreover, it is believed that the end is marked by the final triumph of good over evil. In Zoroastrianism, it is held that the world will last twelve thousand years. At the end of this period, the forces of moral good and light (led by the Supreme Being) will eventually triumph over the forces of moral evil and darkness (led by *Ahriman*). Zoroaster is born three thousand years before the end of time. He aids the forces of good. He also has three descendants, who aid the forces of good. They are born at one-thousand-year intervals, and are savior figures (Skjærvø 2011: 29-30). The last of these is *Saoshyans*. He participates in a battle between the good *yazatas* and the bad *daevas* at the end of time, helping the former side achieve ultimate victory. During these final events, *Saoshyans* will resurrect the bodies of all who have already died. Then there will be a trial by ordeal wherein the *yazatas Airyaman* and *Atar* melt the metal in the hills and mountains. The molten metal will flow across the earth as a river. It will destroy all evil in the world. The metal will come into contact with those living at the time as well as the resurrected dead. Individuals who are morally good will not be harmed. Evil persons will suffer punishment by burning. But they will not be destroyed, and the burning will purify them of their sins. The river

will flow into hell and destroy it along with *Ahriman*. This will make the world into an evil-free paradise that individuals will enjoy.

In Judaism and Christianity, understandings of the end times center on the notion of a savior known as the messiah. The messiah is a descendant of the prophet-king David. It is believed that, over time, the world will get increasingly evil. Severe forms of suffering will proliferate (e.g., famine, disease, natural disasters). Giant evil foreign armies will invade the land of Israel (Gog and Magog), and a powerful political leader will try to destroy the true religion. Then the messiah will appear, there will be a great battle, and the messiah will triumph. This triumph initiates a period of righteousness, peace, and justice on earth. The world will be transformed into a type of paradise, and there will be a resurrection of the dead (Peters 2003: II, 339-376). In Judaism, the messiah is a figure who will come one time in the future. In Christianity, the messiah is Jesus, and he comes two times. He already came one time, during which he was crucified, resurrected, and then raised to heaven. But he will come again. Christianity asserts that, at the end of time, the world will be placed under the rule of a false messiah or antichrist. The antichrist is physically deformed and an ally of Satan. Jesus, the true messiah, will then descend to earth from heaven and defeat the antichrist.

Like Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism holds that the forces of moral good and light (led by the Supreme Being) will eventually triumph over the forces of moral evil and darkness (led by *Ahriman*). In developing these ideas, Manicheism (unlike Zoroastrianism) emphasizes the gnostic notion of a fundamental opposition between spiritual and material substances. Manichaeism asserts that, in the beginning, there was a world of good and light that was spiritual in nature. Below it was located a world of evil and darkness that was material in nature. Originally these two worlds were entirely separate. *Ahriman* then led the world below to invade the world above. This caused spiritual things to become mixed with, and imprisoned in, matter. Thus, spiritual human souls came to be imprisoned in material bodies. It is believed that at the end of time, the two worlds will be strictly separated again. The spiritual will be liberated from matter, and souls will return upwards to the Supreme Being. But before this happens

there will be a battle in which the forces of evil are supported by the antichrist. Jesus will reappear and help the forces of good triumph. Jesus will rule and there will be a period of righteousness. Next the earth will empty as people leave their bodies and go to heaven. Then a great fire will descend on earth to purify and destroy it. Remaining evil matter, and evil persons, will be imprisoned for eternity in a globe, which is placed inside a giant pit covered with a stone (see Van Oort 1998: 45; Tardieu 2008: 35; Sundermann 2012).

Islamic doctrines about the end times most closely resemble those of Judaism and Christianity. These doctrines are largely based on *ḥadīth* reports which are often unclear and seemingly contradictory. Many such doctrines cannot reliably be traced to Muḥammad, although they became widespread within the first two centuries after his death (Saritoprak 2003; Stowasser 2004; Damir-Geilsdorf and Franke 2015). The most basic Islamic eschatological claims can be described as follows. As humans approach the end times, evil will become increasingly prevalent in the world (e.g., promiscuity, alcohol drinking), the teachings of Islam will be forgotten and abandoned, and fear-inducing natural events will occur (e.g., earthquakes, the rising of the sun from the West) (see QS 75:6-11, 81:1-14 99:1-3). Giant evil foreign armies will rampage and cause destruction (Gog and Magog) (see QS 18:94-99). Eventually, a one-eyed false messiah or antichrist (*al-masīḥ al-dajjāl*) will arise and win followers by performing miracle-like acts. For a short period, he will rule over the world, encourage evil, and work to destroy what remains of the Islamic religion. Subsequently, the true messiah will return and kill the false messiah. The true messiah is identified with prophet Jesus. A righteous descendant of Muḥammad (known as "*al-Mahdī*") will also aid in the fight against the false messiah. Following the defeat of the false messiah, there will be a short period of righteousness, peace, and justice on earth. The Supreme Being will then end the world and resurrect people for judgement.

In late antique religions, there is a relationship between the concept of a Supreme Being and the concept of the world ending with the triumph of good. This can be explained as follows. In many or most religions, the

universe is not conceptualized as the creation of any spirit being (e.g., god). It operates in keeping with internal principles of creation and morality that preexist any spirit beings. Spirit beings dwell within the universe, and are subject to its principles. For example, Indic religions like Buddhism, Jainism, and (some versions of) Hinduism assert that the universe operates in keeping with two basic principles: cyclical regeneration and *karma*. According to the principle of cyclical regeneration, as time passes, the universe destroys and regenerates itself in a repeating pattern. This pattern repeats forever and is not dependent on the gods for its functioning. Indeed, the gods themselves are destroyed whenever the universe is destroyed. According to the principle of *karma*, beings in the universe (e.g., gods, humans, animals) experience benefits when they do morally good acts (e.g., wealth, health, reincarnation in higher forms). They experience harms when they do morally bad acts (e.g., poverty, sickness, reincarnation in lower forms). These benefits and harms come about automatically, and are not dependent upon the gods. In a framework of this kind, the gods do not have the power to create the universe. Similarly, they do not have the power to destroy it and bring an end to time. Rather, the universe persists forever in keeping with a cyclical notion of time. In a framework of this kind, the gods also lack power over morality. They do not create standards to determine what is morally good and bad. Furthermore, they do not have the power and responsibility to reward all good and punish all evil (e.g., by destroying a corrupt world). Matters are different in late antique religions. Here the Supreme Being does have the power to create and destroy the universe. By destroying the universe, He can bring an end to time. The Supreme Being also has power over morality. Thus, He has an important role in determining which acts are morally good and bad (by specifying them in scripture). He also has the power and responsibility to reward all good and punish all evil (e.g., by destroying a corrupt world).

Conclusion

This article has highlighted parallels between Islamic theological doctrines, and those found in other late antique religions. More specifically, the article has systematically compared Islam with Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Manichaeism. The article has

argued that all of these religions share six basic doctrines: (1) belief in one morally-concerned Supreme Being (2) belief in lesser spirit beings that are good or bad (3) belief in prophets (4) belief in scriptural texts (5) belief in an afterlife (6) belief that the world will end with the triumph of good over evil.

The article has further argued that the six doctrines are not disjointed and independent. Rather they coherently fit together into a larger perspective on the universe. This perspective is a "whole" greater than the sum of its "parts". The six integrated doctrines constitute the theological foundation of major late antique religions. To be clear, these claims do not imply that there are no internal tensions between the doctrines. These claims also do not imply that certain individual doctrines might not be modified or absorbed into alternative theological systems.

Finally, it has been argued that the six doctrines reflect broad theological trends found across the Middle East and Mediterranean regions. It is more accurate to say that the Islamic theological tradition emerged out of these broad trends, than to say that it emerged out of specific religions (e.g., Judaism, Christianity). Such a conclusion has implications beyond the domain of theology. It suggests a general approach to the study of early Islamic tradition. According to this approach, it should not be assumed that elements of early Islamic tradition (e.g., theology, ritual, law, art, architecture) have emerge out of specific religions. It is likely that they have emerged out of broad late antique trends which transcend any specific religions. This can be verified by systematically examining parallels between Islam and other late antique religions (e.g., systematically comparing Islamic ritual or law or art with that of other late antique religions).

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