

Christianity: Texts and Traditions (HPPD7006)

Essay topic:

Shared Commitments in Abrahamic Religions on the Doctrine of Creation and Its Position in Interfaith Dialogue

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I. Introduction

In today's age of globalisation, an abundance of information is available on the teachings and practices of different religions and it is more common than ever before that people of different faiths experience interfaith encounters in formal and informal settings. This phenomenon has evoked the demand for establishing proper practice of interfaith dialogue as religious differences can be root causes for conflict and disharmony in society. While interfaith dialogue is considered a valuable and essential instrument in achieving peaceful coexistence between religions, it remains an area of challenging issues due to unique truth claims and religious superiority, the recognition of possible truth in religions other than one's own is sometimes perceived as a threat to their self-understanding.

In recent years, interfaith dialogue in the forms of comparative theology and scriptural reasoning are on the rise and the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, are often employed as research subjects. The three traditions do indeed share much in common in their ideas, figures and histories, but the most evident and significant common ground is their shared belief in one transcendental creator and the nature of the creation of all existence. Their shared commitments to the doctrine of creation offer a solid ground for comparative studies among these three traditions in a fruitful and constructive manner.

This paper will firstly examine closely on the shared commitments to the doctrine of creation in three specific areas among Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Then its ability to positively contribute to fruitful interfaith dialogue will be assessed against Cornille's proposal of five critical conditions for successful interfaith dialogue. Lastly, limitations of the common commitments for enhanced dialogue will be addressed.

I. Shared Commitments on the Doctrine of Creation

This paper will begin by examining the fundamental common commitments on the nature of the doctrine of creation in Abrahamic religions in the following three areas:

i. The Act of Creation

Judaism, Christianity and Islam share a central belief that God created the universe out of nothing, known as *creatio ex nihilo*, indicating there was no pre-existent substance prior to God's creation (Aquinas 1955: 49). Medieval Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides identifies this concept as the only teaching shared by all three Abrahamic traditions (Burrell eds. 2010:24). Although some philosophers contend otherwise, such as Aristotle's different view of an eternal existence of the universe (Oliver 2017: 35), Maimonides rejects this view on religious grounds (Burrell eds. 2010:36), *creatio ex nihilo* remains a fundamental principle among the adherents who worship the God of Abraham.

The scriptural accounts on the creation of the universe are identical for Jews and Christians. As described in Genesis 1, God created the earth and brought it into existence out of formless void, so it is reasonable to argue that the act of creation was indeed *ex nihilo* as nothing existed prior to the creation other than the Creator Himself, showing God's independent existence and everything else's dependence on God. Maimonides delineates that the followers of the Law of Moses should recognise that everything in the universe was brought into existence by God out of non-existence, except God Himself; God could exist without the existence of the universe (Burrell eds. 2010:35). The New Testament also frequently refers to a fundamental origin of all existence; for instance, "For from him and through him and to him are all things (Rom. 11:36)." This concept is substantially the same for Islam. The Qur'an's account on creation is as simple as: "He says 'Be' and it is (2:117)!" This verse is in fact repeated throughout the Quran in matters of the creation of all things, illustrating God's almighty power and free act of creating. The central and most significant concept in Islam, known as *tawhid*, insists that God is one and single (Burrell 2011: 18); it holds the oneness concept of monotheism in Islam.

The earliest theologians of Christianity claim that creation was God's free and voluntary act, there was no incentive, internally or externally, that can evoke the divine to create. Later, Aquinas describes creation as a freely-willed and unconstrained emanation from God (Oliver 2017: 36). This free creation is understood to be a divine donation that adds nothing new to God's all perfections before creation. The three Abrahamic religions have a common

understanding that there is no separate existence between God and the universe, God is the one and only existence and everything else participates in His existence. From the Jewish perspective, the notion of free creation corroborates God's covenant with the people of Israel. For Christians, the relation of creation to God is a participation in the persons of the Trinity, through which God's eternal self-donating love is expressed; therefore creation *ex nihilo* can be perceived more than just a free act of the divine will (Oliver 2017: 52).

ii. God, the Creator

For the adherents of the three Abrahamic religions, God is transcendental above all beings; He is the creator and sustainer of the world. In the Nicene Creed, God is described as 'the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.' God is worthy to receive glory and honor and power, for He created all things, and by His will they existed and were created (Rev. 4:11). In the Hebrew bible, God tell Moses, "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isa. 55:9)." In Isaiah 45, God clearly states that there is no other like God Himself (Isa. 45:22). From the scriptures, God has been depicted as the 'one' (Exod. 3:14; Deut. 6:4), 'eternal' (Deut. 33:27; Ps. 90:2; Isa. 40:28; Rev. 22:13) and "omnipotent" (Rom. 1:20) (Oliver 2017: 43). All of these descriptions are expressions of monotheism which is central to Abrahamic faiths.

In Islam, it is believed that the originator of the heavens and earth has ninety nine names with each carrying the connotation of creating. Among them are *al-Badi* (Absolute Cause), *al-Khaliq* (Creator), *al-Mubdi* (Beginner), *al-Muqtadir* (All Determiner) and *al-Qadir* (All Powerful) (Burrell 2011: 16). Ian Netton's Qur'anic Creator Paradigm supports God's role as one who creates *ex nihilo* out of His free divine will, acts and guides His people definitively in historical time; whose existence is participated by His creation (Burrell 2011: 18). Al-Ghazali once stated that the faith in divine unity and divine providence can only be perfected by complete confidence in the One God (Burrell 2011: 344).

In Judaism, the identity of the one God was developed in two ways. Firstly, God is the creator of the heavens and earth (Gen. 1-3); secondly, it was by way of the covenant which constitutes the special relationship between Israel and her God. God made a promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and to Israel that He will be their God, they will be His people (Gen. 17:7; Exod. 6:7; Jer. 7:23, 31:33). This covenant was formalized in the giving of the Ten Commandments.

All three Abrahamic faiths share the belief of the monotheistic nature of God; He is the only One to be worshipped. Moreover, although it is beyond the human mind to reason the divinity of God, but the three traditions agree that God has revealed Himself to humanity in some ways. In Christianity, the Trinity is considered God's own revelation. The generation of the Son (Word) with the procession of the Holy Spirit (Love) in God does not counter the concept of God's free creation, but is considered the revelation displaying the inner life of the creator (Burrell 2011: 350-351). Although Judaism and Islam do not have an explicit revelation as such, but the bestowal of the Torah and the Qur'an respectively are regarded by many Jewish and Muslim thinkers as the revelation from God for their tradition. Indeed, God only acknowledges the covenant if the people of Israel obey His commandment; the ethos of Islam insists that traces of divine wisdom can be found by pondering the verses of the Qur'an (Burrell 2011: 351). Although the means of revelation are different in the three traditions, but they all seek and believe that God has revealed Himself to the world in some form.

iii. Creator and the Creatures

a. God's Relation to His Creatures

Between God and the creatures, there is irreducible asymmetry. While God exists in Himself, the creatures exist only by participation in God. God is not defined or fulfilled by creation, nor does He realise any form of potential in creating the creatures. St. Thomas Aquinas identifies God as the principle and cause of being to all other things (Aquinas 1920: 1a.4.2), signifying that every creature is directly related to God, for He is the source of all things. From the perspective of human creatures, they do not exist on their own; metaphysically speaking, human acts can only occur under the awareness of their dependence on the Creator.

For the three traditions, the creator interacts with His human creatures through an "interpersonal" relationship, namely the "covenant" by Jews, "grace" by Christians and the "proximity to God" by Muslims (Burrell 2011: 51). The Jewish tradition seems to fuse divine and human action more simply than the other two Abrahamic traditions, as the gift of the covenant given by God to Moses at the very start provides an interface for human creatures to respond freely to God's invitation (Burrell 2011: 54). In the Ash'ari view of Islam, God is the only creator in the universe, and human acquisition of acts is determined by Him only. Human creatures do not bring their acts into existence by themselves (Hoover 2009:6). So it is reasonable to say that God's free creation already encompasses the goals that define the behaviour of the creatures. In order for human creatures to respond actively to God, they are

divinely assisted with an interface, Christianity identifies this divine interface as “grace;” and is further classified into two kinds, “habitual grace” and “operating grace” (Burrell 2011: 54). The creator’s activity is sometimes expressed as “intervention”, in the form of the Torah, the incarnation of Jesus and the Qur’an respectively. Burrell contends this term to be misleading; if God and the universe, including the creatures, are not considered separate existence, then is it not contradicting to say that God “intervenes” in the creatures whose very being participates in His existence? God’s relationship with the creatures is known to be a “non-reciprocal relation of dependence (Burrell 2011: 349).”

b. Human Creatures’ Stewardship

At the outset of Genesis, the process of God’s creation is clearly recounted and it is recognised by all three traditions. It is said that God created the heavens and earth in six days; in the first five days, God created the natural world (land, sea and animals) and the cosmic order; on the sixth day, God created the human creatures. Humankind was created in God’s own image and likeness and was commanded to have dominion over everything that creeps upon the earth (Gen. 1:26-28). The last day of creation is seen as the pinnacle of God’s creation, with mankind being endowed with a rational nature that puts them above all the other creatures, humanity’s shared likeness with God evokes the belief of their privilege of a more intimate relationship with God than other creatures. According to Genesis 2, God formed Adam from the dust and he was given “the breath of life”, from then, man became a living soul (Gen. 2:7). Owing to humanity’s “shared likeness with God”, the creation of the human nature can be defined by a twofold act. Firstly the animal nature, which encompasses the formation of the body and its correspondent desires; second part is the gift of the angelic nature, which embodies rational principles that set mankind on a particular path with the ability of knowing and loving what is good. For this reason, God endowed them stewardship of all the other worldly creatures (Gen. 1:26) and the responsibility to tend to their care.

The Bible has an abundance of evidence to demonstrate a strong link between humankind’s stewardship and the conservation of the environment (Gen. 1:29; Psalm 104; Lev. 27:30; 1 Pet. 4:10; 1 Cor. 4: 1-2; Jn. 6:12). Likewise, Islam also sees the protection of the environment from a stewardship viewpoint and the Qur’an consists of many verses to support this principle. As Islam also believes that the earth is God’s creation and mankind has been entrusted to care for it. This responsibility accords with the concept of divine unity (tawhid) in Islamic theology.

II. A Positive Contribution to Building a Basis for Fruitful Interfaith Dialogue

In recent times, there has been increasing demand in the practice of interfaith dialogue in the academic setting, as well as in communities and social groups. The application of comparative theology and scriptural reasoning takes a particular focus on the three Abrahamic faiths and endeavours to deliver meanings to life from theology and scriptures in times of secularisation and pluralisation.

Having discussed the fundamental common commitments shared by the Abrahamic religions on the doctrine of creation, this paper will now assess how these commitments can provide a basis for fruitful interfaith dialogue between the three faith traditions.

Catherine Cornille, a professor who is internationally acclaimed for her work in comparative theology and interreligious dialogue, proposes five conditions as critical for achieving successful interfaith dialogue in her book *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*. The five conditions are humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy and hospitality. It can be contended that the shared commitments of the Abrahamic religions on creation could, to a certain degree, fulfill these five conditions and provide an appropriate basis for more fruitful dialogue between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. An assessment of each condition will be attempted.

Two forms of ‘humility’ are required in participants during interfaith dialogue. Not only does one need to accept the limitations of one’s knowledge and understanding of the other, but must also maintain humility toward one’s own religion (Cornille 2008, p.10). Every religion is a complex system encompassing beliefs, history, practices, rituals and profound philosophy, no matter how much one has learnt about the other religious tradition through reading the scriptures or interacting with the faith adherents, it would still be absurd to claim mastery. Similarly, one should embrace the same attitude toward the teachings and practices of his/her own religion. If one believes his/her religion holds the absolute and final truth, then this mindset is not only implying that all the other traditions are incomplete and untrue, but also prevents prospects for mutual learning and growth, as little room is allowed for openness and receptivity. In this regard, between the three Abrahamic faiths, the common understanding of the nature of creation plays a significant role in fulfilling the condition of humility, as the virtue of humility is fundamentally grounded in the adherents’ relationship with the creator. It

is well-understood between them that God is the ultimate truth and the source of all things, human creatures are only part of the existence of God; this collective understanding will certainly place participants of the three faiths on an equal platform for more effective interfaith dialogue and reduce any potential problems from self-aggrandisement.

The second critical condition is 'commitment'. This commitment refers to firm commitment to one's own particular belief and tradition, together with the willingness to attest to its validity with that of other belief systems (Cornille 2008, p.59). However, strong religious commitment may sometimes lead to religious intolerance and incompatibility, as faith commitment delivers, to many, a sense of belonging, and the recognition of the truth in one belief system inevitably excludes the equal value of the truth in other religions. Moreover, it often becomes a concern in interfaith dialogue that openness may be radically misinterpreted as a compromise to perceive all religions as the same and induce a willingness to faith conversion. Thus, Cornille thinks it is desirable and important to find a proper balance between the commitment to one's own religion and openness toward the truth of other religions (Cornille 2008, p.84). This is not overly challenging for participants from the Abrahamic religions, their common commitments about the nature of creation already provide a good foundation and place them in a stronger position for further dialogue in a constructive and respectable manner. The question on 'the origination of all existence' is least likely to cause conflict within the three traditions as they believe in the same creator; unlike some other religions that may hold incommensurable doctrinal systems to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Buddhism is a good example on this issue. By Buddhist doctrine, it is believed that existence of all things does not depend on a creator, but is a result of the conditions driven by karmic force. So if any one of the Abrahamic religions meets participants from a Buddhist background, then an attitude of openness needs to be developed while in conversation about the creation of existence, whereas it is not such an issue within the Abrahamic religions.

Cornille proposes 'interconnection' as the third critical condition for successful interfaith dialogue, it entails the pursuit of some level of commonality among religions (Cornille 2008, p.95). Fundamental and irreconcilable differences in beliefs and practices do exist, and every religion may consider itself as unique and superior to the other world religions; nevertheless, it is still conceivable for religions to find a common ground. Cornille contends three possible areas for achieving this 'interconnection'. Firstly, shared concerns on external challenges may become a meeting point and bring religions together for dialogue to a common cause,

such as the confrontation with common social, political and environmental challenges. The process can enhance a sense of solidarity between religions (Cornille 2008, p.97). The Abrahamic religions' shared commitment in their entrusted stewardship of worldly creatures can provide a genuine basis for constructive collaboration to solve issues related to the conservation of the environment. The current situation of ecological devastation may stimulate an eager readiness to exchange ideas so as to fulfill their responsibility in looking after God's creation. Secondly, Cornille suggests that the sharing of religious experiences has proven to be an area of convergence between religions (Cornille 2008, p.110), similarities in spiritual paths and qualities can offer a valuable point for the idea of 'interconnection'. Followers of the Abrahamic religions believe they exist in the participation of God's existence, this belief alone could offer much opportunity to reaching similar religious experiences; scriptural verses on the nature of creation could also be compared and shared among them. Finally, the third area for achieving 'interconnection' between religions is the notion of a 'unifying transcendental reality', as it is believed that the ultimate truth of all religions transcend this immanent world (Cornille 2008, p.121). While achieving this idea of unity might be very difficult between many religions, but for the Abrahamic religions, they already worship the same creator from whom the ultimate truth are derived.

Genuine interfaith dialogue only happens when there is proper understanding between one another, for this matter, the condition of 'empathy' is helpful. The conception of empathy is generally interpreted as a form of transposition into the other's feelings, thoughts and experiences (Cornille 2008, p.138). However, in the context of interfaith dialogue, the level of empathy exceeds this requirement; rather, engagement in an entirely alien system of beliefs and practices is entailed. The eminent German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer once stated that:

'it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, aftruly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says (Cornille 2008, p.145).'

Although the employment of "empathy" may enhance understanding of particular beliefs and practices, but it is worth noting that one's understanding of the other is often affected or even biased by their prior knowledge about and previous experience with the other. So attaining a complete empathic grasp of someone from a different tradition is almost implausible. For the

participants from the Abrahamic religions, the source of their belief is the same and they have a substantially similar relationship with that source, hence they would find it easier to transpose themselves into the experiences, beliefs and practices of each other. This good level of “empathy” provides a harmonious starting point for fruitful interfaith dialogue.

The last of the five conditions is ‘hospitality.’ Ultimately, the possibility of interfaith dialogue lies in the recognition of possible truth in religions other than one’s own; on the contrary, resisting the idea that other religions can also harbour any truth beyond the horizons of one’s own religious perspective would reduce desire for dialogue, albeit the previous four conditions are fulfilled. Therefore, the condition of ‘hospitality’ suggests that one should acknowledge the possible truth of other world religions and have an attitude of openness to learn from the other (Cornille 2008, p.177). Cornille finds that hospitality usually stays among religions whose truth of teachings and practices mirror or are similar to one another, because for those groups, little to no threat is imposed on their religious confidence in traditional self-understanding (Cornille 2008, p.189). For that reason, the shared commitments on the doctrine of creation should provide a gateway toward successful dialogue between the Abrahamic religions. Their common understanding of the source of existence provides a basis for an open and respectful dialogue, and can even trigger an interest to learn from each other about the teachings of the same creator; this may help them gain a better understanding of their own traditions.

III. Limitation on Interfaith Dialogue

It has been demonstrated that the common commitments on the nature of the doctrine of creation shared by the Abrahamic religions do indeed provide, to a certain degree, a basis for fruitful interfaith dialogue, however, it is to be noted that limitation is inevitably present. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity, in particular the belief of the incarnation, is opposed by Judaism and Islam and has been a matter of long-standing and unresolved disagreement between the three traditions.

The doctrine of Trinity became the central part of the Christian faith during the development of Christianity and Jesus is recognised as the Messiah by Christians. The New Testament clearly indicates that Jesus (the Word) was with God from the beginning and “was God (Jn 1:1).” God’s grace and truth are revealed through him who came in flesh and lived among the human creatures; most significantly, he is claimed as God’s only son (Jn 1:14). This assertion unquestionably caused much dispute and resentment from the Jews and Muslims. Both

groups do not believe in the doctrine of incarnation, for if this was true, the distinction between the creator and His creatures becomes invalid (Burrell 2011: 354). Jews do not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the fact that Jesus was a Jew, who was trusted by his followers to have come to fulfill the Hebrew bible as the Messiah, truly posed a threat and a challenge to the faith of Judaism. Evident opposition to the claim of the 'Son of God' in Islam can be found in the Qur'anic passages, one of which says: "The very Creator of the heavens and of the earth, how could there be a "son" to Him, there never having been a "spouse" to Him – He who created everything and who is omniscient over all things (6:101)?" The polemical tone in this passage shows the disbelief of the position of a son to the almighty God, Islam believes that God has no progeny.

Furthermore, the doctrine of Trinity is also rejected by Judaism and Islam as it is thought to offend the concept of monotheism and entail tri-theism (Hoover 2009:1). Muslims accuse the doctrine of Trinity for committing the sin of associating partners with God for ascribing divinity to the Son and the Holy Spirit (Hoover 2009:9); this breaches the central concept of God's unity (tawhid) in Islam.

The above mentioned areas are possible incommensurable doctrinal principles related to the nature of creation that the three traditions could encounter during interfaith dialogue. Although the divergence may cause a degree of limitation on the fluency of dialogue, but finding a proper balance between committing to one's own belief and sensitivity and respect for the other could alleviate any tension and assist in accomplishing meaningful and constructive dialogue.

IV. Conclusion

By inspecting the three Abrahamic religions' shared commitments to the doctrine of creation in the areas of 'action of creation', 'God the creator' and 'God's relation to His creatures', it is reasonable to say that these commonalities do provide an equal platform for constructive dialogue between the three traditions and eliminate the issue of self-glorification. Shared understanding evokes solidarity and can unite the three traditions for the purpose of finding solutions to external challenges, such as the preservation of environment; similar religious experiences will facilitate the process of empathic transposition into the belief and practices of one another; and faith in the same transcendental reality means better mutual understanding and greater openness to learning from each other. Limitations are present, in

particular the voices against the belief of incarnation from Judaism and Islam. Although this subject needs further reflection, but divergence in this area should not cease the exchange of ideas between the three Abrahamic religions; nevertheless, the recognised common commitments on creation are sufficient to deliver a starting point for fruitful interfaith dialogue.

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