What Is Islam? (What Is Christianity? What Is Judaism?)

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What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic, by Shahab Ahmed, Princeton University Press.

Somewhere around 1526, the (Muslim) master painter Sulṭān Muḥammad illuminated a manuscript of poems by the (Muslim) fourteenth-century Persian poet Ḥāfez for the (Muslim) royal court in Herat (modern Afghanistan). One page illustrates a couplet in praise of wine:

> The angel of mercy raised the cup of the pleasures
> of intimate company:
> From the draught: upon the cheek of houri and fairy:
> a rose-hue!

The painting is of a multi-story house and garden. The garden overflows with musical and erotic eddies from a drinking party, while lovers and imbibers occupy each floor and balcony of the house. A window on the top story reveals a figure, perhaps representing Ḥāfez himself, reading a book with a jug at his feet. Tucked on the roof between an illuminated parapet and the two lines of poetry that frame the page, hidden from the revelers but visible to us, a private party of winged wine-sipping angels presides over all (fig. 1).

It is difficult to imagine such a painting in Herat today. Few twenty-first-century Muslim rulers would want to associate themselves with wine drinking, image making, or, for that matter, poetry. It was otherwise in the past. "Begin your drinking after the mid-afternoon prayers." Such was the advice of a learned eleventh-century ruler of northern Iran to future Muslim princes. It was said as high praise of one such prince, Ḥusayn Bāyqarā, the great Sultan of Khurasan (r. 1470–1506), that "there was not a day when he did not drink wine

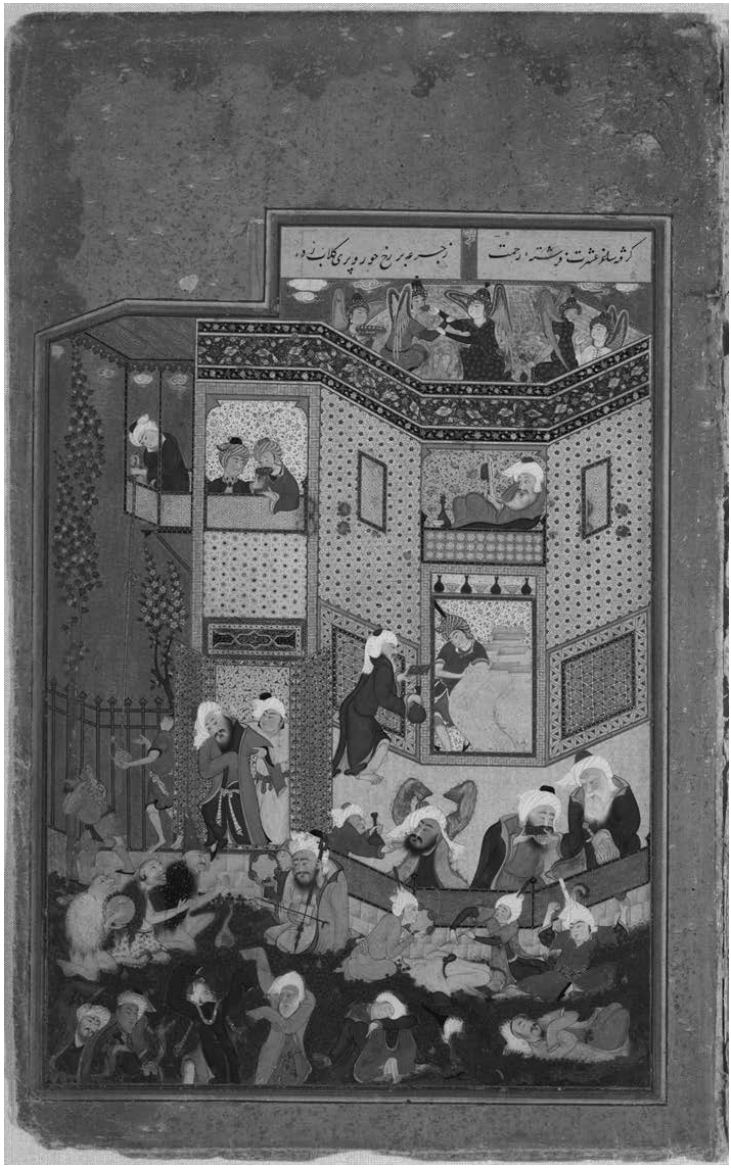

Fig. 1. Sulṭān Muḥammad, "Heavenly and Earthly Drunkenness," (ca. 1530). Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, The Stuart Cary Welch Collection. Jointly owned by Harvard Art Museums and The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

after performing the noon-day prayer, but that he never drank a morning draught." Those who wish to see what Ḥusayn might have drunk from can visit the Victoria and Albert Museum, where a wine jug from his reign is inscribed with lines from another poem by Ḥāfez:

> The ascetic desired drink from the Fountain of Paradise, and
> Ḥāfez from the wine-cup;
> God's Will 'twixt the two? We shall see what is there.

God may distinguish "'twixt the two," but should we? Between Ḥāfez and the ascetic, between royal wine-cup and royal prayer, can we determine which practice is more or less "Islamic"? Modern scholars, both Muslim and not Muslim, have often attempted to do so, not only with subjects like wine, but also with many other aspects of what is, after all, a very diverse religion, encompassing many peoples, practices, languages, cultures, and civilizations. Small wonder that so many scholars have opted either to define Islam as narrowly as possible by establishing "core precepts" they take to be normative and essential, or to throw up their hands and abandon the general category of a singular "Islam" in favor of a myriad of "local Islams."

A part—interesting but not the most interesting—of Shahab Ahmed's *What Is Islam?* is devoted to chronicling and demolishing the answers these scholars have come up with. Before his untimely death last year, the author reportedly worried that these lengthy meditations on the historiography of Islam's unity or diversity were the only ones that graduate students would read as they crammed for their general exams. But what most animates the pages of *What Is Islam?* is Ahmed's awareness of the dangers of the question itself. Perhaps a quick analogy to a related question can telegraph those dangers. "I determine who is a Jew": the claim, adapted by Hermann Göring to Nazi use, reminds us of the power inherent in the decision about who, or what, is Jewish. Equally important, it reminds us that the relationship between the category "Judaism" and what is placed within it is not simple, although also not entirely arbitrary. The Nazis classified as "Jewish" many people who would not have identified as such, and also many aspects of modernity—including liberalism,

capitalism, Marxism, cubism, set theory and abstract algebra, rationality, the United States, the Soviet Union—that had no necessary relation to the religion. As the philosophers Horkheimer and Adorno put it, with people like Göring very much in mind: "[to] call someone a Jew amounts to an instigation to work him over until he resembles the image."

Shahab Ahmed was acutely aware that what is (and what is not) Islam is a question of great power, and that it is not a simple one. That awareness makes every page of this book an occasion for readers to mourn the passing of one who had so much to teach Muslim and non-Muslim alike. For after all, both groups have posed the question frequently. Medieval Europeans, for example, asked it in order to define their own "Christendom" against it. Modern ones do so too: from migration to military policy, the political expression of their opinions on the subject affects the possibilities of life for millions throughout the world, Muslim as well as non-Muslim.

Similarly, among Muslims no age has lacked discussion about what constitutes "true" Islam. Muhammad himself predicted the multiplicity, according to an early tradition: "Those who were before you of the People of the Book [Jews and Christians] became divided into seventy-two sects, and this community will be divided into seventy-three, seventy-two in Hell, and one in Paradise." Although in this prophetic saying the decision between true and false Islamic communities is left to God on the day of judgment, there have always been many Muslim rulers, judges, scholars, and believers who have arrogated to themselves the power to judge what is "true" (or "normative," as scholars of religion prefer to put it) Islam—with real consequences for the possibilities of life for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

The decision may seem easy: prayer is Islamic, wine drinking is not. Poems in praise of martyrdom are more Islamic than those in praise of the pangs of love a man feels for a beautiful boy. The smashing of idols is Islamic but not the making of art; the words of the prophet but not those of the philosopher. And yet the past and present of Islam abound in examples that confound, even contradict, all of these easy classifications. The works of the Persian poet Ḥāfez with

which I began provide an excellent example. His *Dīvān*—the most widely copied, read, memorized, circulated, and cited book of poetry in Islamic history—overflows with poems in praise of love and wine. But in 1501 its (Muslim) editors did not hesitate to preface the sumptuous volume they prepared for a royal patron with couplets equating the book to another "book wherein there is no doubt," namely, the Koran:

> This treasure-house of meaning devoid of imperfection
> Is the impress from that Book of No-Doubt;
> Famous in the world as the emanation of the Holy Spirit;
> Spoken upon the tongues as the "Tongue of the Unseen."

Poetry is here identified with prophecy, a resonance audible not only in the Koranic citation, but also in the sobriquet by which Ḥāfez came to be known throughout the Islamic world: "the tongue of the unseen."

The case of art is no simpler. The major collections of hadith—authoritative reports of teachings or actions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad and his earliest followers—seem clear that "the most grievously tormented people among the denizens of Hell. . .will be the makers of images." "He who makes an image will be punished by God on the Day of Resurrection until he breathes life into it—which he will not be able to do." The making of images is here presented not only as idolatry, but also as an unpardonable rivalry with God, the only true creator. We have plenty of examples of the power of these ideas today, whether in the propaganda videos of ISIS, or in Saudi fatwas against chess pieces as idols. And yet we know that image making (like chess playing!) flourished in many Muslim societies, including even the making of images of Muhammad, such as the illumination of Muhammad's nativity (*Mawlid*) in a thirteenth-century Iranian "compendium of chronicles" now housed in the Edinburgh University Library (fig. 2).

Like Ḥāfez's poetry, such works of art were extolled in prophetic terms. Consider these words of admiration for Sulṭān Muḥammad's revered elder, the painter Bihzād, who died in 1535: "So heart-affecting is his depiction of the bird/That like the bird of Jesus, it

Fig. 2. The birth of the Prophet Muhammad
in a thirteenth-century Iranian "compendium of chronicles."
Image courtesy of Edinburgh University Library.

has become filled with the breath-soul-of-life." The allusion here, as in the just-cited condemnatory hadith, is to the Koran: "O Jesus, son of Mary. . .you did make out of clay, the figure of a bird, by My leave, and you did breathe into it, and it becomes a bird, by My leave" (5:110). Notice how the same verse of the Koran—whose bird story, by the way, is borrowed from the Christian Infancy Gospel of Thomas—can be used to praise the making of art in Islam, or to prohibit it. And although today's ayatollahs might insist that only the latter use is Islamic, tens of thousands of lavishly illustrated Persian manuscripts suggest that their ancestors were just as open to the former. (For a digitized sample of fifty of these manuscripts from the British Library's holding of roughly eleven thousand, see http://www.bl.uk/projects/digital-access-to-persian-manuscripts.)

Ahmed ranged across centuries of Islam collecting contradictions like these. Gifted with an astonishing number of Central and South Asian languages in addition to Arabic and Persian, he focused on what he called the Baghdad-to-Bengal complex—the landmass stretching across today's Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh

that contains the majority of the world's Muslims—but his observations hold just as true for the western reaches of the Islamic world with which I am more familiar. His goal was first to demonstrate "the *prolific scale* of contradiction between the ideas, values, and practices that claim normative affiliation with 'Islam,' which poses the demanding problem of how to locate *the coherence of an internally contradictory phenomenon*" (emphasis here and throughout in original unless otherwise noted). Problem posed, he sought to solve it, not as so many others have done, by dismissing one pole of a contradiction as either peripheral to Islam or as downright "un-Islamic," but rather by formulating "a conceptualization of Islam as theoretical object that, by identifying the coherent dynamic of internal contradiction, enables us to comprehend the integrity and identity of the historical and human phenomenon at play." In other words, his version of the question "what is Islam?" was something like the following: how can we maintain the meaningfulness of difference within Islam, while at the same time identifying the sameness that all Muslims have in common?

Ahmed rejected any number of available solutions to this problem. He refused, for example, to abandon the search for "Islam" in favor of endlessly multiple "local Islams." Granting the diversity and even contradiction of Islam does not mean, he insisted, dismissing the simultaneous existence of unity. Nor did he embrace any of the easier forms of unity on offer. No core set of beliefs can solve the problem for us, for he showed that all have been subject to difference and even contradiction. Nor can we carve out one province of Islamic culture and proclaim it capital of the realm, as so many scholars, Muslim and non-Muslim, have been tempted to do with Islamic law (sharia) and jurisprudence. Ahmed calls this last the "default" conceptualization of Islam today, and some of his most resonant pages are dedicated to showing that "it is not only categorically wrong but also reductionist nonsense" to say that law defined Muslim ways of life in the past.

According to Ahmed, the law-centric view is rather the product of an Islam lived in modern states, states that legitimate themselves through the rule of law. But it cannot make sense of the "historical fact of real

societies in which Muslims. . .valorized, celebrated, and lived by *norms* that were in theoretical and practical *contradiction* of the. . .legal discourse." Across Islamic history there have always been those who agreed with Ibn `Arabi's thirteenth-century dictum that "the jurists in every age have been, and still are, in relation to those who have realized Truth [*al-muḥaqqiqūn*] at the station of pharaohs in relation to prophets." One did not need to be a Sufi master and philosopher like Ibn `Arabi to hold this view. Ebü-s-Su`ūd, the Chief Jurisconsult of the Ottoman Empire between 1545 and 1574, said something similar in a fatwa of moving juridical humility:

> Knowledge of Divine Truth is a limitless ocean. The Sharī`ah is its shore. We [jurists] are the people of the shore. The great Sufi masters are the divers in that limitless ocean. We do not argue with them.

Over and over again Ahmed insists that Islam cannot be located in any specific normative content—not law, not the five pillars, not even the Islamic "creed," or *shahada*. And yet he also insists that "out there in the world beyond the individual Muslim is something that this Muslim recognizes as Islam," and that the two—individual Muslim and Islam "out there"—are "*co-constitutive*." Where then, if not in normative content, does this Islam reside? We might say, to coin an uglier noun from an already ugly adjective, that Ahmed finds it in the process of co-constitutiveness itself. He discovers "a *universal entity* called Islam" in "the idea, which I venture is universally held and experienced among Muslims, that each of them, as an individual *local* Muslim. . .is simultaneously a member of a *universal community* (i.e., a human corpus) of *Muslims*." This "*bounded domain of meaningful phenomena. . .is* Islam; no matter how vast, differentiated or contested that domain of meaning might be." Or in the words of the great thirteenth-century Muslim ethicist Naṣīr-ud-Dīn Tūsī, himself quoting the Prophet: "although they are different from one part of the world to another. . . they are like a single individual. . . .'Muslims are a single hand against all others, and are as one soul.'"

Given that philosophy has long been dominated by the principle of noncontradiction, there are real difficulties in maintaining the simultaneity of sameness and difference. Ahmed was aware of these difficulties, and in his quest to maintain the coherence of self-contradiction he was willing to confront some of them head-on, engaging philosophers from Heraclitus ("They do not comprehend how a thing agrees at variance with itself") through Al-Farabi and Avicenna to Wittgenstein. One can debate the outcome of these encounters. And like so many of us, Ahmed is much better at pointing out the assumptions that underpin assertions of sameness or difference made by others than he is at recognizing those beneath his own. Nevertheless, in his awareness of the philosophical problem he was, once more, unlike the vast majority of his contemporaries among historians, who are notoriously reluctant to examine the conditions of possibility for the classifications their practice depends on.

And yet Ahmed's answer to the question "what is Islam?" turns out to be profoundly historical: Islam is the sum of everything that has ever been lived or experienced as Islamic. It is the hugely diverse aggregate of all previous Islamic experiences. It is through this vast archive of Islam past that every possible Islamic engagement with revelation gains meaning in every moment in time, every present and every future. This archive (my word, not his) is the "Con-Text" (as he terms it) within which the meaning of any possible Islam is produced, "*that whole field or complex or vocabulary of meanings of Revelation that have been produced in the course of human and historical hermeneutical engagement with Revelation*, and which are thus *already present as Islam*" in any particular moment.

Perhaps the argument appeals so much to me because it is similar to the one I attempted in *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today* (2014). There I suggested that the past, conceived of as the sum of all Islamic and Jewish and Christian experiences already lived, "co-produces" all potential Islamic and Christian and Jewish experiences in the present and future: those not yet lived and even those that never will be. Perhaps it is not surprising

that such a vision of the past as a resource for the construction of the future should appeal to historians of religion, since it turns history into a form of revelation, and the historian into something of an arbiter of claims to divine truth. But the vision should be equally attractive to anyone concerned about the potential for violence inherent in the question "what is Islam?" (or Judaism, or Christianity). For against every assertion of a normative or absolute answer to that question in the present, it poses the vast diversity of what the past has experienced as Islamic. Since every one of those experiences of Islam can be presented to the present as exemplary, the history of Islam becomes an inexhaustible reservoir, capable of sustaining an endless variety of futures.

But is this historicist vision true? Or to put it another way, can it be defended as Islamic against those who might claim to have recovered through scripture "the truth" in its original form, and who therefore dismiss every variant produced at any intervening moment of history as (at worst) heresy or (at best) irrelevant error? Ahmed is well aware that such claims exist: in fact he sees them as characteristic of Islamic modernity, which he believes has abandoned the "Con-Texts of Revelation" and focused only on the Text of Revelation itself. Of historical arguments like his or mine he writes: "In this state of the historical eclipse. . . such an argument becomes a very difficult one to produce, and an even harder one to sell."

Ahmed's book diagnoses this difficulty more accurately, and laments it more movingly, than any other work I know, but it does not have much of a solution to offer. Actionable intelligence is, of course, not to be asked of a professor. But I would argue on Ahmed's behalf that what he calls the Text itself authorizes its Con-Text and its Pre-Text (by which Ahmed often means natural reason). Ahmed certainly knew a great deal more about historical readings of the Koran than I do (his unpublished dissertation was on the so-called Satanic verses), but in this book he did not devote much space to it. If he had, he might have shown how revelation itself regenerates across time the potential exemplarity of its every reading, its every experience, even the most contradictory ones. Prophecy perpetually authorizes its constant interpretation, even when it seems to forbid it. He could have

considered revelations like this one from "the book wherein there is no doubt":

> He. . .has sent down to you the Book: in it are verses basic or fundamental (of established meaning) [*muḥkamātun*]; they are the foundation of the Book: others are allegorical or unclear [*mutashābihātun*]. But those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part thereof that is allegorical or unclear, seeking discord, and searching for its hidden meanings, but *no one knows its hidden meanings except God. And those who are firmly grounded in the knowledge say*: "We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord." And none will grasp the message except men of understanding. (Koran 3:7, emphasis added)

The verse is famous both for its explicit articulation of the Text's potential to generate meaning, and for the contradiction within that articulation. The translation here suggests that only God can interpret the ambiguous passages, and that men should not attempt it. But if we pause instead a little later in our reading, the sense is very different: "None knows its explanation save God and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge. Say: we believe therein." In other words, this verse of revelation establishing the distinction between clear and ambiguous revelations is itself ambivalent, proclaiming simultaneously—depending on where we choose to pause—that the most mysterious verses of scripture can be understood by (at least some) believers, and that they cannot. We know, as Gracie Allen put it, that one must "never place a period where God has placed a comma," but the Koran (like the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament) circulated initially without indications of pause. Readers, not prophets, were responsible for punctuation in the ancient world.

Many different experiences of Islam have been built out of the choices those readers have made. Already among the earliest followers of the Prophet there were probably some who wrestled with the ambivalence of this verse, since variants avoiding it survive. But the canonical version chose to preserve the ambivalence and the choice, even if modern editors (and translators) have sometimes attempted to

contain its power. The influential edition of the Koran approved by al-Azhar in 1344/1925–6 makes the restrictive reading obligatory. Other editions and printings mark it as optional.

It is out of such choices, made by myriad interpreters across time, that different answers to the question "what is Islam?" have arisen. It was, for example, on the basis of this particular verse's ambivalence that the Muslim philosopher and jurist Ibn Rushd (Averroës, 1126–1198) argued for the "harmony of religion (sharia) and philosophy (*ḥikmah*)." According to him, the verse offered a two-fold path. The mass of believers should confine their interpretive efforts to the clear verses. But "those firmly rooted in knowledge" (by which Ibn Rushd meant philosophers) could and should apply their knowledge to the "ambiguous" verses, even if this led to truths that sometimes seemed to contradict the "clear" truths. In other words, this passage of the Koran taught that different truths were available for different forms of knowledge, and to different levels of ability. As the Koran put it, in a verse often cited to support this teaching, "we raise in degrees whomsoever we will, and above every possessor of knowledge is one who knows" (Koran 12:76).

Given that Ahmed scarcely speaks of scriptural hermeneutics in a book whose primary goal is to vindicate the importance of Con-Text and history against the increasingly hegemonic claims of Text in contemporary Islam, it may seem odd for me to conclude with the Koran. I do so not because I agree with the advocates of some Islamic *sola scriptura*, against whom Ahmed is striving, but to the contrary, because I believe that in Islam, as in Christianity and Judaism, prophecy itself endorses both of our theses, and proclaims history as a form of revelation. Because the countless communities that have constituted Islam, Christianity, and Judaism have been built out of rival readings of prophetic traditions that have an imagined common origin, arguments about that shared history have always driven the interpretation of scripture and revealed new potentials within it.

The process is evident in the scriptures themselves. The Hebrew Bible, New Testament, Koran, Sunnah, and Talmud are all full of historical reflections upon the claims of their rivals. Hence Hayyim ibn

Musa's advice to polemicists, circa 1456, that the primary mode of commentary in disputations *between* faiths should be the historical. But the same is true *within* each of the faiths, whose scriptures all claim to contain truths that are revealed within and become legible across historical time. This is why the great Islamist Marshal Hodgson, in an unpublished lecture delivered just before his (also untimely) death entitled "The Historian as Theologian," called these three faiths "'kerygmatic' life-orientational traditions—those that call for ultimate commitment on the plane of the historical." Ahmed tilted many pages against Hodgson's own very influential answer to the question "what is Islam?" But I imagine that he would have approved of this essay had he known of it, for it suggests how in each of these traditions the interpretation of the past becomes a form of revelation of divine truth, and the historian becomes . . . a theologian.

With its plea for the plural potentials of prophecy, *What Is Islam?* is, among other things, a luminous example of history as theology. Ahmed chose to argue his historical case out of the contradictions of Islam as lived in the Baghdad-to-Bengal complex, but as I have tried to demonstrate, he could just as well have built it out of the history of prophecy itself, for many of its passages have nourished those same potentials. In some of these, the pluralism Ahmed favors is presented as a trial: "To each among you have we prescribed a Law and an Open Way. If God had so willed, he would have made you a single people, but his plan is to test you in what he has given you, so strive as in a race" (Koran 5:48). In others, it emerges as a defining and miraculous attribute of revelation itself: "If the ocean were ink (wherewith to write out) the words of my Lord, sooner would the ocean be exhausted than would the words of my Lord" (18:109). Or in the earlier words of the Talmud from which the Koran may have borrowed, "If all the seas were ink, if all reeds were pens, if all the heaven were parchment, and all the men scribes, they would not suffice to write out the depths of the ruler's heart." (Compare this passage to John 21:25: "But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.")

Whether blessing or trial, all future believers should be grateful for this multivalence, for as the Christian Ephrem the Syrian put it a few centuries before Muhammad, "if there were [only] one meaning for the words [of scripture], the first interpreter would find it, and all other listeners would have neither the toil of seeking nor the pleasure of finding." No matter how dark the "historical eclipse" of our times that Ahmed noted, these and many other passages of Text will always preserve the potential to lead their readers back to the Con-Text whose oblivion Ahmed mourned. Which means that, for good or ill, the practice of history will remain for these religions a form of prophecy, revealing and re-veiling potential meanings of God's words to humanity.

For good or ill: the prophetic power of history in these three faiths cannot be constrained to values such as pluralism, love, or toleration that we might ourselves prefer. For example, the Wahabism that Ahmed frequently criticized is just as "true" an experience of Islam as the Sufi-philosophical pluralism he celebrated. To paraphrase Empedocles, love and strife are equally potential in Islam, as in Christianity and Judaism. I am not sure that Shahab Ahmed would have agreed with me here. But for my own part, my point is not that history can lead the billions of us who live within these "'kerygmatic' life-orientational traditions" to a truer religion. It is simply that history is the critical tool with which followers of all three faiths have always produced, and will continue to produce, new possibilities for life, and also for death.