

INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

**Prophet Abraham:
A Figure of Exclusivism or Ecumenism?**

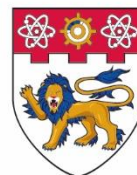
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**Prophet Abraham:
A Figure of Exclusivism or Ecumenism?**

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Abstract

John D. Levenson (2012) and Aaron W. Hughes (2012), among others, have argued that proponents of the construct “Abrahamic religions” essentialized the “differences” between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and that those religions have different conceptions of Abraham that are out of synch with what is considered the politically correct labelling of those religions as “Abrahamic religions.” Although such critiques hold some validity, this article argues that the charge of “essentialism” can also be levelled against the opponents of the construct, i.e., if proponents took a reductionist approach about the “differences,” opponents equally took a reductionist approach about the “commonalities.” Approaching this question as a Muslim theologian, I contend that one of the ways to come out of this polarity is to look not only to “historical Abraham,” but also to “scriptural Abraham,” for it is the “scripture” that has often been considered the locus of “normativity” in those traditions. While Levenson views this move from a “historical Abraham” to a “normative Abraham” as a modern naïve attempt at syncretism, I argue that the pursuit of “normativity” has always been intrinsic to the Islamic tradition. In doing so, I appeal to Fazlur Rahman’s distinction between “historical Islam” and “normative Islam,” to argue that an ecumenical Abraham lies at the heart of “normative Islam.”

Three important qualifications

Firstly, embarking on this subject as a “Muslim theologian” (whereby normativity is most overt and most intrinsic), I am aware of the challenges that risk the “academic character” of this article. However, to slightly offset this risk, I do not see the duality of normative/prescriptive-descriptive as mutually exclusive, for if the acceptance of “revisability” and “criticality” is what essentially distinguishes academic scholarship from theological scholarship,¹ I believe that theological scholarship is not inherently devoid of “revisability” and “criticality.” As Thomas A. Lewis argued, the espousal of “critical normativity” in tandem with “revisability” should refute the common claim that such theologically-oriented approaches fall short of achieving the academic distance demanded by academic scholarship proper.² Here I am also in affinity with Kevin Schilbrack who wrote, “The criterion for what belongs in the academy is not whether one’s inquiries are value-laden—they always will be—but whether those values are open to challenge and critique.”³

Secondly, although the category “Abrahamic religions” is a shared construct between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, this article chiefly concentrates on the Islamic tradition for three reasons. First, the centrality of the figure of Abraham to the Islamic tradition, as compared to his weight in the two other traditions. Second, John Levenson, who is one of my two main interlocutors in this article, does not seem to have done justice to the role of Abraham in Islam, despite his acknowledgment of the former’s cardinality in Islam.⁴ Third, in my move from the “historical Abraham” towards “normative Abraham,” I primarily take a hermeneutical approach, which perfectly suits the Islamic tradition. That is not to say that Judaism and Christianity cannot or should not be studied hermeneutically, but rather that the Islamic tradition personifies this hermeneutical engagement par excellence. Rémi Brague brilliantly summarizes this, stating:

With Judaism, Christianity, and Islam we have three religions, each of which has its book, but which has a different relationship with the book. At the risk of oversimplifying, I would express these relations in three formulas that I will develop shortly. The religion of Israel is a history that led to a book; Christianity is a history recounted in a book; Islam is a book that leads to a history.⁵

Therefore, the Islamic tradition is heavily text-based, whereas Christianity is largely centred around the figure of Jesus Christ and the idea of “scriptural authority” is, using Levenson’s words, “very un-Jewish.”⁶

Finally, my treatment of the subject is significantly focused on the works of John D. Levenson and Aaron W. Hughes as opponents of the category “Abrahamic traditions.”⁷ Both authors are singled out for two reasons. First, they are considered two of the key biblical exegetes among contemporary Jewish thinkers. Second, they are known for their opposition to the category “Abrahamic traditions” and their attempts to dismantle this construct has received much attention.

Setting the Scene

In his *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Levenson puts forward the argument that the category of “Abrahamic religions” is deeply misleading, for it ambiguates key theological differences and underrates fundamental historical antagonisms, many of which are reinforced by

¹ See Thomas A. Lewis, “The Inevitability of Normativity in the Study of Religion: Theology in Religious Studies,” in *Theology and Religious Studies in Higher Education: Global Perspectives*, eds. Simon G. Smith and Darlene Bird, London: Bloomsbury, 2009, 87-98.

² Ibid.

³ Kevin Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto*, Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014, 192.

⁴ John Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012, 8.

⁵ Rémi Brague, “The Concept of the Abrahamic Religions, Problems and Pitfalls” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Abrahamic Religions*, eds. Adam Silverstein and Guy G. Stroumsa, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 88-105, 99.

⁶ Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 184.

⁷ Levenson is an American Hebrew Bible scholar at Harvard Divinity School and Hughes is a Canadian academic, based in the Department of Religion and Classics at the University of Rochester.

exclusive claims to be the only authentic inheritors of the legacy of Abraham. To those who seek ecumenism in the legacy of Abraham, Levenson metaphorically says: You are looking for love in all the wrong places. Beginning initially with the Book of Genesis, which deals with Abraham's early call by God through his ultimate "test" in faith, through his near-sacrifice experience of his son, up until his demise, Levenson highlights not only the different, but also the antagonistic and mutually exclusive ways in which these biblical narratives were received, interpreted, and used in each of the three "Abrahamic religions." He concludes that there is no historical basis for the Abrahamic construct in its ecumenical sense. It is worth quoting him at length here:

Given these conflicting interpretations of the supposedly common figure, the claim that Abraham is a source of reconciliation among the three traditions increasingly called "Abrahamic" is as simplistic as it is now widespread. Historically, Abraham has functioned much more as a point of differentiation among the three religious communities than as a node of commonality. The assumption that we can recover a neutral Abraham that is independent of Judaism, Christianity and Islam—yet authoritative over them—is quite unwarranted.⁸

Levenson then gives a detailed explanation of how the reception of Abraham was different in the three traditions. Beginning with Judaism, he asserts that the Jews saw themselves as the exclusive biological inheritors of Abraham, through Isaac, Jacob, the latter's twelve sons and the tribes of Israel. Jews thus often imagine, believe in or construct Abraham not only as a Jew, but also the "first Jew,"⁹ describing him as the first propagator of monotheism¹⁰ who observed Mosaic law which would be revealed later.¹¹ Levenson dismisses all this, maintaining that although Abraham nearly sacrificed his son moved by a call by God and thereby entered into a personal covenant with Him, there is nothing in the Book of Genesis that may lend support to the romanticized picture of Abraham. On the contrary, he says, it is not that "in Genesis, Abraham does not teach what Moses is said to have taught; it is that he does not teach anything at all."¹² He proceeds to say:

Genesis, like the entire Jewish Bible, is extraordinarily reticent about providing editorial evaluations of Abraham. The same reticence also partly accounts for the occasional willingness of the Jewish tradition to find serious fault with Abraham. In this, too, Judaism seems radically different from the way most religious traditions treat their founders, who are regarded as models for emulation and, in the case of orthodox Christianity, as the very incarnation of God himself.¹³

Moving from Judaism to Christianity, Levenson argues that early Christians minimized the biological relation that the Jews claimed to have had with Abraham's Covenant with God and maximized the spiritual relation instead, with the key thing being "faith" and not "birth."¹⁴ He concludes thus that for Christians the true legacy of Abraham lies, not in his progeny, but rather in his faithful actions and devoted deeds. "To the Jews' claim that their father is Abraham," says Levenson, "Jesus points to the discrepancy between their deeds and his."¹⁵ Furthermore, they responded to the Jewish claim that Abraham was observant of the Mosaic law, by saying that Abraham was blessed by God primarily for his "faith," and not for his observance of the law, long before the full law of Moses, nor was he celebrated for his "monotheism or his uncompromising opposition to religious iconography."¹⁶ Drawing on the Gospels and the Epistles of Paul, Levenson highlights how the later and wider Christian tradition denied any Jewish claim to Abraham's spiritual inheritance.¹⁷ Jews, according to

⁸ Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 8-9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁷ For an extensive coverage of how early Christians related to Judaism, see the writings of Amy-Jill Levine, most notably Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, New York: HarperCollins, 2007. See also Judith M. Lieu, *Neither Jew Nor Greek?: Constructing Early Christianity*, London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016;

this later Christian tradition, have no share in Abraham's Covenant with God. Given that the Abrahamic faith finds its fulfilment in Jesus, it was natural that Christians viewed Jesus as trumping Abraham, embodied in Jesus' statement: "Before Abraham was, I am."¹⁸

Shifting from Christianity to Islam, Levenson's treatment of the Qur'ānic Abraham seems rather facile in comparison to his coverage of Jewish and Christian Abrahams, even though he frequently reiterates that Abraham is more central to Islam than to Judaism or Christianity.¹⁹ Continuing a line of mutually-exclusive readings of Abraham, in Islam, says Levenson, Abraham is "best seen as a prefiguration of Muhammad."²⁰ Islam, argues Levenson, emphasized, not the familial dimension of Abraham which was already emphasized in Judaism, but the moral and theological dimensions, embodied in his full submission to God, his rejection of polytheism and advocacy of monotheism.²¹ Levenson quickly adds, "Morality and submission are, of course, also aspects of the Jewish and Christian concept of covenant and of the religious life more generally, but they do not, as in Islam, exhaust the meaning of covenant or relatedness to Abraham."²²

In the final chapter, "One Abraham or Three?," Levenson asserts that the reconstruction of a pan-Abrahamic Abraham for religious ecumenism does a disservice to the three traditions, for the differences involved are too significant to minimize. The disservice essentially lies in that each of the three traditions needs to compromise something of its essence, in order to comply with this threefold partnership. He expressed this in the following manner: "With its mention of monotheism, it favours Islam and perhaps Judaism over Christianity. With its mention of faith, it favours Christianity (and perhaps Islam) over Judaism. With its mention of [Abraham's] fatherhood, it favours Judaism and Christianity over Islam."²³ On the contrary, Levenson propounds, we would be better served by cherishing better both the deep similarities and equally deep dissimilarities among the three traditions, and deeply comprehending why the similarities and the dissimilarities alike have remained in the background and will likely continue to do so.²⁴ Levenson concludes by saying that while ecumenical Abrahamists appeal to Gen 17:5 which describes Abraham as "the father of a multitude of nations," they forget that "neither the Hebrew Bible nor the New Testament speaks of the revered patriarch as the father of a multitude of *religions* at all."²⁵

Having briefly covered Levenson's take on the usage of the construct "Abrahamic religions," it is now apt to move to Hughes' position, which he presents in *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History*.²⁶ In this book, he argues that this construct "has emerged as a vague referent and as an ecumenical term to explain the myths, structures, and historical interactions among these three religions [...] a modern creation, largely a theological neologism."²⁷ Reiterating Levenson's observations, Hughes attempts to show that the adherents of the three traditions have, historically, attempted to force their conception of Abraham on each other, murdered one another in his name, with each viewing themselves alone as the only true recipient of the Abrahamic Covenant.²⁸

With this background in mind, not only did Hughes call for the abandonment of the "term," but also considered that there is a deeper problem that goes beyond mere terminology. That is, the contemporary usage of "Abrahamic religions" is primarily "a categorical mistake" and not just a "terminological one." Revisiting "both the term and category," says Hughes, "must take the form of developing a new conceptual language that avoids positing discrete religious traditions interacting with and borrowing from one another, and that instead envisages complexity and porosity between manifold and overlapping subgroups within and among 'religions.'"²⁹ It is worth quoting him at length here:

and Paul Hedges, *Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia, and Antisemitism in Global Context*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 52-53.

¹⁸ Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 151.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 199.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 202.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 173-214.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 207.

²⁶ Aaron W. Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

If essentialist terms such as Judaism, Christianity, or Islam add a lens of distortion to the particulars of how subgroups within each of these three religions interact with one another, even vaguer terms, such as “Abrahamic religions,” add an additional one. It is in the overlapping and complex interactions between Judaisms, Christianities, and Islams that we encounter various struggles, skirmishes, and the desire to imagine manifold identity formations. To reduce these complexities to the singular of each tradition, let alone to move a step further and use a name that subsumes within it all three monolithic traditions, is decidedly unhelpful. As a typological category “Abrahamic religions” is of extremely limited use not only because it is historically inaccurate, as I suggested above, but also because it increasingly functions as a laborsaving device that is conducive to anachronism, caricature, and eisegesis.³⁰

Hughes largely reduces the emergence of the term “Abrahamic religions” to political interests, contending that after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the term was brought to the fore, not as “a shield against the forces of irreligion or materialism as it had in the 1950s and 1960s,”³¹ but as an ecumenical device to promote peaceful co-existence among the followers of those traditions when they were seen to be increasingly antagonistic to one another. Therefore, it was more of an antithesis to the theses of the likes of Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington,³² i.e., the “clash of civilizations.”³³ Hughes reminded his readers that ecumenism can still transpire without distorting historical realities. When Jews and Muslims have had good encounters in eleventh-century Cordoba, for instance, that was not under Abraham’s name, but rather “owing to real historical, legal, socioeconomic, and political reasons.”³⁴

Proponents of the construct “Abrahamic religions,” Hughes proceeds, may say that they are revisiting the role of Abraham because formative and classical scholarship in the three traditions might have missed the essence of the Abrahamic Religion, when they took Abraham as a figure of exclusivism rather than being one of inclusivism. Responding to this, Hughes points out that defining anything, let alone something as multi-faceted and intricate as “religion,” is neither an easy nor a straightforward matter. Therefore, the pursuit for “normativity” or “essentiality” in any faith tradition “tends to ignore all those data sets (historical evidence, material remains, and so on) that fly in the face of such a constructed normativity. This is not just about diversity within religious traditions; it gets to the very heart of the conceptual difficulties inherent to the act of defining.”³⁵ Any venture to get at the “essence” of any religion, says Hughes, is bound to fail for the simple reason that religions are not “reified essences. They are, on the contrary, large canopies under which coexist manifold, complex, and often contradictory elements.” It is challenging enough to appreciate this for one religion, but when “various” religions are put under another umbrella, such as “Abrahamic religions,” our task of cherishing differences becomes almost impossible.³⁶ Hughes adds that it becomes even more challenging when one of the traditions involved, i.e. Islam, considers that the Bible had been falsified and was subjected to textual alteration (*tahrif*), since the Jews and Christians failed to preserve its original contents and therefore, for Muslims, it is not a reliable source of the divine will anymore.³⁷ He goes on to say, “It is on account of this perceived textual distortion, moreover, that early Muslim theologians did not attach these earlier revelations to the Qur’ān in the same way that Christian theologians attached the Old Testament to the New, an act that was predicated on the notion that the former foreshadowed the latter.”³⁸

Finally, Hughes asserts that in employing words to define any entity, one is bound to face the problem of “data selection,” where one is faced with a myriad of questions, most notably: “What counts as valid data, or invalid? Who decides on the parameters of inclusion and exclusion?”³⁹ In doing so, one ends up with an exercise of ideology rather than epistemology, wherein something is imposed on an intricate set of data, or using Hughes words, “That which fits the definition is accepted; that which makes us uncomfortable or does not

³⁰ Ibid., 10.

³¹ Ibid., 12.

³² See respectively, Bernard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 266. 3 (1990): 47-60., and Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

³³ Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions*, 12.

³⁴ Ibid., 27.

³⁵ Ibid., 107.

³⁶ Ibid., 110-111.

³⁷ Ibid., 39-40.

³⁸ Ibid., 40.

³⁹ Ibid., 111.

somehow fit with our own understanding, is marginalized and completely ignored at best or written off as somehow 'inauthentic' at worst."⁴⁰

Critical assessment and alternative conceptual framework

What emerges from the above discussion is that there are two poles at play in this discussion: proponents of the category "Abrahamic religions" and opponents of this category. While the former camp view Abraham as a figure of unity and inclusivism, the latter consider him a figure of "identity" and exclusivism. Having briefly presented some key arguments put forward by Levenson and Hughes against the usage of the term, I think that there is a lot of truth to their critiques, especially their argument that Abraham has been moved in contemporary discourse from playing a role of supersessionism and exclusivism, as history attests, to playing a role of ecumenism and inclusivism. This shift, they suggest, is primarily motivated by the contemporary quest for peace and the various political agendas following the Second World War as well as the Second Vatican Council. Supporting their arguments, they quote classical commentaries on the Bible as well as the Qur'ān, to point out that those commentaries often invoked Abraham as a property of each respective tradition in a mutually exclusive manner.

With this polarity of views, we are left with one key question: Who was Abraham? Was he a figure of unity or one of identity? Although the issues raised by Levenson and Hughes deserve serious consideration by any proponent of the category "Abrahamic religions," I do not think they warrant its complete dismissal. Instead of abandoning the category completely, a more intermediate way of addressing the two poles is to appeal to the "scriptural text" in the first place, rather than to the "historical reception" of Abraham, for it is the "scriptural texts" that have historically played a, if not the, major role in the definition of "normativity."

In the context of Islamic theology, by "scriptural texts" I primarily refer to the Qur'ān, as opposed to the Sunna, for while Prophet Muḥammad is unquestionably the most acquainted with Islam and the knowledge that comes through him is indispensable to any Islamic discourse, it is not his authority that is at stake here, but rather that of the Sunna, which constitutes the locus of what we know about what he instructed. Therefore, the key question becomes chiefly one of "authenticity" and not one of "authority." It is no wonder then that "mainstream Sunni theologians did not consider reports of the Sunna to be authoritative and binding in theological articles, as theology was thought to be demanding 'certitude,' which is lacking in the vast majority of the Sunna tradition, for they engender 'speculative' rather than 'certain' knowledge of past events."⁴¹ Hence, Jonathan Brown's observation when he wrote that "The full systems of Islamic theology and law are not derived primarily from the Qur'an,"⁴² applies only to a minority view in the Islamic tradition that considered *ḥadīth* authoritative in creedal matters.⁴³

Muslim scholars have often attempted "normativity" by appealing to "scriptural texts" when social changes happen. For example, not only the early Kharijite movement and the Abbasid uprising can serve as early examples of attempting "normativity," but also the reformism of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), and, even further, the modern revolution in Iran and the emergence of Salafism as well as Islamic feminism are recent trends that look to "scriptural texts" not only to justify change, but also to establish continuity with the tradition.⁴⁴ Al-Ghazālī, for one, contended that Muslims have altered the connotations of key Qur'ānic terms and taken them beyond their normative meanings, including *fiqh*, *tawḥīd*, and *'ilm*. Consequently, in his *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (*The Revival of Religious Sciences*), he attempted to retain the normative meanings of those key terms by appealing to the original texts.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Mohammed Gamal Abdelnour, *The Higher Objectives of Islamic Theology Toward a Theory of Maqāṣid al-'Aqīda*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2022, 45.

⁴² Jonathan Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2014, 18.

⁴³ See al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *al-Kifāya fī ma'rifat 'sūl 'ilm al-riwāya*, Vol. 2, Mit Ghamr: Dār al-Hudā, 2003, 557. See also Abdullah al-Judai, *Taḥrīr 'ulūm al-ḥadīth*, Vol. 1, 1st edn, Leeds: Al-Judai Research & Consultations, 2003, 52.

⁴⁴ Daniel W. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 2.

⁴⁵ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, 1st edn, Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2005, 41-46.

In taking “scriptural texts” as sources of normativity, I follow the lead of Michel Foucault’s concept of “episteme” with some qualification. Foucault views religion primarily as a paradigm of linguistic discourse anchored upon a shared set of understandings about the foundation of knowledge.⁴⁶ Given that the foundation of knowledge in the Islamic tradition is essentially the Qur’ānic text, I am convinced that a text-based reading is truer to the Islamic tradition, than readings offered by the likes of Shahab Ahmed in his *What Is Islam?*, where he contended that Islam is not the simple scripture-based structure, as often perceived, but instead the lived Islam that was embodied in the massive expansion of the culture of mysticism and the different forms of popular piety as well as the Islamic folk culture.⁴⁷ Against this view, I argue that the Qur’ān has constituted the enduring foundation of belief and the reference point for Muslims’ daily life that define what God intends for them. Therefore, Muslims need to have a perpetual hermeneutical engagement with the Qur’ān in a bid to uncover the essence of its message, and here comes in the role of the ulama as agents and navigators of such hermeneutical endeavours.⁴⁸ In the words of John Esposito:

Muslims today, as in the past, continue to affirm that the Quran is the literal word of God, the Creator’s immutable guidance for an otherwise transient world. This transhistorical significance is rooted in belief that the Book and the Prophet provide eternal principles and norms on which Muslim life, both individual and collective, is to be patterned. The challenge for each generation of believers has been the continued formulation, appropriation, and implementation of Islam in history.⁴⁹

Given the preceding, I appeal to Fazlur Rahman’s (d. 1988) distinction between “historical Islam” and “normative Islam” to better understand the normative role of Abraham from a Muslim perspective. Rahman points out the need to “distinguish clearly between normative Islam and historical Islam.”⁵⁰ While the “normative” is mainly concerned with the Islamic essential doctrines as revealed in the scriptural texts, the “historical” is concerned with the understanding and practices produced by individuals or groups of individuals in their attempt to comprehend and implement “normative Islam,” i.e., the “career of Islam at the hands of Muslims.”⁵¹ He argues that once “historical Islam” is identified by Muslim scholars, it needs to be subjected, by those scholars, to “normative Islam,” which is embodied in the Qur’ān and therefore should be taken as the yardstick against which Muslims can distinguish what is “normative” from what is “historical.”⁵²

Rahman’s key motive behind this idea was the fact that the Qur’ān occurred in the light of history and against a social historical backdrop. It came as a response to a certain social historical milieu, thereby it contains pronouncements that speak to specific problems experienced in concrete historical realities. Although it sometimes merely gives an answer to a question, usually these answers are accompanied with an explicit or semi explicit *common denominator*, explaining “why” a certain pronouncement is passed. Therefore, it is “feasible” to comprehend their reasons and hence deduce general principles by studying the background materials available.⁵³

The key questions posing themselves to Rahman’s paradigm were: How does one access and assess “normative Islam”? To what extent can one strip themselves of subjectivities and prejudices before pursuing what is “normative”? Rahman’s response to those questions was one of his key contributions to Muslim reformist thought, introducing his “double-movement theory,” which involves moving “from the present situation to Qur’anic times” and then “back to the present,” in a cyclically recurring manner forming an open hermeneutical

⁴⁶ See Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.

⁴⁷ See Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016. See especially the second chapter of the book: “Islam as Law, Islams-not-Islam, Islamic and Islamicate, Religion and Culture, Culture and Civilization,” 113-176.

⁴⁸ On the nature and dynamics of this community of interpreters, see Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Faysal al-tafriqa bayna al-islām wa-al-zandaqa*, ed. Sulaymān Dunyā, Cairo: ‘Īsā al-Bābī al-Halabī, 1961; Sherman Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002; Abdullah Saeed, *Reading the Qur’an in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach*, New York: Routledge, 2013.

⁴⁹ John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, third edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 31.

⁵⁰ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam & Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, 141.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 141-147.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

circle between the present and the past.⁵⁴ The first of the two movements was made up of two consecutive steps: to understand “the meaning of the Qur’an as a whole as well as in terms of the specific tenets that constitute responses to specific situations.”⁵⁵ This step would naturally lead to the *ratio legis* mentioned above. To comprehend a *ratio legis* fully, Rahman pointed out, an understanding of the socio-historical background is necessary. Of particular help in this regard is the genre that Qur’ān commentators call “occasions of revelation,” as it helps with understanding the socio-historical context.⁵⁶

Once the *ratio legis* is arrived at, one was then groomed for the second step of the first movement. Namely, “to generalize those specific answers and enunciate them as statements of general moral-social objectives that can be ‘distilled’ from specific texts in the light of the sociohistorical background and the often-stated *rationes legis*.”⁵⁷ The second step properly understood and neatly applied; one would now be ready to actualize the second part of the double movement. That is, coming back to the present with “normative Islam” in hand. Both movements require some deep level of social-scientific understanding of not only the past situation but also the present and its problems. Only then can scholars get to revitalize the Islamic tradition and bring it to life in each generation to speak to its problems and guide its way forward.⁵⁸

Having applied this double movement, Rahman reached the conclusion that it is God that lies at the centre of Islam, as opposed to the common belief that it is Prophet Muhammad. God, he writes, “is that dimension which makes other dimensions possible; He gives meaning and life to everything. He is all-enveloping, literally infinite, and He alone is infinite.”⁵⁹ As a result, “normative Islam” is based around God. Therefore, no single historical interpretation of the Qur’ān should hold an “infinite sway” on Muslims, given that God is the only “infinite” in Islam. He considers this to be implied in Q. 18.109, which states: “Say: If the ocean were to turn into ink [for writing] the [creative] Words of my Lord, the ocean will be expended before the Words of my Lord are—even if we were to bring another ocean like it.”⁶⁰ Namely, Muslims should continuously go back to the Qur’ān with a “holistic” mind in every generation and produce new interpretations speaking to the needs of every age. Therefore, “the urgent task” that every Muslim generation needs to carry out, Rahman wrote, “is to re-examine the Islamic tradition itself [...] which contains, of course, many Islamic things, many unIslamic things and many that may be on the borderline.”⁶¹ It is, Rahman writes, “not necessary that a certain interpretation, once accepted, must continue to be accepted; there is always both room and necessity for a new interpretation, for this is, in truth, an ongoing process.”⁶² Being aware of the complexities and potential prejudices involved in this hermeneutical endeavour, he always qualified his quest for objectivity by seeking only “sufficiently objective” knowledge or “fairly objective” judgement, as opposed to pursuing “ultimately objective knowledge.”⁶³

The distinction that Rahman draws between two approaches in dealing with the Qur’ānic text: the “atomistic approach” and the “holistic approach,”⁶⁴ should help us avoid what Hughes called the risk of being “selective” when it comes to our distinguishing of the “historical” from the “normative.” The atomistic approach often misses the *ratio legis*, for its atomicity clouds the bigger picture, whereas the holistic approach comprises not only particular commands but also contains the *ratio legis* for the commands. The *ratio legis* is comprehended when the singular verses are studied in the light of the Qur’ānic philosophy as a whole, in tandem with studying the larger socio-historical context in which those singular verses were revealed, for history and revelation are intertwined.⁶⁵ Relating this to our discussion of the category of the “Abrahamic religions,” one

⁵⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 5-6.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 141.

⁵⁹ Fazlur Rahman, *Major themes of the Qur’an*, Minneapolis, MN: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980, 3.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁶¹ Fazlur Rahman, “Islamization of Knowledge: A Response,” *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 5.1 (1988): 8.

⁶² Ibid., 145.

⁶³ It is important to note, as Farid Panjwani pointed out, that Rahman never explicated what would serve as “sufficient or fair.” Farid Panjwani, “Fazlur Rahman and the Search for Authentic Islamic Education: A Critical Appreciation,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 42.1 (2012): 33-55, 50.

⁶⁴ Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 2-3. See also Fazlur Rahman, *Revival and Reform in Islam: A Study of Islamic Fundamentalism*, ed. Ebrahim Moosa, Oxford: Oneworld, 2000, 16-17.

⁶⁵ Panjwani, “Fazlur Rahman and the Search for Authentic Islamic Education.”

should not appeal selectively to specific Qur'ānic verses in order to support any given idea, but rather should go "holistically." In doing so, one would not ignore verses that may go out of line with his leading idea, but rather grapple with them in order to build up a consistent and a holistic understanding of the reality of Abraham.

Reading an Ecumenical Abraham within a Traditional Islamic Approach

With this theoretical background in mind, it is now apt to approach the "Islamic scripture" to see the extent to which an ecumenical Abraham is viable. Q. 4:123-125 is a good place to start with, as those verses provide an account of the quarrel of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, with each asserting claims to ultimate superiority, whereby the verses provide the context for divine clarification of the role that Abraham may play in bringing those strands together. The verses state:

(123) It will not be according to your hopes or those of the People of the Book: anyone who does wrong will be requited for it and will find no one to protect or help him against God; (124) Anyone, male or female, who does good deeds and is a believer, will enter Paradise and will not be wronged by as much as the dip in a date stone; (125) Who could be better in religion than those who direct themselves wholly to God, do good, and follow the religion of Abraham, who was true in faith? God took Abraham as a friend.

The verses chastise all three groups for their fanatical and excessive concern with theological allegiance, reminding them of a figure that may well have the capacity to bring them to unity because all three traditions have a distinct, but not necessarily separate, relation with him, be it through his progeny as in Judaism, his faith as in Christianity, or his submission to God as in Islam.⁶⁶ Given that those verses chastise the followers of the three traditions "equally," one may well ask: If this does not indicate the ecumenical role that Abraham may well play, why is he particularly invoked here?

Another verse that is worthy of our investigation is Q. 3:67, which says: "Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, he was a man of pure faith; one who surrendered [i.e., was a *muslim*]. He was not one of those who associate others with God." It is interesting to note that while Hughes engaged with Q. 3:67 in his criticism against the usage of Abraham as a figure of unity when Abraham is invoked here with his Muslim identity, he seemed to have ignored the preceding verses, which indicate that the term "*islām*" here should not be conflated with Muhammadan Islam.⁶⁷ The preceding verses to Q. 3:67 state that the reason Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian was that the Torah and the Gospel were only revealed after him.⁶⁸ Therefore, he cannot, chronologically, be Jew or Christian. If this is conceded, then him being a Muhammadan Muslim is even more remote, for Muhammadan Islam only came after Judaism and Christianity. Therefore, what the word "*muslim*, i.e. devoted to God" in Q. 3:67 seems to indicate is an ideal religious attitude symbolized by Abraham's submission to God's will, in accordance with the Covenants described in the Bible and the Qur'ān.

To name a few other Qur'ānic verses that show the ecumenical role that Abraham may well be able to play, Q. 22:78 says that God made Abraham a "father to *muslims*." By the term "Muslims" the verse does not only refer to Muhammadan Muslims, but also to several earlier prophets and peoples. For instance, Jesus and his disciples are described as Muslims in Q. 3:52. Jacob, Ismael, as Isaac are deemed Muslims in Q. 2:133. Moses and his followers are viewed as Muslims in Q. 10:84. Joseph is introduced as a Muslim in Q. 12:101. Solomon is also regarded as a Muslim in Q. 27:44. Finally, Noah in Q. 10:72 is also viewed as a Muslim. Furthermore, Q. 4:54 states that Abraham's descendants were given "the Book and Wisdom," which neatly translates into the Jewish, Christian and "Islamic" traditions. Last but not least, Q. 19:58 accentuates that

⁶⁶ Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-manār*, Vol. 5, second edition, Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1328 AH/1910, 432-433.

⁶⁷ I recognize the ambiguity surrounding the construct "Muhammadan Islam," but I simply use it to highlight the original and general connotation of the term *islām* and how it relates to Prophet Muhammad. While using different terminology, the usage of "islam" is succinctly stated in Paul Hedges, *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies*, Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021, 306.

⁶⁸ The verse states: "Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian. He was upright and devoted to God, never an idolater." See M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 39.

Abraham's lineage was one in which the gift of prophecy was deeply rooted as a generic trait, which is again a perfect description of the history of the three traditions.

Therefore, one can safely argue that when Abraham is introduced as a "*muslim*" in the Qur'ān, it primarily refers to someone who acts in loving obedience and submission to God, embodied in Abraham's agreeing to God's call to sacrifice his son. If we apply Rahman's double-movement theory, it is Abraham that essentially incarnates the founding religious attitude of monotheism before the incorporation of specific laws and rituals that would eventually particularize each of the three traditions. It is Abraham's *islām* that forms the basis of the Covenant "not in historical time and addressable space but in the infinite time-space of consciousness, an attitude elicited by the absolute, beyond all influence of language, law, or tradition-in Arabic and in the Qur'an is called *islām*."⁶⁹

Needless to say that using the term "*islām*" as presented above goes against the way in which the term was often used by Muslims throughout history, whereby the term acquired "ritual, legislative, and semantic characteristics that the theologian-jurists later amplified and systematized into a corpus of belief and non-belief that would become the Muslim religion, also called Islam."⁷⁰ Therefore, I concur with Fred Donner's thesis put forward in his *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, which essentially argues that what came to be called Islam began as a monotheistic "Believers' movement" initiated by Prophet Muhammad, with a view to including righteous Christians and Jews as well as monotheists who were in line with the teachings of the Qur'ān.⁷¹ Furthermore, he argued that it was only under the reign of the Umayyad ruler, 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān ibn al-Ḥakam (685-705), that Muslims, driven by a need to form a sense of identity, began to separate from Christians and Jews.⁷² As such, the Abraham of the Qur'ān was not written against the Jewish and Christian Abrahams, but rather as a continuity of their respective narratives.

Long before Donner, several Qur'ān commentators and theologians have indicated the different usages of the term *islām*. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505), in his *Iṭmām al-ni'mah fī ḥḥṭiṣāṣ al-islām bihadhi al-ummah* (Perfecting the Favour in Restricting [the title] Islam to this *Ummah*), illustrated the two key views on this question: the view of those who contend that anyone who submits to God can be called a *muslim* and that of those who say that no one can be called a Muslim except the followers of Muhammad.⁷³ Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) was one of the key theologians who endorsed the first view, in his interpretation of Q. 3:85, which reads: "if anyone seeks a religion other than *islām*, it will not be accepted from him: he will be one of the losers in the Hereafter." He argued that conflating *islām* here with Islam is not only inaccurate but is also an act of theological racism.⁷⁴ Similarly, Maḥmūd Shaltūt (d. 1963), a disciple of 'Abduh's school and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar in his time, argued that early Muslims were "true" believers because they "lived" in a state of *islām*, i.e. submission, yet the subsequent generations largely transformed that "lived state" into a "nominal title."⁷⁵ This distinction is of cardinal importance, for Islam as lived by Muslims, who are indistinctly both believers and historical actors involved in political, cultural, and ideological struggles, would have naturally accrued un-islamic components in the process. Therefore, attempting to filter "normative Islam" becomes an urgent necessity in every age, as noted earlier by Rahman.

Back to Hughes and Levenson

With this heavy role given to Abraham in the Qur'ān, the same charges that Hughes levels against proponents of the category "Abrahamic religions," i.e., selectivity and essentialism, may well apply to his own treatment of

⁶⁹ Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, ed. and trans. Robert D. Lee, second edition, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019, 15-16.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷¹ Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

⁷² *Ibid.*, xii.

⁷³ al-Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn, *Iṭmām al-ni'mah fī ḥḥṭiṣāṣ al-islām bihadhi al-ummah*, ed. Khāled A. Jum'ah and 'Abd al-Qādir A. 'Abd al-Qadir, 1st edn. Kuwait City: Dār al-'Urūbah, 1988, 15. See a more extensive discussion of this question in Mohammed Gamal Abdelnour, *A Comparative History of Catholic and Aš'arī Theologies of Truth and Salvation: Inclusive Minorities, Exclusive Majorities*, Leiden, Brill, 2021, 132-158.

⁷⁴ Muḥammad 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-manār*, Vol. 3, Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1328 AH/1910, 360-361.

⁷⁵ Maḥmūd Shaltūt, *Min Tawjīhat al-Islām*, eighth edition, Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2004, 42-46.

the subject. That is, if proponents of “Abrahamic religions” essentialized the “differences,” he, on the other hand, essentialized the “commonalities,” i.e., shared root and shared epistemic edifice, or as Paul Hedges put it, “a shared originator.”⁷⁶ Both forms of essentialism are two sides of the same coin. Therefore, if this ecumenical reading of Abraham, which is scripturally viable, if not compelling, was not recognised in the historical experience of the three religions for whatever reason, this need not be perpetually ignored or perennially excluded. Krista N. Dalton put this brilliantly when she writes:

Even though Hughes insists he is not placing a value judgment on the modern common-origin theory used by the three religions, he is saying that the claim is historically invalid and must not be perpetuated by the academic and theologian alike. However, religious identity is always shaped both from sociological and ideological factors; thus, the current identifications of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish people who assert common origins are not ‘wrong;’ rather, they are constructing a modern religious identity like any other religious construction. Perhaps it would be better to nuance at AAR [American Academy of Religion] that Abrahamic Religions invites the study of that modern construct, rather than the perpetuation of a historical myth about the shared root of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, yet Hughes is unable to hide his disdain, which detracts from his methodological claim.⁷⁷

In light of this quotation, Hughes and Levenson both seem to take it for granted that there is a Jewish, a Christian, and an Islamic Abraham. While obviously there are various Abrahams in each of these traditions, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive and hence these various Abrahams can be shared in some ways. The point that Dalton excellently makes is that this ecumenical reading endeavour is not “wrong” as such, but rather natural, given that the tradition is also adapting and changing. Therefore, from a religious studies perspective, there are no “right” or “wrong” readings as such, but only changes within traditions. Even though I am taking a normative stance here and not a religious studies one, the point stands, which is that this ecumenical reading of Abraham is not to be discarded as simply a “modernist” reading that is “imposed” on the scripture, but one that is fully grounded within a community of tradition and an embracing of reading practices of the original text, constituting what Talal Asad called a “discursive tradition,” which seeks to instruct practitioners about the authentic form and purpose of a given religious tradition, with a view to connecting, conceptually, a past and a future through a present to prevent any rupture from taking place.⁷⁸ With this in mind, the Islamic tradition here is not seen as a timeless one but rather as something of a work-in-progress that responds to the spirit of each age; a tradition that is not only built on change and reformation but also considers *tajdīd* (renewal) “a religious imperative.”⁷⁹

Another issue with Levenson’s and Hughes’ accounts is that they seem to have operated on the assumption that Islamic theology has perceived the Bible as completely falsified. However, more recent scholarship in the field highlights the fact that early Muslim commentaries on the Qur’ān considered the Bible as a source of religious authority and attestation while, at the same time, highlighting uncertainty and suspicion about how Jews and Christians handled it. Gordon Nickel’s *Narratives of Tampering in the Earliest Commentaries on the Qur’ān* and Martin Whittingham’s *A History of Muslim Views of the Bible: The First Four Centuries* illustrate how this qualified position was common in early Islam,⁸⁰ challenging today’s popular perception that early Muslims wholeheartedly subscribed to the theory of *tahrīf* (alteration), whereby the *meaning* of the biblical text, or the biblical *text* itself, was tampered with.

⁷⁶ Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 46. Also, Muḥammad ‘Abduh expressed this relation poetically when he wrote:

I was in venerable Jerusalem to visit the holy places which the people of the Three Religions unitedly exalt. The visitor notices in these [places] that it is as if there is one family tree (*dawḥa*), that is, the true religion (*al-dīn al-ḥaqq*), from which numerous twigs branch out. [I]ts unity in type and character and the singularity of its origin are not impaired by the visitor’s observations of the variety of [the tree’s] leaves or the splitting of its branches. (Ammeke Kateman, *Muḥammad ‘Abduh and His Interlocutors: Conceptualizing Religion in a Globalizing World*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019, 133.)

⁷⁷ Krista Dalton, review of Aaron W. Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History*, *Religion* 44.4 (2014): 684-686, 686.

⁷⁸ Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, Washington, DC: Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1986, 14-15.

⁷⁹ Abdelnour, *The Higher Objectives of Islamic Theology*, xix.

⁸⁰ Gordon Nickel, *Narratives of Tampering in the Earliest Commentaries on the Qur’ān*, Leiden: Brill, 2010. Martin Whittingham, *A History of Muslim Views of the Bible: The First Four Centuries*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021.

Finally, Hughes somehow, paradoxically, recognised this ecumenical reading when he suggested that we must develop “a new conceptual language that avoids positing discrete religious traditions interacting with and borrowing from one another, and that instead envisages complexity and porosity between manifold and overlapping subgroups within and among ‘religions.’”⁸¹ By the same token, if the boundaries between those traditions are more porous then suggesting that each of them inherently has a different Abraham so much so that we cannot even say Abrahamic traditions, becomes even less justifiable. Hedges makes this clear when he writes:

We may assume each [religion] has its own “founder,” distinct “scriptures,” and specific “beliefs” and “rituals” stemming from this particular religious identity. But such a view is very misleading. Religions in both mainstream/orthodox and folk/popular/lived expressions have always been syncretic.⁸²

He proceeded with a representative example that speaks to our subject, stating:

The first Christians were all Jews, as was Jesus. The texts of the early Jesus movement (see box 4.11) were Jewish, and were concerned primarily with bringing non-Jews within the covenant. While Judaism and Christianity had become somewhat distinct by the second century CE, texts from as late as the fourth century exist which we cannot readily identify as either Jewish or Christian.⁸³

Conclusion

This investigation aimed to address and assess the arguments of two key opponents of the usage of the notion “Abrahamic religion/s,” with a view to determining the extent to which those arguments are valid and whether or not the term “Abrahamic religion/s” can be sustained. In doing so, the article grappled briefly with the concept of the category “Abrahamic religions” and its opponents, with proponents of the former viewing Abraham as a figure of unity and the latter viewing him as a figure of identity. Charting a more intermediate way to address the two poles, the article argued that one needs to appeal to the “scriptural texts” in the first place, qua sources of normativity, and not solely to the “historical reception” of Abraham, for it is those “texts” that largely had the function of defining “normativity.”

Grappling with the “scriptural texts,” with special focus on the Islamic tradition, the article argued that the Islamic scripture leaves room for viewing Abraham as a figure of unity and ecumenism, as opposed to being viewed as a figure of identity and exclusivism. The article attempted to demonstrate that viewing Abraham as such is not a modern imposition on the Islamic scripture, but is rather fully grounded in the Islamic hermeneutical tradition. While the article agreed with some of the critiques raised by Levenson and Hughes, such as underestimating the historical usage of Abraham as a figure of exclusivism rather than inclusivism, it argued that such concerns should not hinder our quest for the ecumenical Abrahamic, but rather should make us more cautious in our quest and more aware of our prejudices and modern horizons.⁸⁴ Overall, the article remained sanguine about the usefulness of the category and its ability to enrich the commonalities of the three traditions without blurring the boundaries.

Having reached the end of this article, it is worth noting that there is a third group who use the construct “Abrahamic religion/s” more descriptively and/or phenomenologically or as a marker of discourse, most notably Hedges and Dalton.⁸⁵ Both authors use the construct without claiming any absolute unity between those traditions and without implying an ecumenical getting together on its basis. I accept their position, however

⁸¹ Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions*, 3.

⁸² Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 72.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer’s works are particularly relevant here, especially in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London: Sheed & Ward, 1975, but due to space limitations, I have not engaged him directly here. A more extensive coverage of the subject should follow in the future.

⁸⁵ Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 46; Krista Dalton, review of Aaron W. Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions*.

without its qualification. That is, I claim that some form of ecumenism can be anchored upon this category, however, this is not the place where I can demonstrate this.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ In a forthcoming article of mine I address this question.

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