

FROM ABRAHAM TO THE 'ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS':
LOUIS MASSIGNON AND THE INVENTION
OF A RELIGIOUS CATEGORY

by

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ABBREVIATIONS

Les trois prières d'Abraham	<i>T.P.Abraham</i>
Note liminaire	<i>N.L.</i>
La prière sur Sodom	<i>P.Sodome</i>
L'Hégire d'Ismaël	<i>H.Ismaël</i>
La prière sur Isaac	<i>P.Isaac</i>
Opera Minora	<i>OM</i>
Écrits Mémorables	<i>EM</i>
Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān	<i>EQ</i>

NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS, TRANSLITERATIONS, & SCRIPTURAL CITATIONS

Translations

(1) Not all texts quoted in this dissertation are translated, especially if translations may lead to the loss of the nuance in the source language.

(2) Translation of primary sources, except scriptural texts, are my own, unless otherwise specified. Translation of quotes cited in secondary sources are by the authors of those sources respectively, unless otherwise specified.

Transliterations

The transliteration of Arabic words follows the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES). Quotes containing Arabic words are left as transliterated in source.

Scriptural Citations

(1) Biblical abbreviations follow the Journal of Semitic Studies.

(2) Qur'ānic quotations are marked by "Qur'ān", followed by reference to the chapter (*sūra*) number, and the verse (*āya*) number.

(3) The translations of Biblical and Qur'ānic texts are usually provided in cases where there is a direct discussion of the meaning of cited text.

(4) Translations of the Bible follow the English Standard Version.

Translations of the Qur'ān are by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (New Edition, 1993) with slight variations (especially on capitalisation of words).

ABSTRACT

As a neologism for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the modern construct 'Abrahamic religions' is as ubiquitous as it is contested in the study of the monotheistic religions. Some have argued against the use of the concept on both historical and theological grounds. In particular, the concept is often interpreted as ecumenically motivated in the thought of Louis Massignon. This understanding arises from a parochial interpretation of its origins, in which Massignon's reflections on the subject over time, as well as its varied uses in recent times, have not been fully considered. This thesis calls for a more extensive historical analysis of its genealogy with the aim of discussing its intellectual and cultural backgrounds. In doing so, it seeks to shed light on how the interrelationships between the three religions had been historically examined prior to Massignon, and how the birth of the concept in his thought and its subsequent uses offer a richer understanding of the concept that goes beyond ecumenical significance.

To this end, this thesis unpacks the concept by probing into its antecedents, examining its birth, and reflecting on its future. The first chapter aims to show the historical basis for considering a genus for the three religions, by surveying perspectives on Abraham in *historia sacra*, and thereafter, discussing works in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that explore the connections between the three religions. The second and third chapters introduce Massignon and discuss his Abrahamic thought from both its socio-religious and intellectual perspectives. The main text examined here is his *Les trois prières d'Abraham*. The fourth chapter traces the different trajectories of the concept after Massignon and highlights its nuanced meanings as derived from these variegated uses. The fifth and concluding chapters explore the ways in which the concept can profit the study of religion.

Is't not hence this common Prouerbe growes,
'Tis a wise child that his owne father knowes?

G. Wither, Abuses (1613)

INTRODUCTION

Like its eponymous figure, the modern construct ‘Abrahamic religions’ used in contemporary parlance as a neologism for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,¹ is now contested in the study of monotheistic religions.² This construct first appeared in a sustained way in the writings of the French Islamicist Louis Massignon, in the mid-1930s, after a lengthy period of both academic studies and personal reflections on the significance of Abraham in the Muslim tradition, as well as in the Judeo-Christian texts and sources. Given that the concept of an Abrahamic faith has its origins in the Qur’ānic notion of *millata Ibrāhīm* (the religion of Abraham), this is not all too surprising.³ Massignon’s conception, however, paradigmatically altered the theological interpretations of Abraham,

¹ In this dissertation, the locution ‘Abrahamic religions’ is written with quotation marks to refer to an analytical category that has a history and whose use is being contested and interrogated. Thus, it is not used here as a neologism for the three religions, as is widespread in works that discuss the three religions from a comparative perspective. This is to be contrasted with the use of ‘Abrahamic religion’ by evangelical movements in America to refer to the Christian faith. According to them, the Abrahamic religions cannot be fathomed nor can ever be legitimate, for there is only one religion, i.e. Christianity, that is Abrahamic. On the exclusive Christian use of the ‘Abrahamic’ in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Aaron W. Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions : On The Uses and Abuses of History* (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 48-55.

² There are other religions that make a claim to Abraham, such as the Druze and the Bahá’í. A recent suggestion that there are five ‘Abrahamic religions’ (which include the Bábi and the Bahá’í faiths), including the three major monotheisms (i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) is Frances Worthington, *Abraham : One God, Three Wives, Five Religions* (Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing, 2011). One should note that the two additions (i.e. Druze and Bahá’í) stemmed historically from previous monotheisms, and are rarely meant when the locution ‘Abrahamic religions’ is invoked at present, whether in interreligious dialogue or comparative works. To be sure, this dissertation only examines the ‘Abrahamic religions’ with reference to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

³ For a further discussion of the meaning of this locution, see pages 33-34 below. It must be noted however that the religion with which the Qur’ān is associated is called Islam, both in the text of the Qur’ān and in the self-understanding of its adherents.

which had prior taken place exclusively in the Christian sense in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through the notion of the 'Abrahamic covenant'.⁴

The concept is increasingly ubiquitous, invoked regularly by advocates of interreligious dialogue for whom Abraham represents the shared forefather of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and employed by scholars of comparative religion who find the concept heuristically pertinent.⁵ More recently, the concept has entered the self-consciousness of scholars of religion,⁶ who have called attention to some of its conceptual difficulties from both historical and theological perspectives. According to these critiques, the 'Abrahamic religions' is an ambiguous category that masks the difficulties underlying the historical claims that it presupposes, and even the ecumenical intent that it purports to achieve. Further to this, the commonality between the three religions that the concept implies cannot be proven to have existed, whether historically,⁷ or in their respective hermeneutical traditions. In the latter case, the term overlooks

⁴ Those who have used the 'Abrahamic covenant' in such ways include John Taylor DD of Norwich (1694-1761), a minister and theologian, in his *The Covenant of Grace, and Baptism the token of it, explained upon Scripture principles*, and Daniel Dow DD, a pastor of the Congregationalist Church, Connecticut, in his *A Dissertation on the Sinaitic and Abrahamic Covenants: Shewing the Former to be Only Temporary, the Latter Everlasting*. For a discussion on this, see Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions*, 48-55.

⁵ Examples of such uses include Jacob Lassner, *Jews, Christians, and the Abode of Islam : Modern Scholarship, Medieval Realities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

⁶ The concept of 'self-consciousness' and 'self-criticality' in the study of religion was first raised in a sustained manner by Jonathan Z. Smith in his *Imagining Religion : From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982).

⁷ This critique has been very recently put forth by Aaron W. Hughes. See his *Abrahamic Religions*. See also Garth Fowden's brief comment on his agreement with Hughes on this in Garth Fowden, *Before and After Muhammad : The First Millennium Refocused* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), fn.2, 2. The critiques of the concept are discussed more extensively in chapter four of this dissertation.

unique and mutually exclusive appropriations of the figure in each religion.⁸ Moreover, the unity between the three religions that the concept seems to imply constitutes no more than a mirage that surfaced because of a sorely desired ideal given a turbulent interreligious environment that the world was, and is, still in. The idea of a common figure of Abraham is therefore, as best summarised by a scholar, “a vague abstraction”.⁹

Yet, in both the uses (whether interreligious or academic) and contestations of the concept, questions relating to the substantive meanings of the ‘Abrahamic religions’, and key epistemic issues that relate to its origins, as well as its theological, historical, and philological presuppositions, have all thus far been unsatisfactorily addressed. Although its origin has been rightly situated in the thought of the twentieth-century French Orientalist and Catholic mystic Louis Massignon,¹⁰ the contours of his thought on the subject have not been comprehensively examined. In particular, there is scant reflection on how the idea itself evolved in Massignon’s life and works. In the context of the study of religion, this analytical lapse is paradoxical, given the now established tradition in the field to question assumptions underlying the emergence of concepts in

⁸ On this, see Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Rémi Brague, *Du Dieu de chrétiens et d’un ou deux autres* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009).

⁹ “[L]’Abraham que les trois religions auraient en commun est une vague abstraction. Ce plus petit commun dénominateur ne coïncide avec aucune des figures concrètes que celles-ci révèrent et en lesquelles elles se reconnaissent. Accepter cet Abraham, ce serait pour chacune renoncer à une dimension de sa foi.” Brague, *Du Dieu de chrétiens et d’un ou deux autres*, 33.

¹⁰ After Louis Massignon, the Harvard scholar James Kritzeck wrote analytically on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, from the perspective of their shared Abrahamic ancestry. Kritzeck discusses summarily the Judaeo-Christian background and origins of Islam, but with the optimism that this should lead towards greater and more fruitful dialogue between the three religions, and especially to invite Islam to the dialogue table. See James Kritzeck, *Sons of Abraham : Jews, Christians, and Moslems* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1965).

religious studies. This is attested to by the increasing use of cognitive terms such as ‘imagination’, ‘invention’ and ‘manufacturing’ in attempts to describe how religious categories had been conceived.¹¹ In many such works, it is argued that categories do not evolve out of disinterested attempts to describe phenomena or to identify family resemblances, but that ideological interests and motivations were key in determining category formation. Such categories, therefore, do not simply function as innocuous descriptors, but can help us understand, as the cultural historian Tomoko Masuzawa suggests in her study of the concept ‘world religions’, what “went on in the European academy.”¹² Here, Masuzawa, along with peers such as Aaron W. Hughes and Russell McCutcheon, extend the arguments Jonathan Z. Smith made in *Imagining Religion* over a decade earlier.¹³

In view of the above, this study sets out to examine the evolution of the concept of the ‘Abrahamic religions’ in the life and thought of Louis Massignon (1883-1962), assess its current uses and reflect on its future uses. The present study was first driven by the modest aim to understand the history of concepts in religious studies and focussed on the ‘Abrahamic religions’ as its case study. Whilst this study was still in its infancy, the interest in the ‘Abrahamic religions’ picked up rather considerably, with the publication of new studies that

¹¹ Key examples of such usages are Smith, *Imagining Religion*; Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or How European Universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).

¹² Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, xv.

¹³ Jonathan Z. Smith is perhaps best remembered as having cautioned the student of religion to be self-conscious about creation of terms (in this case, ‘religion’). The overarching idea of ‘religion’ itself “is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization.” This self-consciousness, according to him, constitutes “his primary expertise, his foremost object of study.” See Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi.

questioned its epistemic worth and scholarly functions.¹⁴ The concept has often been interpreted from ecumenical and theological perspectives on the basis that it is “ahistorical” and that it serves an ecumenical idea by instinctively placing three warring religious communities (both historically and contemporaneously) under the aegis of a common forefather in the figure of the biblical Abraham.¹⁵ Consequently, those holding on to such views consider the ‘Abrahamic religions’ as epistemically vacuous beyond an interreligious discourse.¹⁶

There is perhaps little to disagree with the argument that a concept used for interreligious purposes and interpreted theologically may not fully serve a discipline such as the study of religion that ought to function on sound historical research. This is, after all, an argument to which those who have employed the concept for comparative and scholarly purposes would also concede.¹⁷ But interpreting the concept as ecumenical *tout court* has serious repercussions because any ecumenical motif with its accompanying theological presuppositions may rightfully dislodge its utility for the academic study of

¹⁴ A well-balanced discussion on the subject is the recently published work by Carol Bakhos, who asks “[t]o what extent is “Abrahamic” a useful analytical tool for interrogating the complex relationship of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as a family of religions?” See Carol Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham : Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Interpretations* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 2.

¹⁵ Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions*.

¹⁶ In this dissertation, the use of the term ‘interreligious’ is used interchangeably with ‘ecumenical’ to describe the relationship between different religions, as several scholars often refer to the ‘ecumenical’ function of the ‘Abrahamic religions’. Nonetheless, the former is preferred by the author and is used in the context of the arguments put forth in this dissertation. This is especially in view of the fact that ‘ecumenism’ (with its Greek origin *oikoumenē*) has Christian origins and became used to denote the move towards the universality of Christian churches. On a good and early discussion of the term ‘ecumenical’, see the statement issued by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, entitled Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, “The Calling of the Church to Mission and to Unity,” *The Ecumenical Review* 9, no. 1 (1952).

¹⁷ See for example Guy G. Stroumsa, “Athens, Jerusalem and Mecca: The Patristic Crucible of the Abrahamic Religions,” in *Studia Patristica*, ed. Markus Vinzent (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 168.

religion. It also means that in the context of the discipline of comparative religion, the rise and emergence of the 'Abrahamic religions' as a concept in the twentieth century would not add to our knowledge of the history of the discipline but will instead tragically distort it. The question that needs asking then is, does the 'Abrahamic religions' still have a legitimate place in academic research, and if so, in what ways? Critics have also not furnished their otherwise insightful reminders with a commensurate critical analysis of its origins.¹⁸ For this and all the attendant consequences on how we understand concepts and their origins, a lot is therefore at stake in a careful examination of its historiography. As the intellectual historian Quentin Skinner reminds, the understanding of concepts will be compromised if their histories are misunderstood.¹⁹

As this study immersed deeper into the history of the 'Abrahamic religions' from its inception through to its development in recent times, a different view of its origins and development began to emerge. Far from an oversimplified ecumenical image that critics tend to paint, the concept informs the comparative study of religion in two ways. First is that it sheds light on how the interrelationships between the three religions had been explored, prior to,

¹⁸ For example, the parochial and inadequate treatment of its origins could be found in Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions*. In his monograph, Hughes' study of Massignon's reflections on the prayers of Abraham uses only the translated version of the summary of the three prayers published in the journal *Dieu vivant* in 1949, as well as Neil Robinson's article on Massignon. See *ibid.*, n.17, n.20, 157. Carol Bakhos' discussion of its origins, although more nuanced than Hughes', is still limited, in that it primarily situates Massignon's ideas within interfaith dialogue and rapprochement. See Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham*, esp. 4.

¹⁹ Skinner, whose method I draw on in this dissertation, argues for the need to properly trace the historical evolution of concepts. See Emmanuelle Tricoire and Jacques Lévy, "Quentin Skinner: "Concepts only have histories"," *EspacesTemps.net*, Laboratory, <http://www.espacestemp.net/en/articles/quentin-skinner-ldquoconcepts-only-have-historiesrdquo-en/>.

and in the course of, the emergence of the concept. Second is that it enriches our understanding of the contested nature of the study of religion in the twentieth century because there is a more complex intellectual and cultural history that underpins the evolution of the concept. As this thesis will demonstrate, this background had led to its theological beginnings in the thought of Massignon, whose works on Islam permitted the conception of this category. This background, nonetheless, becomes obscured if one remains stuck with an ecumenical representation. In the light of these observations, this study gradually evolved to defend the utility and place of the concept in the study of religion, and sought to show how this is so.

The foregoing rationale, nonetheless, begs the question of why the origins of the concept have eluded its critics, such that a full-fledged study on this is only now warranted. Generally, two intertwined reasons account for this. First is that Massignon's Abrahamic thought has been examined in limited ways, and this marks a failure, on the part of his interpreters, to engage with the diverse ways and motivations that had led him to associate with the figure of Abraham throughout his career. This may be the outcome of the hermeneutical difficulties one encounters in reading Massignon. As both a public figure and also scholar that exudes a complex and protean-like personality, it is easier to focus and limit one's investigation to specific areas of his scholarship. Generally, such difficulties have been recognised by his biographers, such as Christian Destremau and Jean Moncillon, who remark that one could speak of a "*massignonienne*" fashion that defies easy categories.²⁰ A key example in this regard is his studies on Muslim

²⁰ "Massignon semble échapper aux catégories, à toutes les catégories, par son génie, mais aussi et surtout par ses paradoxes, ses hésitations, les contradictions entre

mysticism, in which Massignon's 'spiritual élan', his religious motivations and the socio-political considerations that governed his life often come in the way of objective scholarly considerations of their worth.²¹ In addition, a full-fledged study may also have had to deal with the problem of sources, as his writings and reflections in their various forms and versions were only compiled relatively recently.

In the context of his Abrahamic thought, it was his close disciple, the Maronite priest and scholar on Islam Youakim Moubarac, who first offered a brief framework for analysis. Extending the pioneering work of Moubarac, Guy Harpigny's *L'Islam et Christianisme selon Louis Massignon* articulates clearly what later became a well-received idea that an Abrahamic cycle could be delineated in Massignon's life.²² This cycle, according to Harpigny, corresponds to the period in which Massignon dedicated his life to the cause of Muslims as part of fulfilling his promises to them after his reconversion in 1908.²³ As the image of a man whose life was dedicated mostly to a rapprochement with Muslims began to take root, and the notions of reconciliation and ecumenism

l'homme public et l'homme privé." Christian Destremau and Jean Moncelon, *Louis Massignon: le cheikh admirable* (Lectoure: Le Capucin, 2005), 10.

²¹ This has been raised by Jacques Waardenburg in Jacques Waardenburg, "Louis Massignon (1883-1962) as a Student of Islam," *Die Welt des Islams* 45, no. 3 (2005): 341-42. See also his *Muslims as Actors: Islamic Meanings and Muslim Interpretations* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 176.

²² Guy Harpigny, *Islam et Christianisme selon Louis Massignon* (Paris: Louvain-la-Neuve, 1981), esp. 79-106. Those who adopted Harpigny's characterisation of Massignon's thought into the different cycles include Pierre Rocalve in his *Louis Massignon et l'islam place et rôle de l'islam et de l'islamologie dans la vie et l'oeuvre de Louis Massignon* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1993), 15.

²³ According to Harpigny, the mid 1920s mark the beginning of this cycle and it ended roughly with his ordination to priesthood in the 1950s. Harpigny may be referring to the period in which Massignon wrote the three prayers of Abraham as a key episode in the latter's Abrahamic thought, but he omitted the foundational period in which Massignon rediscovered his faith.

were taken to be his *idée fixe*, subsequent writers would conveniently situate Massignon's thought within the interreligious paradigm.²⁴ In the English-speaking world, the first to offer such a view is Neal Robinson.²⁵ A more substantive and recent critique that followed Robinson's lead is Aaron W. Hughes' *Abrahamic religions*. As noted above, Hughes critiqued the category 'Abrahamic religions' on the basis that the notion had an ecumenical past. There are some important exceptions to these generalisations, particularly the works of Sidney Griffith²⁶ and Patrick Laude²⁷ that present a more nuanced view of Massignon's thought and provide a preliminary and more sophisticated picture of the evolution of his Abrahamic thought.²⁸ The most comprehensive analysis, thus far, is that of Simone Landrien, but this work unfortunately remained as a

²⁴ An early examination of Massignon's contributions in this regard is Giulio Basetti-Sani's *Louis Massignon (1883-1962): Prophet of Inter-Religious Reconciliation*, trans. Allan Harris Cutler (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1974). Father Basetti-Sani was a disciple of Massignon. He approaches the study of Massignon with an emphasis on the latter's spirituality, and sought to present Massignon's personality, life, and thought through the latter's various articles that he gathers in this volume.

²⁵ Neal Robinson, "Massignon, Vatican II and Islam as an Abrahamic religion," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 2, no. 2 (1991).

²⁶ Griffith provides a systematic assessment of Massignon's Abrahamic thought, by tracing it chronologically, and examining Massignon's writings on the subject over time. See Sidney H. Griffith, "Sharing the faith of Abraham: The 'Credo' of Louis Massignon," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 8, no. 2 (1997); *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 163-64.

²⁷ Patrick Laude, *Pathways to an Inner Islam : Massignon, Corbin, Guénon, and Schuon* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2010).

²⁸ For example, rather than simply classifying Massignon's Abrahamic thought as an ecumenical expression, Laude observes that for Massignon, "these three groups are understood within the context of the particular mystical relationship that Christians are divinely assigned to entertain with them. This relationship is one of substitution ... the meaning of which is subsumed under the idea that the suffering of Christians may be offered as a way to fulfill the Divine Promise in others." See Patrick Laude, *Pathways to an Inner Islam : Massignon, Corbin, Guénon, and Schuon* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2010), 76.

brief dissertation.²⁹ In brief, there is no sustained study of Massignon's Abrahamic thought that takes into account its geneology and evolution over time, as well as its rich terrain that comprises the various themes which constitute the core of his Abrahamic thought.

Consequently, the main task undertaken in this present study is to offer a comprehensive historical account of the concept of the 'Abrahamic religions'. Thereafter, it aims to provide the necessary background for further reflection on this taxonomical unit and its epistemic nature (or natures, as it may be), by drawing out its varied uses and significance as can be discerned from Massignon's thought and beyond. In the case of Massignon, his thought will be set against both his specific contexts and the general background of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Orientalist and religious thought. Two key arguments will be put forth in this regard. The first is that, as opposed to a precipitous emergence, the 'Abrahamic religions' was intimately linked to two developments in Massignon's life. First is his understanding of the biblical figure of Abraham, which was itself an outcome of an enduring and lifelong pensive journey. Second is his studies on Islam, in particular its mystical tradition, and his reflections on the Muslim teachings that relate to claiming the figure as its own that had led to his conclusion that Islam was an Abrahamic religion. Arising from this understanding, Massignon then went on to conceive of the idea of the 'Abrahamic religions' in the plural, as he began juxtaposing the Muslim position to both Jewish and Christian claims to Abraham. The second argument is that

²⁹ Landrien's work is particularly helpful in putting together many of Massignon's writings on the subject on Abraham, although it could have benefitted from a better organisation of the sources as well as a deeper and developed analysis of Massignon's ideas. See Simone Landrien, "Some Aspects of the Meaning of Abraham in the Life, Works and Thought of Louis Massignon" (McGill University, 1968).

the development of the concept over the last few decades reveals new and creative ways in which scholars have engaged with the concept for comparative purposes. Accordingly, this dissertation seeks to show that a proper assessment of the origins of the concept has repercussions beyond historical and comparative concerns. In other words, although the focus in discussing the concept has usually been either to negate the historicity of the 'Abrahamic religions' or to point out commonalities and differences that exist between the 'Abrahamic religions', exploring its origins in more comprehensive ways becomes suggestive for a mapping out of a more inclusive history of comparative religion in the twentieth century

I. METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

This present study draws principally on methods in the history of ideas, with the aim of examining the unexplored past of the 'Abrahamic religions' and to enunciate its intellectual and cultural histories. The historicisation of religious concepts with similar objectives as undertaken in this study is not a new development and has become the *modus operandi* in the discipline of religious studies over roughly the last three decades. A lot of new and profitable insights into the evolution of religious concepts and ideas have been generated, some of which have altered the landscape of the comparative study of religion and successfully challenged its assumptions. Our understanding of the emergence and growth of the discipline has also been enriched in significant ways by new findings on its historical development. For example, although it was commonly understood that Max Müller's comparativism in the nineteenth century laid the

foundations for the science of comparative religion,³⁰ recent studies have argued that the origins of the science could be pushed back further to the sixteenth century.³¹ Such works that critically examine religious concepts inform the present study in two interlinked ways. Firstly, these works cumulatively show that religious concepts are far from being arbitrarily conceived, and are not innocuous nor purely descriptive in nature.³² From this perspective, they provide an overarching rationale for the type of historical research that this study undertakes. Secondly, they show that there is a plethora of factors that underpin the evolution of religious concepts, from ideological to sociological,³³

³⁰ As Max Müller notes in his Lectures on the science of religion, "When the students of Comparative Philology boldly adopted Goethe's paradox, "*He who knows one language, knows none*;" people were startled at first, but they soon began to feel the truth which was hidden beneath the paradox." See F. Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner & Company, 1872), 10-11. Hans Kippenberg locates the interest of Western academic scholarship on the subject in the second half of the nineteenth century, a period of rapid discoveries which "opened the gates to unknown stages and territories of human culture." See Hans G. Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), vii.

³¹ Some of these works include James M. Byrne, *Religion and the Enlightenment: From Descartes to Kant* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion: An Historical Introduction to Theories of Religion* (Malden, MA Blackwell, 2006); Guy G. Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010). In particular, Stroumsa makes a compelling argument to push the origins of the discipline to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As he writes, "...the period between Renaissance and Romanticism is the crucial one in European intellectual history for the first emergence and early formation of the modern study of religion. It is then that a new paradigm of religion was constituted, a paradigm that permitted an intellectual revolution." Ibid., viii.

³² By tracing the employment of the term 'religion', Jonathan Z. Smith has shown that it is a foreign term imposed upon native cultures. Tomoko Masuzawa also argues more specifically that "the categories religion and culture ... are both historically specific, fairly recent formations, and our daily employment of these terms, however natural and uncontroversial it may seem, is in fact mobilizing and energizing a powerful ideology of modernity, both feeding on and feeding into a certain logic that is central to our notion of who we are and what we are." See Tomoko Masuzawa, "Culture," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 71.

³³ Edward Said's *Orientalism* has raised the idea of a nexus between scholarship and ideology evocatively. Although Said advocates a totalizing discourse that paid little heed

and could be attributed to individual or communal factors.³⁴ There is therefore an intractability between ideology and scholarship inherent in the design of concepts and categories that we inherit. This relationship, one has to admit, is as ubiquitous as it is subtle.³⁵ Whilst it may be less evident in some cases, this is no proof of the absence of ideological factors at play. Rather, it is the task of the student of religion to carefully examine how a scholar interacted with his or her world, and how such interactions filtered into their writings. It is only with such

to the nuances and diversities of a complex and vast era and expanse of western intellectual enterprise, his overarching theory nonetheless remains of value, and therefore must be given due consideration in the study of the discipline of comparative religion in the modern period. See a discussion on this in Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 20-21.

³⁴ Classification is part of a cognitive process, as the anthropologist Levi-Strauss argues, and thus, could be attributed to various factors that relate to individual and wider circumstances. See Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 10. On the production of such cognitive categories in the social sciences, see Erik Olin Wright, *Classes* (London: Verso, 1985), esp. 20. One of the earliest to examine categorisation as a mental process is Eleanor Rosch. George Lakoff argues for the artificiality of concepts, using an experientialist view of reason that ‘the mind is thus not simply a “mirror of nature” ’ and concepts are not merely “internal representations of external reality.” With specific reference to conceptual categories, they are “at least in part, determined by the bodily nature of the people doing the categorizing rather than solely by the properties of the category members. Human conceptual categories have properties that are a result of imaginative processes (metaphor, metonymy, mental imagery) that do not mirror nature.” See George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 370-71.

³⁵ For example, the positivist approach brought about by the Enlightenment had determined, to a large measure, what ‘religion’ meant and provided the scholarly basis and criteria for comparative and analytical purposes. Peter Harrison, in his study of the emergence of ‘religion’ in English Enlightenment thought, observes that “[t]he emergence of the idea of religion thus entailed tests of religious truth, theories of religion, comparisons of ‘religions’, in short, a whole set of rules which governed the manner in which the nascent concept was to be deployed.” See Peter Harrison, *‘Religion’ and Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 2-3. Daniel Dubuisson also argues that the study of religions was deeply rooted in Europe’s history, especially as it navigated its way in the new circumstances in which it found itself in the modern world. As he states, “the history of religions, despite its scientific pretensions, initially appears in the intellectual history of the West as the heir to a Western vision of the world and of humanity that was itself determined by its Christian antecedents.” Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion : Myths, Knowledge, and Identity*, trans. William Sayers (Baltimore, M.D.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 39.

an understanding that one could then pass an informed and considered judgment of the meanings, uses, as well as 'abuses' of religious categories.³⁶ In sum, the criticality that is desired in our use of concepts presupposes clarity in our understanding of its origins and evolution.

These preceding works fall within two main types of historicisation of categories and concepts in religious studies that have emerged over the last few decades. The first type consists of broad historical inquiries that examine specific eras and study the emergence of various concepts and categories such as 'world religions', 'universal religion',³⁷ 'civil religions' and 'oriental religions'.³⁸ Such works discuss the thought of various scholars, together with their approaches and findings, and the socio-historical conditions that may have informed their conceptions.³⁹ The second type treats specific concepts more comprehensively. In these works, concepts are traced to their origins and the whole gamut of factors contributing to their emergence and varied uses are explored. A

pioneering work of this type is Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *The Meaning and End of*

³⁶ The concept of 'abuse' in religious studies is prominently raised in Aaron W. Hughes' critique of the 'Abrahamic religions'. See Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions*.

³⁷ The emergence of these categories could be traced to the nineteenth century in the works of the Dutch theologian Cornelius Petrus Tiele (1830-1902), the comparativist Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923), and the Protestant theologian Abraham Kuenen (1828-1891). These ideas assumed particular significance in the nineteenth century, as can be seen in the works of the Conference of Great Religions. In its gathering in Lahore, India, in 1896, the Conference concluded with the recognition of "both the unity within and the diversity between the 'great' World Religions because they correspond to important geo-political entities with which we must deal. All 'primitives' by way of contrast may be simply lumped together as may the so-called 'minor religions' because they do not confront our history in any direct fashion. They are invisible." Cited in Jonathan Z. Smith, "Classification," in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London: Continuum, 2000), 42.

³⁸ On a discussion of the emergence of such conceptions, see Stroumsa, *A New Science*; Smith, "Classification".

³⁹ Examples of this approach include Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1986); Stroumsa, *A New Science*; Strenski, *Thinking About Religion*.

Religion,⁴⁰ which examines the idea of 'religion' and shows how its meanings have morphed over time as 'religious' practices and beliefs interacted with specific cultural contexts.⁴¹ Notwithstanding the above benefits of previous historiographical studies of religious concepts, their methods and approaches could not be emulated in toto for the purposes of this present study. As this study seeks to historicise the 'Abrahamic religions' that emerged in the thought of one particular thinker but over time took on new meanings and significance through its various other uses, there is a methodological lacuna which needs to first be addressed. In this regard, two approaches in the study of ideas are particularly useful.

First is Quentin Skinner's method of historical contextualism with its emphasis on the role of language as is available to the author. Skinner applies this method to the thought of individual political theorists, and proposes a study of ideologies over and above a textualist approach.⁴² In his classic *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Skinner explains that his approach provides the tools for interpreting scholars and not just their works. In other words, the 'world' of the scholar and his operative environment becomes a

⁴⁰ William Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1962; repr., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); *Faith and Belief: The Difference Between Them* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979; repr., Oxford: Oneworld, 1998). For a review of *The Meaning and End of Religion* as a classic in its field, see Talal Asad, "Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith's 'The Meaning and End of Religion'," *History of Religion* 40, no. 3 (2001). Cantwell Smith's study was pathbreaking in its own right, but had a lesser theoretical impact relative to Jonathan Z. Smith's *Imagining Religion* in the study of comparative religion.

⁴¹ A recent analysis on this is also provided by Charles Taylor, who points out the changing meanings attached to the idea of 'religion' as historically examined. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 15.

⁴² On Skinner's methods, see especially the compilation of his essays in his *Visions of Politics: Volume 1. Regarding Method*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

critical component in interpreting his ideas. The interpretation of the scholar's texts therefore demands an equal mastery of the conditions of his society and its 'vocabularies' with which he writes. As Skinner explains, "[w]hen we attempt in this way to locate a text within its appropriate context, we are not merely providing historical 'background' for our interpretation; we are already engaged in the act of interpretation itself."⁴³ Skinner's hermeneutical approach, by grounding text to its intellectual context, is very apt in unveiling the import and significance of the ideas of a thinker. Although the work of Skinner, as well as the Cambridge School, addresses political thought, and Skinner himself admits to a limited interest in religious thought,⁴⁴ the worth of Skinner's approach has been recently acknowledged in the study of religion and his methods have also been proven useful in this area of study.⁴⁵ This approach, as Brad S. Gregory uses in his study of the thought of the sixteenth-century Flemish Anabaptist Jacob de Roore, yields very promising outcomes for the study of religious ideas. In his rather brief but insightful essay, Gregory offers a useful matrix of potential epistemological and ideological objections that have been put forth by various critics to understanding religious ideas as how their protagonists conceived and understood them. Gregory argues that the danger of rejecting 'confessional history' *a priori* is to then permit "ostensibly neutral—but in fact no less morally or metaphysically contentious—secular views to dominate the study of

⁴³ Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought : Volume One. The Renaissance*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), xiv.

⁴⁴ Skinner admits this in the context of his study of Christian theology and notes that this may impact on his "sensibility as an historian". See Tricoire and Lévy, "Quentin Skinner: "Concepts only have histories"".

⁴⁵ In this regard, see the collection of essays in Alister Chapman, John Coffey, and Brad S. Gregory, eds., *Seeing Things Their Way : Intellectual History and the Return of Religion* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

religion."⁴⁶ Extending Skinner's paradigm to the study of religious ideas, Gregory shows that the epistemological frameworks of the scholar under study need to be considered and appreciated. In brief, Skinner's historical contextualism counters reductionist approaches that are dismissive of approaches which do not fit in one's own epistemologies.

Further to this, the cultural context of scholars and their works beckon serious examination, as argued by Ann Taves. She proposes not only studying the writings of scholars, but also the religious world around them, and this could comprise other "popular figures and movements".⁴⁷ As she contends, limiting our study to only the works of scholars without having a view of the world around them will truncate our understanding of how such intellectual figures engaged with religion as a lived experience. Tracing the evolution of religious ideas should therefore include an examination of "social and discursive practices and institutions" and how these have mutually influenced the formation of intellectual ideas.⁴⁸ Taken together, the approaches of Skinner and Taves

⁴⁶ Brad S. Gregory, "Can We "See Things Their Way"? Should We Try?," in *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion*, ed. Alister Chapman, John Coffey, and Brad S. Gregory (Notre Dame, In.: University of Notre Dame, 2009), 43. In the same breath, Gregory cautions further that "[i]t is time to recognize, in a manner analytically identical to the critique of traditional confessional history, that secular ideas and ideologies are just as capable of distorting the study of religion as are particular religious commitments." Ibid.

⁴⁷ See Ann Taves, "From Religious History to the Cultural History of Religion," *Journal of The American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 4 (2003). She illustrates her point by examining the connection between Tylor and Spiritualism and Marett and psychical research, which seems to suggest that the scholars were not only debating over "remote and past religion" but one that took place among "contemporaries in the academy and beyond over the legitimacy of nearby, present-day claims regarding religion's place in the modern world." Ibid., 888.

⁴⁸ As Dena Goodman argues in her illuminating work on a cultural history of the Enlightenment, "[t]he job of the cultural historian is to understand the ways in which human beings have shaped and been shaped by the social and discursive practices and institutions that constitute their lives and actions." See Dena Goodman, *The Republic of*

reinforce the need to examine the socio-cultural motivations for the emergence of the 'Abrahamic religions' by situating all of its articulations in their intellectual, religious, and cultural contexts.⁴⁹ The task in this study is thus to 'see' the concept of the 'Abrahamic religions' as Massignon himself, and its proponents, saw it.

In tracing the subsequent trajectories of the 'Abrahamic religions' after Massignon and how the concept devolves into scholarly and interreligious uses, the approach advocated by the *Begriffsgeschichte* is instructive. The discipline, which started as the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriff* (the historical background of concepts), deals specifically with concepts that have endured over time and have themselves been subject to various social contexts. The *Geschichtliche Grundbegriff* was initially designed to mark out the "contours of a new conceptual topography" as well as draw the "coordinates of our conceptual world."⁵⁰ It brings attention to a consideration of the nexus between conceptual and social history, and emphasises the importance of language, whether in philology, historical semantics, and structural linguistics.⁵¹ Leveraging the methods of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriff*, this study will trace how the 'Abrahamic religions' and its meanings have evolved under different

Letters : A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1996), 2.

⁴⁹ As Skinner explains, his aim is "to use the ordinary techniques of historical enquiry to grasp their concepts, to follow their distinctions, to appreciate their beliefs and, so far as possible, *to see things their way*." (my own italics) See Skinner, *Visions of Politics : Volume 1. Regarding Method*, 1, 3.

⁵⁰ Keith Tribe, "The Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe Project: From History of Ideas to Conceptual History. A Review Article," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, no. 1 (Jan. 1989): 181.

⁵¹ Melvin Richter, "Begriffsgeschichte and the History of Ideas," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48, no. 2 (Apr. - Jun., 1987).

circumstances and how the concept has been employed in varying contexts, both in the works of Massignon, and also beyond. Accordingly, the methods of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriff* caution against a reification of the concept and would help explore its varied meanings.

In sum, both Skinner's historical contextualism and the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriff* socio-cultural approach to the history of ideas warrant a study of concepts in all their varied contexts and within the complex web of factors that have contributed to their emergence and development. In the context of religious ideas that evolved in the modern period, three developments have always stood out as integral to their formation. First is the role of new intellectual discoveries and tools, in this case philology, and how these influence and give shape to the ideas of scholars. As this study will show, comparativists in the modern period were eminent philologists in their own right and language was key to deciphering the meaning of cultural norms and practices as well as religious texts. This is a particularly important observation in studying the thought of Massignon, whose use of language and emphasis on words and their meanings are paramount to the shaping of his worldview. Second is the role of the reigning culture of any particular scholar, whether religious, political, cultural or social. In this context, it is important to examine how scholars were influenced by or reacted against such cultures. Third is the study of their personal lives to uncover possible motivations for their works. In many cases, the spiritual ideas or religious attitudes of a particular scholar were pivotal to influencing their thought. This thesis will therefore examine the evolution of the 'Abrahamic religions' in the light of these three strands.

The examination of Massignon's thought in this study utilises several primary sources. First is his general œuvre as published in two major publications: *Opera Minora*, compiled by his student Youakim Moubarac, and *Écrits Mémorables*, a recent publication with valuable introductions put together under the supervision of the French philosopher Christian Jambet. These compilations, taken together, comprise all of Massignon's published articles, and therefore serve as a comprehensive source for his written works. The second source relates to Massignon's Abrahamic thought and is concentrated in his writings compiled under the title *Les trois prières d'Abraham* (the three prayers of Abraham). There are two sources for his reflections on the prayers of Abraham. First is the version put together by Daniel Massignon and published in 1996 by Cerf, Paris. This publication includes three separate writings: an important preface written by Massignon in 1936, the final versions of Massignon's writings on each of the three prayers, and the abridged version of all three prayers first published in the journal *Dieu vivant* in 1949. Second are the drafts of *Les trois prières d'Abraham* in the form of manuscripts at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF). The third source is Massignon's correspondences with his colleagues and acquaintances, which inform us of his personal thought on various subjects. Some of these have been published (with useful introductions by his interpreters), whilst others are located in archives of various libraries. There are several other primary sources that are currently not available for consultation, such as manuscripts at the BNF that have not been catalogued, primarily due to the transition of Massignon's documents from a personal collection to the BNF in the last few years. The available resources in the present moment collectively provide a considerable amount of relevant

material for a comprehensive study of Massignon's thought, although one may not rule out that new information could be gained from an unfettered access to all of Massignon's writings. Nonetheless, because Massignon's views as presented in the different sources studied in this study corroborate one another, it would be fair to say that the limited nature of files available for consultation does not impede a considered judgment of his views and major lines of thought.

II. STRUCTURE

This thesis will chart the historical trajectory of the concept by tracing its origins and development up until the modern period in its earlier chapters, and argues for the legitimacy of and methodological utility of Massignon's category of the 'Abrahamic religions' in the comparative study of religion, in the later chapters. In this introduction, I have provided the background to the present study by discussing its main premises, methods, as well as sources. The first chapter seeks to trace the antecedents of the concept and highlight its historical nature. It thus considers the question of how these three religions were studied before Massignon and discusses the multifarious and variegated ways in which the three religions have been studied and compared historically. In this regard, two main strands of comparison will be discussed. First is the polemical strand that characterises the earliest attempts at comparison, in which perceptions of the three religions often take place from the perspective of the writer's worldview and its accompanying *historia sacra*.⁵² Second is the academic analysis of the

⁵² *Historia sacra* is used in this present study to refer to the general sacred histories of the three religions, i.e. how the three religions interpret and understand God's meaning

comparative history and doctrines of these religions, which took place in the late eighteenth century onwards. Despite the divergent aims and methods of both these periods, they serve as important antecedents to the concept of the 'Abrahamic religions', as they shed light on different ways in which the interrelationships between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, have been explored and identified.

The second and third chapters examine the birth of the concept 'Abrahamic religions' in the life and thought of Massignon and explicate the theological nature of the concept as it evolved in his thought. The second chapter addresses aspects of Massignon's life that explain his unique worldview and his religious approaches in interpreting history. It does not aim to provide a comprehensive biographical account of Massignon's life, but focusses on his epistemology and the various roles he assumed in his life that had an influence over this unique epistemology. To situate his thought in its historical context, this chapter is arranged according to two major themes: his religio-cultural world, and thereafter, his intellectual background. In the context of both these themes, I discuss Massignon's faith and spirituality, his career and approaches as an Orientalist working on Islam and Muslim mysticism, and in what ways his spirituality and discrete perception of religious history influenced his roles in both religious and political rapprochement, especially between Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

The third chapter closely examines Massignon's Abrahamic thought and traces the emergence of the 'Abrahamic religions' as a concept. The focus of this

which could be discerned from a study of their scriptural interpretations and exegetical traditions. See F. E. Peters, *The Children of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 167-72.

chapter is on *when* the concept emerged and *what* its content was. The profoundly theological expressions of the idea of the 'Abrahamic religions', both in its literary and practical forms in Massignon's thought and life, will be examined. In particular, I seek to show how Massignon related to Abraham in his personal life, how he conceived of the relationships between the three religions and Abraham, and subsequently how his understanding of Abraham gradually evolved into his conception of the 'Abrahamic religions'. In essence, Massignon's readings of these relationships that took place in the context of his understanding of the Christian economy of salvation that harks back to Abraham will be highlighted. This approach will thus raise the unresolved tensions that exist in Massignon's thought, in that he sought to embrace Muslims within the Judeo-Christian fold, yet read Islam through his Christian lenses.

The final two chapters focus on contemporary trajectories of the idea. In chapter four, I discuss the development of the idea in two areas of uses: academic and interreligious. The task here is to analyse how the 'Abrahamic religions' has evolved in the contemporary period, and to examine its new meanings and significance in the study of religion. Chapter five counters the critiques presented in the previous chapter, by arguing that the 'Abrahamic religions' has become, and should continue to be, an analytical term that is emptied of its theological and ecumenical meanings. It explores the use of the concept as a heuristic tool in the comparative study of religion, taking on a philosophical conception that seeks to group religions that exhibit family resemblances. In other words, the 'Abrahamic religions' distinguish themselves from other categorisations such as 'Eastern religions' that exhibit characteristics which differ in considerable ways from the 'Abrahamic religions'.

Further to this, I then suggest two ways in which this concept can enrich the study of the three religions. First is comparative scriptural hermeneutics, through which I examine the process of 'Abrahamization' in the respective scriptures of the three religions that reveal ambivalent notions on how a religion perceives rival claims to Abraham. Second is a renewed understanding of the history of comparative study of religion in the modern period, which incorporates alternative epistemologies, such as that pursued by Massignon. The conclusion looks at both the benefits and the shortcomings of the approach pursued in this thesis, as well as suggestions on how the findings of this research could be further harnessed for the benefit of the discipline of comparative religion.

CHAPTER 1

FROM POLEMICS TO COMPARATIVISM : ANTECEDENTS OF THE 'ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS'

“They are an Arabian nation and name their tribes from these, both because of their own virtue and because of the dignity of Abraham their father.”

Flavius Josephus¹

The question of Abraham’s family portrait —who to be included or excluded— has a uniquely long and complex history that began in the chapters of Genesis and gained renewed importance with the emergence of a new religious community in Arabia in late antiquity. Although the concept of the ‘Abrahamic religions’ is modern, claims to the eponymous figure that were as comparable as they were competing have existed in those early days, as attested to by the writings of the first century Jewish chronicler Flavius-Josephus. The period between late antiquity and the Renaissance was flush with works that privileged particular appropriations of Abraham over others. These works were mostly polemical in tone and intent but they nonetheless provide the earliest examples of how the three religions that associated with the figure of Abraham were considered in comparison. In this sense, such works preceded more serious scholarly studies that emerged after the Enlightenment, especially in Orientalist

¹ Antiquities of the Jews, Book 1 Chapter XII, in Flavius Josephus, *The Complete Works of Flavius-Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Chicago: Thompson & Thomas, 1901), 41.

scholarship, on the respective religious histories of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Considered collectively, they form an important cultural and religious heritage of the comparative study of the three monotheistic religions.

This chapter traces such interpretations and perceptions and provides a backdrop to the emergence of the concept of the 'Abrahamic religions'. Its principal aim is to illustrate how scholarship before the twentieth century has accentuated the historical interlinkages between the three religions, and how it gradually evolved into a discipline of comparativism that focussed on religions which exhibit family resemblances. Further to this, the diverse approaches in Orientalist scholarship that have investigated the relationships between the three religions, as shall be examined in this chapter, will show that the consideration of a type or genus that refers to them all (and in Massignon's thought later referred to as the 'Abrahamic religions') was not new, but rather a common objective that these scholars had. This, by extension, provides a compelling basis for the viability of the concept of the 'Abrahamic religions' as an analytical category in the study of religion, an argument that will be further discussed in chapter five of this study.

With the above objectives, this chapter will first discuss how Abraham has been used in the respective scriptures of the three religions. Next, it traces the comparative methods and objectives of writers, from its polemical beginnings in the medieval period to the scholarly discussions in the modern period. As the focus is on tracing the diverse ways in which such comparisons were presented, the discussion largely follows a chronological pattern. It is only with reference to modern Orientalist scholarship that views presented therein have been clustered

according to the content and not discussed chronologically, because the former demonstrates better the diverse approaches within the same era of scholarship.

1.1 ABRAHAM IN *HISTORIA SACRA*

The uses of Abraham in the respective scriptures and exegetical traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam show the extent to which the figure is shared and at the same time, contested in the self-understanding of each of these religions. This section will provide a summary of these uses, with the aim of providing a background to subsequent appropriations of the figure by each religion over the course of their histories. In each religion, Abraham is portrayed as a key figure, and in the case of the New Testament and the Qurʾān, the patriarch is the second most mentioned figure after Moses.² In the case of Judaism and Christianity, the book of Genesis is the source of the basic narratives on Abraham's faith and these would be expounded later in both rabbinic and Christian thought, albeit with varying emphases.³ The figure of Abraham first

² In the Qurʾān, Abraham is mentioned in 245 verses in 25 chapters, out of which 69 times are by name, and with five different appellations. See Reuven Firestone, "Abraham," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 5. Moses is mentioned 136 times. See Muḥammad Saʿīd al-Laḥḥam, *al-Muʿjam al-mufāhras li alfāz al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿārif, 2003), 967-69 on Moses, and 41-43 on Abraham.

³ Samuel Sandmel helpfully summarises rabbinic thought in this regard into twelve themes. Abraham was the first to recognise God's existence; he was chosen and then blessed by God because of his obedience; the virtues of Abraham, such as his observance of all of God's commands, righteousness and hospitality; the testing of Abraham that proved his righteousness; God's rewards to Abraham; God's rewards to Israel; the merits of Abraham, including his effective intercessory prayers; Abraham as the Prophet who received God's revelations; Abraham as the Sage; the true seed of Abraham is through Isaac and that of Israel are those who are circumcised; Abraham's blessed old age; and Abraham's death and his continuous intercessory efficacy. See Samuel Sandmel, *Philo's Place in Judaism: A Study of Conceptions of Abraham in Jewish Literature* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1956), 77-95.

appears in Genesis after chapter 11, strikingly symbolises the first spark of hope, and marks a new chapter in man's history with God.⁴ In the Muslim tradition, which holds that the Qur'ān is the only uncorrupted source of God's revelations,⁵ non-Muslim sources of the Abrahamic narratives are largely not acknowledged. Despite this disparity in the recognition of authoritative sources, all three commonly recognise the paradigmatic significance of Abraham in two ways. The first concerns the inheritance of Abraham, whether in racial or spiritual ways. As such, the notion of "*Avraham avinu*" (Our father Abraham), "*sperma tou Abraham*" (the seed of Abraham), and "*millata Ibrāhīm*" (the religion of Abraham) occupy critically important places in the respective theologies of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The second concerns the exemplary character of Abraham's faith in God, such that the figure earns the similar title of 'the friend of God' in the respective scriptures.⁶

⁴ This is perhaps best said in the Pirkei Avot 5:2-3: "There were ten generations from Adam and Noah, to demonstrate the great extent of [God's] patience, for each one of those generations provoked [God] continually until [God] brought the waters of the flood upon them. There were ten generations from Noah to Abraham, to demonstrate the extent of [God's] patience, for each one of those generations provoked [God] continually, until Abraham, our father, came and received the reward of them all. With ten tests Abraham, our father, was tested – and he withstood them all; in order to show how great his love was, peace be upon him." See "Pirkei Avot Chapter 5," Sefaria, http://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.5.

⁵ Although the Muslim tradition overwhelmingly holds on to the doctrine of supersessionism because of the claim that Jews and Christians have corrupted their texts, and that Islam is the final religion (see for example, Qur'ān 3:85 and 5:48), the opinion on the subject is not conclusive, in part because of the nuanced Qur'ānic approaches towards the *ahl al-kitāb* (people of the Book). On a recent analysis, see Abdulaziz Sachedina, "The Qur'ān and other religions," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁶ In Isa. 41:8 : "But thou, Israel art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of *Abraham my friend*." In 2 Chron. 20:7 : "Did you not, our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of *Abraham your friend*?" In the Qur'ān 4:125 : "For Allah did take *Abraham for a friend*." [my own italics] This title could also be found in the Muslim ḥadīth literature, in which the Prophet Muḥammad was reported to have said "The noble son of the noble son of the noble son of the noble son was Yusuf son of Ya'qub son of Ishaq son of Ibrāhīm, *the*

Nonetheless, over the course of the evolution of each tradition, Abraham began to acquire diverse characteristics and importance. For Judaism, the *midrashim* as a sacred source of Jewish thought collectively constitute the depth and breadth of the Jewish conceptions of Abraham. These evolved almost congruously with the evolution of the Jewish faith itself over the centuries.⁷ The *midrashim* is therefore instrumental in filling gaps in the biblical narratives of Abraham's life and faith. Ultimately, with the skeletal biblical features as its prototype, a more complete and desirable image of Abraham took form, with the embellishments provided by the imaginative strokes of those who sought to interpret him. In the context of Jewish self-understanding, these were the hands of the rabbis who would have projected their career and worldview unto the image of Abraham they desired. As Samuel Sandmel suggests, "[t]o the rabbis, one might say, Abraham is a rabbi."⁸

For Christianity, two aspects of Abraham's life became its central focus: faith and works. The core debate in early Christianity on faith and works transposed itself on interpretations surrounding the life of Abraham. In this regard, the role of the apostle Paul of Tarsus was central,⁹ especially in his attempts to include Gentiles in his ministry. For Paul, true descent from Abraham

khalil (close friend) of the Merciful, the Blessed and Exalted." Ḥadīth no. 605 in al-Bukhārī, *al-Adab al-Mufrad*. [my own italics]

⁷ See Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 3. See also Samuel Sandmel's summary of rabbinic thought on Abraham in his *Philo's Place in Judaism*, 77-95.

⁸ Sandmel, *Philo's Place in Judaism*, 95.

⁹ The two key sets of biblical references on this are Paul's epistles to the Romans and Galatians. See Rom. 4:9-25; 9:7-9; Gal. 4:21-31. The Roman historian and Bishop of Caesaria Eusebius, was heavily influenced by Paul in this regard. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, he writes that "the course of piety which was pursued by Abraham, has appeared thus far cultivated only by Christians, and that too by works more efficacious than words." See Eusebius Pamphilus, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Christian Frederick Crusé, 10th ed. (New York: Thomas N. Stanford, 1856), 27.

is neither biological nor physical, but rather earned through one's faith. Abraham then becomes the father of all who believe in Christ, Gentiles included.¹⁰ In Paul's usage, the faith of Abraham functioned to privilege faith above the observance of laws.¹¹ For example, Paul reasons that Abraham was reckoned as righteous through faith alone, because this preceded his circumcision.¹² As many Pauline scholars have noted, Paul's theology as expressed in Abrahamic terms here must be understood in its socio-political context, which offers a critical insight into how, and in which contexts, Abraham's faith became an important aspect of early Christian thought. For example, his interpretations of Abraham arose in his disputations with rival Jewish Christian teachers in Galatia.¹³ Paul had thus employed the faith of Abraham to effect the most fundamental change to Jewish teachings, which is the acceptance of uncircumcised Gentiles. In doing so, he reformed traditional Jewish notions, such as law, righteousness, faith, and circumcision, and interpreted them anew. This is of course not the place to enter into the complexities of Paul's thought but it suffices to note that Abraham prominently entered into early Christian thought through the interpretations of Paul. This initiated debates among several other New Testament writers, who had also taken up the subject of the faith of Abraham. In this regard, contrast

¹⁰ See Gal. 3:29 "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."

¹¹ At once reacting to James, Peter and Barnabas, Paul distinguished faith from law, exalting the former above the latter, and anchoring his re-interpretation of Abraham within his faith-law dichotomy. See Gal. 3: 2, 10-12, Deut. 27: 26, 21: 22-3.

¹² Gen. 15:6 "And he believed the LORD, and He counted it to him as righteousness."

¹³ Jeffrey S. Siker, "From Gentile Inclusion to Jewish Exclusion: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy with Jews," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 19, no. 30 (1989): 31. The notion of righteousness thus became linked to the question of the applicability, or lack thereof, of Jewish law on the new religious community which he founded.

Paul's views with that of James, who argues against the idea of justification by faith alone using the faith of Abraham.¹⁴ According to James, Abraham had also fulfilled deeds by offering Isaac for sacrifice. John discusses the differences between *sperma* (physical descendants) and *tekna* (spiritual children) of Abraham.¹⁵ Some other aspects of Abraham's life and qualities are also recounted elsewhere in the New Testament, such as his patience, in Heb. 6:13.

The use of Abraham's faith in the case of the Muslim tradition, as the Qur'ānic narratives show, is unparalleled in the other two traditions. The Qur'ān arguably establishes its theology and monotheism (*al-tauḥīd*) upon the faith of Abraham, whom it describes as a *ḥanīf*.¹⁶ A clear meaning of the term in Muslim exegetical tradition is not too obvious, but used generally as a descriptor for one who is on the straight path (*muṣtaqīmān*) and steers away from falsehood. Falsehood here has been widely interpreted by the exegetes as polytheism, Judaism and Christianity.¹⁷ The figure of Abraham thus represents the archetypal

¹⁴ See Jas. 2:20-24.

¹⁵ Jeffrey S. Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews : Abraham in Early Christian Controversy* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 137.

¹⁶ The term occurs eight times in reference to Abraham, and twice in reference to Muḥammad. Ibrāhīm as *ḥanīf*: 2:135, 3:67, 95, 4:125, 6:161, 16:120, 123, whilst reference of Muḥammad as *ḥanīf*: 10:105, 30:30. On a further discussion on the term, see Mun'im Sirry, "The Early Development of the Qur'ānic Ḥanīf," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 56, no. 2 (2011); Uri Rubin, "Ḥanīfiyya and Ka'ba: An Inquiry into the Arabian pre-Islamic background of din Ibrāhīm," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13 (1990).

¹⁷ See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Kitāb mafātiḥ al-ghayb al-mushtahir bi-l-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, 6 vols., vol. 1 (Miṣr: al-Maṭba'ā al-Miṣriyya al-Miriyya 1862), 521. In this context, it could be an adjective for both the believer and the religion. On Qur'ān 2: 135, see Maḥmūd b. 'Abdillāh Al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'azīm wa-l-sab' al-mathānī* (Beirut: Dār Ihyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 19_), 1:394. On early interpretations and discussions on favoured meanings, see Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Maktab al-Buḥūth wa al-Dirāsāt al-'Arabīyya wa al-Islāmiyya, 2001), 2: 591-94. and Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān: tafsīr al-Qurṭubī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1997), 4: 109. Early interpretations tend to focus on manifestations of it, whether as a pilgrim (by Ibn Abbās), or one who faces the direction of the House in prayer (from Abū al-'Āliya), or

faith, the “urmonotheismus” of the Qur’ān,¹⁸ which it emphatically underscores by recounting Abraham’s struggle to uphold his belief in God.¹⁹

Where the Qur’ān seems to differ in emphasis on the figure from the Jewish and Christian traditions is in its motif of election, as can be seen in the way it discusses the concepts of *mīthāq* and *‘ahd*.²⁰ A possible explanation for this is that covenants in the Qur’ān are subsumed under its distinct concept of prophetology, i.e. one that does not discriminate between the prophets of God.²¹ Thus, whilst the stories of Abraham take place through the prism of covenant

one who believes in all the prophets (from Abū Qilāba). See Ismā‘īl b. ‘Umar Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘azīm* (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya al-Kubra, 1937), 1: 186-87. More importantly, *hanīf* also exists in the extra-Qurānic sources, used as a descriptor for strict monotheists who had rejected idolatrous polytheism, such as ‘Amr b. Zayd. The word thus seems to be already in circulation at the time of the Prophet Muḥammad, who reportedly had used the term *hanīfiyya* to describe his religion. As recorded in al-Suyūṭī, Abū Umāma reported the Prophet saying “I was sent with the the religion of *hanīfiyya* and *samḥa*.” A study of its possible relationship with the Syriac *hanpa* has yielded some interesting and important observations, chief among which is the possibility that the term may be a reference to the “gentiles”. If this is the case, then as Gabriel Said Reynolds suggests, *hanīf* becomes synonymous with the Qur’ānic term *ummi*. The significance of this, as he argues, is that the Qur’ān tries to remove Abraham from both the Jews and Christians by making him a prophet of the gentiles. See Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur’ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 85.

¹⁸ Gerald Hawting, “The Religion of Abraham and Islam,” in *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham*, ed. Martin Goodman, George H. van Kooten, and Jacques T.A.G.M. van Ruiten (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 492.

¹⁹ There are ample narratives on this in the Qur’ān. See Qur’ān 2: 258, 260, 6: 74-75, 83, 19: 41-50, 21: 51-73, 43:26-27, 29: 16-18, 9:114, 60:4. In this regard, the function of Abraham as an exemplar to Muḥammad is succinctly summarised by Carol Bakhos: “He is the believer par excellence in God, and because of his unflinching conviction he incurs the people’s wrath. Told often and in great detail in the Qur’ān, the story depicts Abraham as the valiant defender of God. Here and elsewhere in the Qur’ān, Abraham is the precursor of the prophet Muḥammad and, like Moses, serves as a model of Muḥammad, who confronts unbelievers in Mecca as well as Jews and Christians who do not accept his revelation.” Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham*, 76.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

²¹ On a comparison between the Qur’ānic and biblical prophetologies, see Sidney H. Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the “People of the book” in the Language of Islam* (Princeton Princeton University Press, 2013), 62-89. As Pierre Lory explains, “Dans le Coran, Abraham est inséré dans une prophétologie générale systématisée et développée dans la doctrine musulmane commune.” See Pierre Lory, “Abraham,” in *Dictionnaire du Coran*, ed. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2007), 9.

and election in Jewish and Christian traditions, this is in the context of establishing what the ideal and archetypical faith is in the Qurʾān. Nonetheless, Abraham is certainly not less important in Islam, as compared to Judaism or Christianity, rather it is the biblical notion of covenant which the Qurʾān seems to eschew.²² On the contrary, Islam extolls the virtues of Abraham as an exemplar, a role model and an *imām* to be emulated.²³ The descriptions of Abraham's faith and his significance in the theology of Islam take place through concepts such as *milla*, *muslim*,²⁴ and the religion of Abraham (*millata Ibrāhīm*)²⁵ called *islām* and "*al-ḥanīfiyya al-muslima*".²⁶ The precise meaning of *milla* is not self-evident, and has been speculated on within the Muslim exegetical tradition. Among some of the more well-known interpretations include religion (*al-dīn*) (in al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*), or religion and law (*al-sharʿ*) (in al-Qurṭubī's *tafsīr*), or monotheism (*al-tauḥīd*) and ethics (*al-akhlāq*) (in al-Alūsī's *tafsīr*).²⁷ The historians al-

²² One could consider this to be a reaction to Jewish and Christian uses of covenant with Abraham, and that Islam sought to offer a novel way to relate to the biblical figure.

²³ See Qurʾān 2: 124, 16:120-123.

²⁴ Qurʾān 3:64-68, 2:130, 135. Here, the use of the term *muslim* for Abraham is not at all clear if it is in the adjectival form of the noun *islām* (i.e. submission) or a retrospective naming of Abraham as a Muslim, a follower of the religious system later introduced by Muḥammad. However, a contextual reading of its occurrences with reference to Abraham, especially in that it is often used to demarcate Abraham's faith from polytheism (*shirk*), would suggest the former interpretation. In support of this view, classical exegetes often interpret it to mean one who submits to God or is a monotheist (*muwaḥḥid*). See Al-Alūsī, 3: 195, on Qurʾān 3: 67. See also D. Z. H. Baneth, "What Did Muḥammad Mean When He Called His Religion Islam? The Original Meaning of *aslama* and its Derivatives," in *The Qurʾān: Style and Contents*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 90-91.

²⁵ The genitive construction, *millata Ibrāhīm*, occurs eight times in the Qurʾān in 2:135, 124, 3:64-68, 3:84, 3:95, 4:125, 6:161, 16:123, 22:78.

²⁶ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, 1: 185. See also Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr fī al-tafsīr al-maʿthūr: wa huwa mukhtaṣar tafsīr Tarjumān al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1990), 1: 255.

²⁷ Another exegete, Ibn ʿAshūr, explains that *milla* is probably derived from *amalla al-kitāb*. See Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Ibn ʿAshūr, *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr wa-l-Tanwīr* (Tunis: Al-Dār al-Tūnisiyya li-l-nasyr, 1984), 1: 693 on Qurʾān 2:120.

Shahrastānī and al-Baghdādī used the term *milla* interchangeably with *al-dīn* to refer to religion. For example, al-Shahrastānī speaks of *al-milla al-islāmiyya* (the religion of Islam) and *al-milla al-ḥanīfiyya* (the religion of ḥanīfism), and that the *ahl al-Kitāb* are considered among those who have departed from *al-milla al-ḥanīfiyya*.²⁸ However, if *milla* can be equated with religion, as is often assumed, then its use raises the question of how it differs from the more widely used Qur’ānic term *dīn*, especially as there are some differences to be found. For example, Qur’ān 4: 125 shows that *dīn* refers to a set of characteristics, one of which is to follow the *milla* of Abraham. Further to this, the genitive construction “*millata Ibrāhīm*” suggests a more nuanced meaning because it is often used in direct contradistinction to the *mushrikūn* (polytheists) and the Jews and Christians as the *ahl al-Kitāb* (i.e. People of the Book). Thus, *milla*, in the Muslim usage, seems to best describe a universal and transcendental belief, and not simply equivalent to *dīn*, as the latter is a wider term that encompasses belief and other dimensions, including political. More recently, some scholars working on the historicity of the Qur’ān have suggested that *milla* could have been an adaptation of the Syriac *mellā*, a word equivalent to the Greek *logos*. On the basis of this literary genealogy, the term may be referring to “God’s covenant with Abraham, or the commands [God] imposed on him.”²⁹

In summary, the Muslim self-definition as derived from the Qur’ān concerns the rejection of Jewish and Christian claims, with its reasoning that Abraham could have neither been a Jew nor a Christian as he predated these

²⁸ Al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa-l-Niḥal* (Beirut: Al-Maktaba al-‘Asriyya, 2000), 1: 15, 173; al-Baghdādī, *Kitāb al-Milal wa-l-Niḥal* (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1970), 114.

²⁹ See F. Buhl and C. E. Bosworth, “Milla,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. P. J. Bearman et al. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960-2005), 61.

religions.³⁰ In addition, both Jews and Christians have not preserved Abraham's monotheistic teachings, but rather corrupted it, and thus, could no longer be his rightful heirs. Accordingly, it is only Islam that is true and rightfully inherits God's promise to, and covenant with, Abraham.

1.2 THEOLOGICO-POLEMICAL COMPARATIVISM

The emergence of a new religious movement under the leadership of a prophet in Arabia in the late antique period had naturally given rise to scathing responses from religious communities around it. In an atmosphere where rival religious ideas were rife, perceptions of, and relations with, the religious 'Others' were expectedly surly and confrontational.³¹ Christian groups, concerned with the burgeoning religious and political power of the Arabs, saw the rise of those they called 'the sons of Ishmael' in light of God's promises to Abraham about his first son in Gen. 17:20.³² John of Damascus, writing in the early eighth century,

³⁰ The most remarkable comment on claims to Abraham in the Qur'ān is perhaps its rebuke of the claims of both Jews and Christians in Sura 3:65 with its simple logic that Abraham could not have been a Jew nor a Christian as he lived before the existence of these religions. Nonetheless, one could also argue that by such logic, Abraham could also not have been a Muslim, contrary to the Qur'ānic description of Abraham as a *ḥanīf* and *muslim* just two verses later. See Qur'ān 3:67 "Abraham was not a Jew nor yet a Christian; but he was true in faith, and bowed his will to Allah's (which is Islam), and he joined not gods with Allah."

³¹ Robert Hoyland helpfully summarises the different types of conceptions, mainly the following that refers to Muslims as Ishmaelites: (1) Muslims as the tool of God's wrath, such as in the writing of the Mesopotamian John bar Penkaye; (2) deliverance from the Wicked Kingdom as seen by the Jews, such as in the writings of rabbi Simon ben Yohai and in the *Doctrina Jacobi*; (3) the Fourth Beast as prophesied by the prophet Daniel, such as in the Armenian bishop and chronicler Sebeos' writings; (4) Abrahamic monotheism, also in Sebeos' writings. See Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 13 (Princeton, N.J.: The Darwin Press, Inc., 1997; repr., 2007), 523-44.

³² Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 41.

was one of the earliest Christian theologians to have enunciated an elaborate and disparaging view of the fledgling religious movement.³³ Like other late antique figures such as the historian Sozomen (d. c. 450), the Bishop of Gaza in his *Historia ecclesiastica*,³⁴ and the Armenian bishop Sebeos in his *History of Heraclius* (written c. 650),³⁵ John recognised the Arabs as descendants of Abraham through Ishmael and Hajar.³⁶ But, for John, the new religion was nothing more than a heresy and superstition introduced by a “forerunner of the Antichrist”.³⁷ As such, this Abrahamic lineage of Islam earned through the Egyptian servant Hagar and Abraham’s firstborn was none other than derogatory, and set the Arab race and followers of its religion apart from Christianity. John of Damascus’ stance was however not unprecedented. Already, patristic literature prior to Islam attests to contestations over Abraham between

³³ On John of Damacus’ “Heresy of the Ishmaelites” in his *De Haeresibus*, see Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The “Heresy of the Ishmaelities”* (Leiden: Brill, 1972).

³⁴ Yehuda D. Novo and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2003), 186-87; Hawting, “The Religion of Abraham and Islam,” 490.

³⁵ Sebeos writes of Muḥammad as “very learned and well-versed in the Law of Moses [and] taught [the Arabs] to know the God of Abraham.” See Hawting, “The Religion of Abraham and Islam,” 498-99. However, Robert Hoyland reminds that such texts need to be understood in the context of the pejorative mood of Christian writings on Islam at the time. See Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 536-38.

³⁶ I. Eph’al, “Ishmael’ and ‘Arab(s)’: A Transformation of Ethnological Terms,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 35 (1976): 231-33; Hawting, “The Religion of Abraham and Islam,” 477. This is also mentioned in the Khuzistan Chronicle (written c. 660s). “Then God raised up against them the sons of Ishmael, as the sand on the sea shore, whose leader was Muḥammad.” See Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 186.

³⁷ As several scholars have pointed out, there were internal theological reasons that contributed towards this certain view of Islam. In the case of Monophysite and Nestorian Christians, polemics were not the only way in which the presence of Muslims was interpreted. They viewed Islam as deliverance of God’s judgement on fellow Christians who conformed to the Council of Chalcedon. As the Monophysite writer Michael the Syrian wrote, “The God of vengeance ... raised up from the south the children of Ishmael to deliver us from the hands of the Romans.” Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, 37. As the Chronicler of Khuzistan stated, “the victory of the sons of Ishmael who subdued and enslaved these two strong empires was from God”. Cited in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 524.

Christians and Jews.³⁸ This polemical episode would extend well into the Islamic era, with Muslim polemicists and apologists writing in a period of the new faith's political ascendancy in the tenth and eleventh centuries, echoing the tone of John of Damascus in denouncing both Christianity and Judaism as distortions of the faith of Abraham. Theologically, each religion would make it as their aim to weave Abraham into their respective soteriologies, and in so doing, sought to safeguard their religious sovereignties.

Although the polemical motive of writers continued well into the medieval period, works in the period were more elaborate and substantiated, as writers then were better equipped with deeper knowledge of other traditions. In place of broad and sweeping characterizations of any particular religion, the authors tend to say more on the doctrines and teachings of other religions, but not without clear and vitriolic judgments on their falsity.³⁹ This was particularly popular in the ninth and tenth centuries, when the *al-milal wa al-niḥal* (religions and sects) genre was a key feature of religious apologetics within the Muslim tradition.⁴⁰ In this regard, three works stand out as particularly significant: the Andalusian theologian and jurist Ibn Ḥazm's *Kitab al-faṣl fi l-milal wa l-ahwā wa-*

³⁸ See for example, Stroumsa, "Athens, Jerusalem and Mecca."

³⁹ On this, see Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible : From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁴⁰ For a general comprehensive summary, see Jacques Waardenburg, "The Medieval Period : 650-1500," in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions : A Historical Survey*, ed. Jacques Waardenburg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). On Ibn Ḥazm's views of Judaism and Jewish scripture, see Ross Brann, *Power in the Portrayal : Representations of Jews and Muslims in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Islamic Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 54-90. On al-Shahrastāni, see Shahrastani, *Livre des religions et des sectes* [Kitab al-Milal wa l-nihal], trans. Daniel Gimaret and Guy Monnot, 2 vols., Collection Unesco d'oeuvres representatives (Belgium: Peeters/Unesco, 1986).

l-niḥal,⁴¹ Al-Shahrastāni's *Kitāb al-milal wa-l-niḥal*, Al-Biruni's *Kitāb tāriḫ al-hind*, and Abu al-Ma'ali's *Kitāb bayān al-adyān*.⁴² These works offer a substantial amount of informed and well-founded comparison between different faiths and traditions, such that some have suggested that they could be considered as the antecedents of the modern study of religion.⁴³ Nonetheless, some of these contained dichotomous categorisations, dividing religions into those with either true beliefs (*al-ḥaq*) or false beliefs (*al-bāṭil*), and were therefore judgments of the authors on other religions. One could argue that they seem a better fit with religious apologia as opposed to the study of religion as understood in its modern sense.

The work that comes closest to a non-polemical treatment of the three religions is Ibn Kammuna's *Tanqīḥ al-abḥāth li-l milal al-thalāth* (*Examination of the Inquiries into the Three Faiths*) written in the thirteenth century.⁴⁴ The author, Sa'd ibn Manṣūr Ibn Kammūna (c. 1215-1285), was a Jewish thinker from Baghdad. One could not rule out that his milieu and life circumstances may have contributed towards the emergence of views which were less polemical

⁴¹ Ibn Ḥazm (994-1064) proposed a six-fold typology based on beliefs and is closer to a philosophical oeuvre than comparative religion. On a summary of Ibn Ḥazm's ideas, albeit presented apologetically, see Ghulam Haider Aasi, *Muslim Understanding of Other Religions: A Study of Ibn Hazm's Kitāb Al-Fasl Fi Al-Milal Wa Al-Ahwa Wa Al-Nihal* (International Institute of Islamic Thought and Islamic Research Institute, 1999).

⁴² The philosopher and theologian Fakhr al-dīn al-Rāzī's *I'tiqādāt firaq al-Muslimīn wa l-musyrikīn* however simply lists the doctrines of different Jewish and Christian sects and classify these, among others, as non-Muslim sects (*al-firaq*) in essence (*al-ḥaqīqa*) and name (*al-ism*). Al-Rāzī mentions four main Jewish sects (Al-'Anāniyya, Al-'Isāwiyya, Al-Ma'diyya, Al-Samīriyya – all mentioned by Al-Shahrastāni too), and five main Christian sects (Al-Malkaniyya, Nestorians, Jacobians, Farfourisiyya, Armanusiyya (he may have meant Aryanism)). See Fakhr al-din Muhammad ibn Umar al-Rāzī, *I'tiqādāt firaq al-muslimīn wa l-musyrikīn* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitāb al-'Arabi, 1986), 111-19.

⁴³ Waardenburg, "The Medieval Period," 25.

⁴⁴ Sa'd ibn Mansur Ibn Kammuna, *Ibn Kammuna's Examination of the Three Faiths: A Thirteenth-century Essay in the Comparative Study of Religion*, trans. Moshe Perlmann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

than those written by Muslim writers earlier.⁴⁵ However, as a learned Jew, Ibn Kammuna took it upon himself to defend his faith, and the impact of the historical competition and hostility between the three religions would not be lost on his work, shown in his somewhat emotional outcry against Islam towards the end of his work.⁴⁶ In the introduction, Ibn Kammuna explains the motivation for his composition, that “[r]ecent discussions have induced me to compose this tract as a critical inquiry into the three faiths, that is, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.”⁴⁷ In the main, he discussed the core prophecy which the three religions had in common.⁴⁸ In this work, Ibn Kammuna does not offer a specific category for the religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam but elaborately studies and compares their religious claims. He draws on the thought of Maimonides (1138-1204) in the latter’s *Dalālāt al-ḥā’irīn* and and Judah ha-Levi (1075-1141) from the latter’s *Kitāb al-Khuzari*.⁴⁹ Ibn Kammuna’s work nonetheless remains an exception to the acrid atmosphere of interreligious polemics in the medieval period, in which the disparaging reference to Muslims as Saracens was still commonplace. Saracens was, for the Franciscan Roger Bacon’s (1214-1294) as

⁴⁵ Alan Brill, *Judaism and World Religions: Encountering Christianity, Islam, and Eastern Traditions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 164.

⁴⁶ See especially his disputation of the Muslim claim that Muḥammad had attained perfection and that the religion spread through dishonourable means: “... that there is no proof that Muḥammad attained perfection and the ability to perfect others as claimed...” and “to this day we never see anyone converting to Islam unless in terror, or in quest of power, or to avoid heavy taxation, or to escape humiliation, or if taken prisoner, or because of infatuation with a Muslim woman, or for some similar reason.” Kammuna, *Ibn Kammuna’s Examination of the Three Faiths*, 148-49.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁸ “I have not been swayed by mere personal inclination, nor have I ventured to show preference for one faith over the other, but have pursued the investigation of each faith to its fullest extent.” *Ibid.*, 11. See also Perlmann’s remarks in ‘Introduction,’ in *ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁹ Reza Pourjavady and Sabine Schmidtke, *A Jewish Philosopher of Baghdad: ‘Izz al-Dawla Ibn Kammūna (d. 683/1284) and His Writings* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 9.

seen in his *Opus majus*, as for others in the period, a reference to Muslims as pagans and idolaters.⁵⁰ With a tradition that harks back to fourth century Christian apologetics, the Christian West did not still perceive Muslims as monotheists.

Yet, between the Renaissance and the Reformation, a shift in attitudes towards the three religions was underway, with the discovery of new cultures and belief systems through the European travels to new lands, and with decades of religious wars which dented the long-held belief of the preeminence of Christianity. Inevitably, a strong wave of religious skepticism and the disputation of claims of religious truth ensued.⁵¹ This period had unleashed a burst of newfound intellectual interest and energy that had led to, among others, the transformation of “inherited cognitive categories” and the birth of a comparative interest.⁵² In such a climate, Christianity lost its privileged status and closed ranks against all other religions, especially with Judaism and Islam, insofar as its similarities with these other religions keenly noted and examined by comparativists in the period. At the core of this was the idea that each religion

⁵⁰ Bacon’s categorisation of religions included groups such as ‘Pagans, Idolaters, Tartars, Saracens, Jews and Christians’. This is an example of where reasons specific to Bacon’s life had a role to play in his thought. Here, Bacon was charged as being involved in sorcery and as a heretic, and this work could have been written as a defense against those charges. See Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 12.

⁵¹ In part, this has led to the flourishing of works on historical Jesus and the historical criticism of scriptural texts. The nature of Jesus was already debated by the likes of Laelius Socinus (1525-1562) and Michael Servetus (1511-1553), both of whom denied Jesus’ divinity and considered him only as a prophet. See Warren S. Kissinger, *The Lives of Jesus: A History and Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1985), 14; Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 156-61. In the seventeenth century, theologians such as the French Catholic priest Robert Simon began to apply historical criticism to biblical texts. The role of the historical-critical method in biblical studies in critical approaches to religion must therefore be underlined.

⁵² Stroumsa, *A New Science*, 23.

had a prophet or founder who claimed to have been divinely inspired, and that they hold the right to the truth. Jesus was thus not any more special than Moses or Muḥammad. New ways of looking at Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, emerged, giving rise to the notions of ‘the three impostors’ and ‘the three rings’.

1.3 PARABLING THE THREE MONOTHEISMS

The late seventeenth and early eighteenth century was intellectually thriving, in which, as Paul Hazard describes in his classic, *The Crisis of the European Mind*, “certain men of genius - Spinoza, Bayle, Locke, Newton, Bossuet, Fenelon, to name only the most illustrious - addressed themselves to the task of exploring the whole field of knowledge in order to bring out anew the verities which govern and condition the life of man.”⁵³ In light of a rationalist critique of religions, the three monotheisms were found to display strong resemblances that foretell the stirrings of a genus that collectively refers to them. First is the metaphor of ‘the three impostors’ that arose in 1721 in an anonymous work entitled *Le traité des trois imposteurs*. The notion of religious impostors was however not new and had its origins in much older texts,⁵⁴ although its uses were not necessarily similar in each case. The notion encapsulates the distrust of figures deemed as having beguiled peoples into submission by claiming to represent a deity. According to the tractate, some of these ‘prophetic’ figures, the

⁵³ Paul Hazard, *The Crisis of the European Mind: 1680-1715*, trans. J. Lewis May, Kindle DX ed. (New York: New York Review, 2013).

⁵⁴ On the possible Islamic origins of the notion attributed to the 10th century Karmite chief of Bahrain, Abū Tāhir, see Louis Massignon, “La légende “de tribus impostoribus” et ses origines islamiques,” *Revue de l’Histoire des Religions* 41, no. 1-2 (1920).

most influential among them Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad, introduced a set of laws to regulate their communities. Each succeeded the other in continuously deceiving their people by claiming to be prophets of God.⁵⁵ In this instance, the ‘three impostors’ gained new importance as it reflected the anti-religious sentiments of the time.

But the period was not one of stable and uniform attitudes. Despite the increasing scientific ardor of the eighteenth-century philosophes, for whom the three monotheisms went afoul, the notion of the ‘three rings’ had also begun to circulate. If the ‘three impostors’ reflected an atmosphere of mistrust, the ‘three rings’ demonstrated ambivalence on the question of ‘truth’. Unlike the ‘three impostors’, this notion was more sympathetic to the three religions, as its aim was less to do with the veracity of their truth claims as to highlight the problem of ascertaining which of the three religions was true. What has however notably disappeared was the superiority of Christianity. Like ‘the three impostors’, the legend of the ‘three rings’ probably has its origins further back in history, in an eighth century Eastern Christian text, but popularised in Europe by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s play *Nathan der Weise* in 1779.⁵⁶ Lessing’s portrayal also bears resemblance to that of a much older text Boccaccio *Decameron* (1353), in which the author sought to positively portray the Jewish king Melchizedek.⁵⁷ The monotheistic religions, in the context of this parable, thus enjoyed a reversal of

⁵⁵ As to the speculative origins of the three impostors either in the thirteenth century (as proposed by Renan) or the eleventh century (as proposed by Louis Massignon), see Stroumsa, *A New Science*, 138-39.

⁵⁶ A good argument for this is presented in Iris Shagrir, "The Parable of the Three Rings: A Revision of Its History," *Journal of Medieval History* 23 (1997).

⁵⁷ See Marcel Poorthuis, "The Three Rings: Between Exclusivity and Tolerance," in *The Three Rings: Textual Studies in the Historical Dialogue of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Barbara Roggema, Marcel Poorthuis, and Pim Valkenberg (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 259.

their fate, one from rejection of their truth, to what Marcel Poorthuis, in his study of this parable and its multiple variations, notes as a “whole-hearted appreciation of other religions.”⁵⁸ Although it is unclear to us the extent to which the notions above had a direct influence on scholarly pursuits that ensued, collectively, they hint at an increasing historical curiosity and an emboldening will to rethink inherited ideas.⁵⁹

Apart from both these parables, there were also other ways, which have not been given enough attention in scholarship, in which the three religions were considered. These attest to the rich and diverse perceptions that existed in the period between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. An example in the sixteenth century is the French Orientalist, and one of the earliest teachers at the Collège de France, Guillaume Postel (1510-1581), who dreamed of a universal *concordia* and unity of religions at the deepest level.⁶⁰ In his *De originibus* (1553), Postel considers the plausibility of Muslim truth claims, and that through Abraham and thereafter the Jews, Mohammedans became aware of the final truth.⁶¹ Even lesser studied examples are the views put forth by Muslim scholars in the period, such as that of the seventeenth-century Muslim jurist and Sufi saint and traveller ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (1641-1731).⁶²

⁵⁸ Ibid., 284.

⁵⁹ As Stroumsa observes, both legends “appear to be the reverse side of one another: if no religion is divine, or if one cannot distinguish that which has a divine origin from the others, all must be dealt with in the same way.” Stroumsa, *A New Science*, 143.

⁶⁰ William J. Bouwsma, *Concordia Mundi: The Career and Thought of Guillaume Postel (1510-1581)* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1957), 64.

⁶¹ Ibid., 61. Postel had improbable ideas. He suggested that the Brahmans were descendants of Abraham because their names were alike, and his many other absurdities had led to charges of heresy and confinement.

⁶² His predecessors from the Banū Jamā‘ah served as Shāfi‘ī chief judges in Mamluk Cairo and Damascus. His own encounter with mysticism truly began with an intimacy he

Al-Nābulusī considered Jews and Christians who live alongside Muslims in their lands as brethren and assured of salvation in the hereafter. He was no doubt heavily influenced by the thought of the controversial medieval mystic Ibn al-‘Arabi.⁶³ In one of his works *al-Fatḥ al-Rabbānī wa-al-Fayḍ al-Raḥmānī*, al-Nābulusī explains that for him, the ultimate reality (*al-ḥaqīqah*) means that those who lived in the abode of war (*dār al-ḥarb*) and have not migrated to the abode of peace (*dār al-Islām*) were not sinful.⁶⁴ For him, God is merciful and forgiving,⁶⁵ whose doors of forgiveness are open to Jews and Christians “up to the hour of their death”.⁶⁶ In his practical life, al-Nābulusī encountered Christian groups in his travels to cities like Nazareth and Bethlehem and recorded the cordial interactions that took place.⁶⁷ In c. 1712, he engaged the Patriarch of Antioch, Athanasios Dabbas, in a theological discussion on the nature of God, describing the Patriarch as “brothers in the spiritual journey, whose noble selves and soft nature are like moons in the theological sky.”⁶⁸ But it is in his commentary of Ibn ‘Arabi’s *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* that al-Nābulusī’s views on Jews and Christians

developed with the writings of three controversial medieval mystics: Ibn al-‘Arabī (d.1240), Ibn Sab‘īn (d. c. 1269) and ‘Afīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d.1291). See Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Sufi Visionary of Ottoman Damascus : ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī, 1641-1731* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 7.

⁶³ As he describes in powerfully evocative terms, “I draw upon the Shaykh’s words in all my states and that his books, in accord with the Qur’ān, the *Sunnah*, and the consensus of the pious forefathers, are the pillars of my belief. In my turn I affirm his speech to others. For I was raised suckling at his two breasts from the time I was a child who knew nothing. I am his suckling child, son of the Shaykh al-Akbar, and he is my milk-father. How blessed is he as a guiding father!” Quoted in *ibid.*, 19.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁵ M. Winter, “A polemical treatise by ‘Abd al-Gani al-Nābulusī against a Turkish scholar on the religious status of the dimmis,” *Arabica* 35 (1988): 103.

⁶⁶ Sirriyeh, *Sufi Visionary of Ottoman Damascus*, 33.

⁶⁷ See ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī, *al-Ḥaqīqa wa-al-Majāz fī al-Riḥlah ilā Bilād al-Syām wa Miṣr wa-al-Ḥijāz* (Cairo: al-Hay’ah al-Miṣriyya al-‘Ammah lil Kitāb, 1986), 125.

⁶⁸ See Bakri Aladdin, “Deux fatwā-s du Ṣayḥ ‘Abd al-Ganī al-Nābulusī (1143/1731) : présentation et édition critique,” *Bulletin D’études Orientales* 39-40 (1987-1988): 9, 23.

were explicitly outlined. In this work, he shares Ibn ‘Arabī’s opinion that the Jews and Christians gain happiness (*sa’āda*) by paying the prescribed poll tax (*jizya*). This view attracted scathing criticism from a Turkish writer,⁶⁹ who considered it heretical, as it contradicted the concept of *wa’id* (i.e. God’s threat to punish infidels in the hereafter).⁷⁰ Al-Nābulusī rebutted fiercely in his treatise entitled “The pertinent discourse concerning the possibility that God will not carry out his threats (to punish the infidels with Hell fire) against the ignorant and stubborn Turk.”⁷¹ In it, he interprets the Qur’ānic verse on *jizya* to mean “[t]hat is, until they agree to pay the *jizya*. But when they do, know that they have the same rights and duties as Muslims.”⁷² He also states:

They (i.e. the Jews and Christians) are legally (*syar’an*) assured of happiness by agreeing to pay the *jizya* and then giving it to the Muslims, because by this they save their lives and protect their property and honor. With this they become like Muslims: It is forbidden to fight against them, to interfere with their property and children, to slander, curse or defame them, or generally to harm them. A Muslim who kills a *dhimmi* is to be put to death, and it is reported that the Prophet executed a Muslim for unjustly killing a *dhimmi*.⁷³

According to al-Nābulusī, *jizya* has two implications for *dhimmis*. First, they become brethren to Muslims and hence have equal rights and duties,⁷⁴ and this therefore prohibits any discrimination against them. Second, they enter paradise alongside Muslims in the hereafter, because they become Muslims

⁶⁹ On the details of the Turkish writer as identified by Barbara von Schlegell, see Sirriyeh, *Sufi Visionary of Ottoman Damascus*, 92.

⁷⁰ See Winter, "A polemical treatise"; Sirriyeh, *Sufi Visionary of Ottoman Damascus*, 92-94.

⁷¹ The original Arabic title is *Kitāb al-qawl al-sadīd fī jawāz khulf al-wa’id wa-al-radd ‘alā al-Rūmī al-jāhil al-‘anīd*.

⁷² Quoted in Winter, "A polemical treatise," 98.

⁷³ Quoted in *ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

according to the laws of the hereafter (and thus 'gain happiness').⁷⁵ According to him, the *dhimmi*s pay *jizya* and by doing so, help their Muslim brothers, and could accomplish that as they were granted the "inner faith (*al-īmān bāṭinan*)" by God."⁷⁶ Al-Nābulusī adds that "faith (*īmān*) is believing in the heart only, according to the Ash'aris and the Hanafis, whose schools are the true ones" and some *dhimmi*s fall within this category.⁷⁷ Although the bulk of al-Nābulusī's discussion focusses on *dhimmi*s, a specific class of citizens in Muslim lands, his justification invokes theological perspectives which offer a fresh perspective on the status of the religious 'Other' from an Islamic viewpoint.

1.4 NINETEENTH-CENTURY THOUGHT

Kant's well-known Enlightenment slogan "*Sapere aude!*" symbolises well what would follow in the German intellectual scene in the late eighteenth century and early into the nineteenth century. The interest amongst German scholars of religion in this period was overwhelmingly to determine the question of origins. A series of essay competitions were organised by various German institutions and Kant himself wrote the essay "What is enlightenment?" as part of a competition organized by the journal *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in 1784. Several years earlier, the Berlin Academy had organised an essay competition on the 'Origin of Language' which was won by the Lutheran pastor Johann Gottfried

⁷⁵ Ibid., 99-100.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 99.

⁷⁷ Ibid. He asserts that "even if they were *dhimmi*s, Jews or Christians or belonging to all groups of non-believers and idolaters, they cannot be ill-treated." Aladdin, "Deux fatwās," 32.

Herder (1744-1803), whose essay then became his famous *On the Origin of Language*.⁷⁸ In 1832, the Philosophy department at the University of Bonn organised a similar competition, this time with the question “An enquiry into the sources of the Qur’ān derived from Judaism.” The German-Jewish scholar Abraham Geiger (1801-1874) submitted his essay entitled “*Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?*” (What Mohammed learnt from Judaism) and won the competition.⁷⁹ Geiger’s fellow Orientalist and friend, Gustav Weil, wrote his *Die poetische Literatur der Araber vor und unmittelbar nach Mahommed* (published in 1837), first as an essay which he submitted for a competition organised by the University of Heidelberg’s Philosophy Faculty.⁸⁰ Collectively, these competitions and the ensuing scholarly essays testify to the flurry of interest in the nineteenth century, especially in Germany, in the questions of origin and influence, in particular, those that relate to the influence of Judaism on other religions.⁸¹

⁷⁸ See Paul Salmon, “Also Ran: Some Rivals of Herder in the Berlin Academy’s 1770 Essay Competition on the Origin of Language,” *Historiographia Linguistica* 16 (1989).

⁷⁹ This essay was later expanded into his doctoral thesis in 1833, and translated in 1896 by F. M. Young into English with the title ‘Judaism and Islam: A Prize Essay.’

⁸⁰ Weil’s essay was a response to the question on Arabic poetry before Muḥammad and the prophet’s influence on it: “wie war die arabische Poesie vor Mohammed beschaffen, und welche Einfluss übte der Prophet auf sie?”

⁸¹ Frank Manuel describes this quest for origins: “The most perplexing subject to an eighteenth-century man in quest of reason was the origin of religious practice and belief. If only the philosopher could discover what had happened in history to drive men into absurd credulity and superstition, to transform them into fantasts, mystics, cruel zealots, to cause them to lacerate their own flesh and to immolate the bodies of others, if only this madness could be fathomed, man would hold within his grasp the secret of his irrationality and the key to his liberation.” See Frank E. Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1959). See also Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Foreword,” in Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise : Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).

This interest was, however, underpinned by several socio-political factors. With respect to German-Jewish scholarship in particular, history became important as it served pragmatic contemporaneous needs of the Jews of Europe to be viewed favourably. For many scholars, a more objective and sober appraisal of Islam could put Jews in a more positive historical light. As one scholar has recently argued, “the study of history was not utilitarian but ultimately caught up in the attempt to construct seminal periods of the past often to rejuvenate a people or a “race” (*Volk*) in the modern period ... History thus became the means by which a *Volk* could articulate its own identity by knowing and grasping its essence, and subsequently differentiating it from equally essentialized others.”⁸² One could also likewise argue that a ‘utilitarian’ study is only a myth, or at least cannot be proven. Thus, what is more important is to examine the ideas and use the contexts within which they emerged to aid our interpretation and understanding. Accordingly, the lives and scholarly careers of many of the figures involved in this area of research demonstrate the undercurrents in nineteenth-century Europe that may have contributed to the formation of their ideas.⁸³ In what follows, I discuss key works and ideas in the nineteenth and early twentieth century which address the interrelationships

⁸² Aaron W. Hughes, *Situating Islam: The Past and Future of an Academic Discipline* (London: Equinox, 2007), 14-15. Hughes then goes on to argue that “the goal of German-Jewish scholarship was to show ... the Jewish matrix from which Islam, like Christianity before it, emerged. By doing this, such scholars tried to demonstrate that the essence, in the Hegelian sense, of Judaism was monotheism and that this, in turn, was responsible for the formation of other monotheistic religions.” Martin Kramer surmises that for these scholars, “a Europe respectful of Islam and Muslims was more likely to show respect for Judaism and Jews”. See Martin Kramer ed., *The Jewish Discovery of Islam* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1999), 3.

⁸³ On the discussion of some of these undercurrents and how they shaped the thought of Goldziher, see Lawrence I. Conrad, “Ignaz Goldziher on Ernest Renan: From Orientalist Philology to the Study of Islam,” in *The Jewish Discovery of Islam*, ed. Martin Kramer (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1999), 138.

between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Some of these discuss directly the uses of Abraham whilst others focus on the historical origins of, and connections between, the three religions. The ensuing discussion does not claim to be exhaustive, with the aim of highlighting the only major trends of thought. Scholars and their works are selected to provide key examples of each particular trend. In addition, because the focus of this present study is the three religions examined collectively, only works that include Islam are included.

1.4.1 THE SEMITIC TYPE OF THE 'ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS'

Within the nineteenth-century search for the origins of religious belief and practices, a particularly significant concept that emerged was that concerning the 'Semitic race' and 'Semitic religions'. The notion of the Semitic race with its monotheistic belief that forms the source of the 'Abrahamic religions' was discussed by two scholars; the French Orientalist Ernest Renan (1823-1892), and the Scottish scholar William Robertson Smith (1846-1894). The focus in this chapter is not so much to critically examine their views, but to show how the three religions were understood as historically-related entities that could lead to a consideration of a genus that refers to them collectively. Renan was particularly influential in this regard, having introduced the powerful but false dichotomy between the Semites and the Aryans, and it is with him that the discussion begins.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Jean-Pierre Vernant also observes of the emergence of a "tissue of scholarly myths" even in "the heyday of positivism and scientism". Further, "[a]s scholars established the disciplines of Semitic and Indo-European studies, they also invented the mythical figures of the Hebrew and the Aryan, a providential pair which, by revealing to the people of the

Born in France on 28 February 1823, Renan was sent for religious training in the Saint-Sulpice seminary but spent only two years there. It was not long before the prodigious young man encountered German's rationalism which earned his unwavering admiration, such that he embraced Germany as his 'spiritual' home. As he exclaimed, "It was exactly what I was looking for, the combination of a highly religious with a critical spirit. At times I regretted not being Protestant, so that I might be more a philosopher without ceasing to be a Christian."⁸⁵ Renan was a prominent figure in the nineteenth-century historical movement in the study of religion known as the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, a corollary of the radical Enlightenment. He was influenced by both French and German philosophical thought and in the field of religious criticism, took after Hermann Reimarus and David Strauss.⁸⁶ For Renan, as his *L'Avenir de la science* tells us, his struggle against dogma left a serious vacuum which he later satisfactorily filled up with philology.⁸⁷ In the same work, he declares that "my

Christianized West the secret of their identity, also bestowed upon them the patent of nobility that justified their spiritual, religious, and political domination of the world.... The Hebrew undeniably had the privilege of monotheism in his favor, but he was self-centered, static, and refractory both to Christian values and to progress in culture and science. The Aryan, on the other hand, was invested with all the noble virtues that direct the dynamic of history: imagination, reason, science, arts, politics." Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Foreword," in Olender, *The Languages of Paradise*, vii-xi.

⁸⁵ Ernest Renan «Le Séminaire Saint-Sulpice» in *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1er Novembre (1882), republished in Henriette Psichari (ed.), *Œuvres Complètes de Ernest Renan: Tome II* (Paris : Calmann-Lévy), 853-883, 865-866. Quoted in *ibid.*, 51.

⁸⁶ Renan could be said to be an heir to seventeenth-century philosophers such as Malebranche and Fénelon, and German thinkers such as Herder, Hegel and Goethe. See Richard M. Chadbourne, *Ernest Renan* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1968), 17.

⁸⁷ David C. J. Lee, *Ernest Renan: In the Shadow of Faith* (London: Duckworth, 1996), 125; Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 214; Olender, *The Languages of Paradise*, 51-52.

religion is always the progress of reason, i.e. science.”⁸⁸ Wholly embracing the positivistic methods of his time, Renan launched a controversial project in his *Vie de Jesus* to liberate Jesus from the shackles of both historical indeterminacy and religious dogma, fervently believing that the history of Christ could be reconciled with the positivism of his time.⁸⁹ More could be said about Renan, especially the great controversies his works had churned in nineteenth-century France. Nonetheless, it suffices to note here that Renan approached the question of the origins of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam along the lines of historical positivism that was evident in his *Vie de Jesus*.

Renan’s focus was to compare the Semitic race and the Indo-Aryan, with his conclusion of the inferiority of the former. But in order to arrive at such a conclusion, the question of origins of the three religions became imperative. Renan approached this in several ways. First, he traced the origins of the three religions to a common source, whose features he noted were genetically transmitted in its offshoots. This is explained in his massive but incomplete work, *History of the People of Israel*. In this work, he speaks of the common source as rooted in a socio-political quest of ancient Israel.

The thinkers of Israel were the first to revolt against the injustice of the world, to refuse their submission to the inequalities, the abuses, and the privileges without which there can neither be an army nor a strong society. They compromised the existence of their petty nationality, but they founded the religious edifice which, under the name of Judaism, Christianity, or Islamism, has served as a refuge for humanity down to this present day.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ “Ma religion, c’est toujours le progrès de la raison, c’est-à-dire de la science.” See Ernest Renan, *L’Avenir de la science* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1890), vii.

⁸⁹ See for example Chadbourne’s description of Renan as a man of high intellect and commendable audacity in confronting his faith. Chadbourne, *Ernest Renan*, 8, 18.

⁹⁰ Ernest Renan, *History of the People of Israel: From the Time of the Hezekiah till the Return from Babylon*, vol. III (London: Chapman and Hall, 1891), xii.

Second, he examined the features of their beliefs and languages and concluded that the Semitic race was inferior relative to the Indo-European race, because the former was stagnant and incapable of creativity. The contribution of the Semites to human civilization, according to Renan, is only its monotheism. The Semitic race, according to him, “does not have the same lofty spirituality that has only been witnessed in India and Germany, nor the feeling for the proportions of perfect human beauty which Greece has passed on to the Romance nations, nor the profound and delicate sensibility which is the dominant trait of the Celtic peoples.”⁹¹ But it is these qualities that could ensure growth and development which the Semites lack.⁹² For Renan, the evidence for the inferiority of the Semites is the absence of mythology.⁹³ As to the question of language, Renan contrasted the inflexibility and rigidity of the Semitic against the more dynamic and animated Indo-European languages, and it is the characteristics of the languages of the latter that portend its cultural progress and diversity.

Where was Renan going with this seemingly sweeping dichotomy? It is here that we find links between his views and his *Vie de Jesus*, through which he became instantly notorious. This work started off as an attempt to offer his

⁹¹ Ernest Renan, *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitique*, vol. 1 (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1855), 5.

⁹² Ibid., 12, 16. “Ainsi la race sémitique se reconnaît presque uniquement à des caractères négatifs : elle n’a ni mythologie, ni épopée, ni science, ni philosophie, ni fiction, ni arts plastiques, ni vie civile ...” He also argued that Semitic literature lacks saga and epic narratives. See *ibid.*, 12.

⁹³ Among others, Renan argued that “... les Sémites n’ont jamais eu de mythologie.” See *ibid.*, 6-7. Goldziher disputed Renan’s theory in his ‘homage’ to Renan, as well as in his *Mythology Among the Hebrews*. See Ignaz Goldziher, *Mythology Among the Hebrews and Its Historical Development*, trans. Russell Martineau (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1877).

rationalistic view of the life of Jesus, but it was however his 'heretical' statement that Jesus was "an exceptional and creative man" that, for many, detracted from it any of its scholarly worth.⁹⁴ For Renan, Jesus' creativity was emblematic of the Aryan race. By splitting the Aryans and the Semites, Renan could resituate Christianity and thereafter differentiate between the three religions. As he explains, "The thought of Jesus stemmed from a high conception of divinity, which, owing nothing to Judaism, was in its entirety a creation of his great soul ... Fundamentally there was nothing Jewish about Jesus."⁹⁵ This view of Jesus liberated Christianity from the Semitic grip, and Christianity was thus conceived as "less purely Semitic" and "the least monotheistic" of them all.⁹⁶ Having released Christianity from the grip of the Semites, Renan could then argue for a more acute link between Judaism and Islam. As we shall see, his conclusion here is not unlike that of Geiger and the latter's contemporaneous Jewish thinkers, although his rationale is totally at odds with theirs.

Across the English Channel, the eminent Scottish Orientalist William Robertson Smith had also examined the traits and origins of the Semitic race and

⁹⁴ Renan's reconstruction of Jesus as "l'homme *hors ligne*" evoked intense controversy, especially across the ranks of French Catholicism. His work assaulted and insulted them, especially because a former seminarist has now denounced 'the symbols of faith'. He was called the 'European blasphemer' by Pope Pius IX, an 'imposter' and 'a modern Arius', and haunted his critics with the harrowing memories of attempts to undermine the early Church by heretics such as Marcion, and polemicists such as Celsus. See Vytas V. Gaigalas, *Ernest Renan and His French Catholic Critics* (Massachusetts: The Christopher Publishing House, 1972), 17-18, 20-21, 52-53.

⁹⁵ P. Alfarcic, *Les manuscrits de la "Vie de Jésus" d'Ernest Renan* (Paris, 1939), 61-62 and 26, cited in Olender, *The Languages of Paradise*, 69.

⁹⁶ Ernest Renan, "Nouvelles considérations sur la caractère général des peuples sémitiques, et en particulier sur leur tendance au monothéisme," *Journal asiatique*, April-May 1859, 417-450, 422, cited in *ibid.* Renan had also commented that "Originally Jewish to the core, Christianity over time rid itself of nearly everything it took from the race, so that those who consider Christianity to be the Aryan religion par excellence are in many respects correct." Quoted in *ibid.*, 70.

its religions, although with a different focus and method in mind. Smith had an early education similar to those pursued by other scholars of his generation. Within his unfortunately short life, Smith prodigiously mastered many fields of learning, as evinced by his expertise in the fields of Old Testament studies, Semitic philology, and Arabic.⁹⁷ Smith was at home with biblical critical methods, but despite his critical leanings, his belief in revelation remained intact.⁹⁸ Smith did not exhibit the same proclivities as Renan in differentiating between the two races, but rather set out to examine the broader historical evolution of the Semitic religions. In doing so, Smith could be said to have established the methods of comparative anthropology in the study of religious history.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Smith's most influential works in the context of the study of religion are *Animal Worship and Animal Tribes among the Arabs and in the Old Testament* (published in 1880), *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (published in 1885) and most importantly for the comparative study of the monotheistic religions, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: the Fundamental Institutions* (lectures delivered at Aberdeen University in March 1890 and December 1891, and book first published in New York in 1889). In this work, he discusses the concept of sacrifice and primacy of rituals, social patterns, as well as totemism. Smith's religious and intellectual life illustrate well the controversies that accompanied the comparative study of religion in the nineteenth century, especially whether scripture (in this case biblical ones) could be interrogated and critiqued historically. On this, see Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 79.

⁹⁸ J. W. Rogerson, *The Bible and Criticism in Victorian Britain: profiles of F. D. Maurice and William Robertson Smith* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 13. Several of Smith's own statements on this are poignant. "We must not be afraid of the human side of Scripture. It is from that side alone that scholarship can get at any Biblical question ... In this department of intellectual life science and faith have joined bands. There is no discordance between the religious and the scholarly method of study. They lead to the same goal; and the more closely our study fulfils the demands of historical scholarship, the more fully will it correspond with our religious needs." Smith 1881, 27, quoted in Strenski, *Thinking About Religion*, 35. Later, Smith would articulate the position in a more forceful way. "The higher criticism does not mean negative criticism. It means the fair and honest looking at the Bible as a historical record, and the effort everywhere to reach the real meaning and historical setting, not of individual passages of the Scripture, but of the Scripture Records as a whole; and to do this we must apply the same principle that the Reformation applied to detail Exegesis. We must let the Bible speak for itself. Our notions of the origin, the purpose, the character of the Scripture books must be drawn, not from vain traditions, but from a historical study of the books themselves." Smith 1912, 233, quoted in *ibid.*, 35.

⁹⁹ Strenski, *Thinking About Religion*, 118.

Smith's interest was in the origins of religious belief and he studied the reasons for its evolution. There are two aspects of Smith's thought which are particularly relevant for the purposes of this chapter. First is his view that all three religions grew out of the same ancient Semitic origin but subsequently developed into more complex and "positive" religious systems. By "positive", Smith meant that they did not begin on their own but evolved from ideas traceable to ancient religions, and that it had passed through a 'totemistic stage' in their religious evolution.¹⁰⁰ Unlike Renan's idea that the Semites was a stagnant and uncreative race, Smith shows, through the evolutionary process which the Semitic race went through, that the Semites were more than capable of adapting to new circumstances. This process of evolution and adaptation is well explained by Smith in an important paragraph in his *Lectures on the Religions of the Semites*.

Behind these positive religions lies the old unconscious religious tradition, the body of religious usage and belief which cannot be traced to the influence of individual minds, and was not propagated on individual authority, but formed part of that inheritance from the past into which successive generations of the Semitic race grew up as it were instinctively, taking it as a matter of course that they should believe and act as their fathers had done before them. The positive Semitic religions had to establish themselves on ground already occupied by these older beliefs and usages; they had to displace what they could not assimilate, and whether they rejected or absorbed the elements of the older religion, they had at every point to reckon with them and take up a definite attitude towards them.¹⁰¹

A second key idea of Smith's was that each of these religions began with the teachings of a founder figure who would relay to his followers what they had received from a divine source. Thus, although Smith used critical historical

¹⁰⁰ Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 81.

¹⁰¹ William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1894; repr., New York: Adegri Graphics LLC, 2011), 1-2.

methods, he did not deny the possible authenticity of the claim of each religion to divine inspiration.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are positive religions, that is, they did not grow up like the systems of ancient heathenism, under the action of unconscious forces operating silently from age to age, but trace their origin to the teaching of great religious innovators, who spoke as the organs of a divine revelation, and deliberately parted from the traditions of the past.¹⁰²

It is very significant that Smith had actually proposed that the three religions could then be examined as a type because of the similarities that they exhibit. As he explains, “The Semitic nations are classed together on the ground of similarity of language; but we have every reason to recognise their linguistic kinship as only one manifestation of a very marked general unity of type.”¹⁰³ It must be said that he is one of the earliest to consider the three religions within a genus marked out by their comparable features, which are in his view, as noted above, not only limited to language. More importantly, Smith sees an evolution in religious thought from the Semitic origins right through to Islam. In this sense, using linguistical anthropology, Smith was one of the earliest scholars in the modern period to observe the interrelationship between the three religions.

¹⁰² Ibid., 2.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 8. Nonetheless, in all these, Smith amply recognised Israel’s special status: “Abraham’s seed had no more right than the Gentiles to claim God as their Father, but that God of his free grace had drawn nigh to the people of Israel redeeming them out of Egypt ... entering into a Covenant with them.” Quoted in Rogerson, *The Bible and Criticism in Victorian Britain*, 135.

1.4.2 JEWISH SOURCES OF THE 'ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS'

If Renan and Smith had discussed Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in light of their Semitic origins and qualities, others were more interested in investigating more specific lines of influence between the different religions, and in doing so, to locate their origins. Thus, the idea of influences of earlier traditions on subsequent ones became current, backed up, in this regard, by linguistical and philological methods. As noted before, the many essay competitions which German institutions introduced underline the role of German-Jewish scholars in tracing the origins of religions. Renan's German contemporary, Abraham Geiger, was one of the earliest advocates of this idea. His essay on the relationship between Judaism and Islam is a landmark in this respect, in that it did not only suggest the Jewish origins of Islam, but established what was then a path-breaking approach in the comparative study of scriptures. It is also to Geiger that we owe the idea of a "Muslim-Jewish symbiosis" in the history of religions.¹⁰⁴ Geiger, like many of his contemporaries, started out with traditional Jewish learning but developed a critical eye to religious studies in Frankfurt, where he studied with the German Arabist Georg Wilhelm Freytag (1788-1861). Like most other nineteenth-century thinkers, the influence of the Enlightenment would not be lost on Geiger, who would go on to become the pioneer of modern Reform Judaism and a principle figure in the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Jacob Lassner, "Abraham Geiger: A Nineteenth-Century Jewish Reformer on the Origins of Islam," in *The Jewish Discovery of Islam*, ed. Martin Kramer (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1999), 108.

¹⁰⁵ This is apart from Moritz Steinschneider (1816-1907), both of whom had a considerable influence on the Islamicist Ignaz Goldziher. Ibid., 104. See also Olender, *The Languages of Paradise*, 115.

His essay in 1832, which focussed on the relationship between Judaism and Islam, was an ingenious attempt to compare the doctrines and institutions of two traditions, but its real worth was not so much in its central thesis as in the evidence he furnished to support it and the method which he employed in his study. The framework for inquiry, as noted above, was already set, albeit generally, by those who designed the essay competition in the first place. Geiger was himself an original thinker and prolific scholar who wrote further essays on the history of Judaism in 1865 and 1871, entitled *Das Judentum und seine Geschichte* (translated as 'Judaism and its History').¹⁰⁶ Geiger, one could argue, laid down the foundations of a scientific comparison of the three religions in these writings in two ways. First, he offered a more objective historical assessment of the development of religious ideas. In particular, he had clearly parted ways with the more disparaging portrayals of Islam by his predecessors such as Antoine-Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838), the founder of modern Arabic studies. For example, as opposed to Silvestre de Sacy's view that Muḥammad was an impostor,¹⁰⁸ Geiger suggested that Muḥammad did not set out to deceive but had a genuine impetus and drive, and was convinced that he was under the guidance of God.¹⁰⁹ In addition to this, Geiger recognised the contributions and civilizational potential of Islam and contrasted this with Christianity. For example, he observed that Islam "always left itself favorable to

¹⁰⁶ There are two early translations of this. (1) by Maurice Mayer (New York: M. Thalmessinger & Co., 1865) and (2) by Charles Newburgh (New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1911).

¹⁰⁸ De Sacy described Muḥammad as "a skilled impostor, premeditated in all his actions and cold-bloodedly evaluating all that which favored and assured the success of his ambitious projects." Quoted in Lassner, "Abraham Geiger," 107.

¹⁰⁹ "[Muḥammad] seems to have been a genuine enthusiast who was himself convinced of his divine mission." Quoted in *ibid.*, 106.

the cultivation of science and philosophy,” and this is to be contrasted “with a [pre-modern] Christian church that increasingly nourished a repugnance of science and reason.”¹¹⁰

Secondly, and in a more significant way, Geiger introduced a useful method to compare Qur’ānic narratives with biblical ones.¹¹¹ His aim was to identify the origins of these narratives, in light of similarities found in the Bible, and then concluded that the possibility of borrowing from an earlier source could not be ruled out. Furthermore, the presence of Hebrew and Aramaic loan words of Jewish origins in the Qur’ān point towards this possible borrowing.

Geiger further observes:

As the ushering in of hitherto unknown religious conceptions is always marked by the introduction of new words for their expression, and as the Jews in Arabia, even when able to speak Arabic, kept to the Rabbinical Hebrew names for their religious conceptions; so words which from their derivation are shown to be not Arabic but Hebrew, or better still Rabbinic, must be held to prove the Jewish origin of the conceptions expressed.¹¹²

These philological comparabilities attest to such borrowing, apart from the fact that any idea “as expressed in Islamic garb and “in harmony with the spirit of Judaism” is utterly inexplicable without its Jewish referent.¹¹³ As he explains further, “[Muḥammad] hoped to strengthen the opinion that he was taught by direct revelation from God; he had also a strong wish to win over the Jews to his kingdom of faithful upon earth, and then, too, the legends and fanciful

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 106.

¹¹¹ There is very minimal use of extra-Qur’ānic sources in his comparison between Islam and Judaism.

¹¹² Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islam: A Prize Essay*, trans. F. M. Young (Madras: M.D.C.S.P.C.K. Press, 1896), 30-31.

¹¹³ Lassner, "Abraham Geiger," 125.

sayings of the Jews harmonized with his poetic nature.”¹¹⁴ According to Geiger, the biblical narratives that could be found in the Qur’ān were derived from Jewish sources, which Muḥammad became aware of by way of the folkloric oral tradition in his native Arabia. Geiger also talks about lesser forms of Islamic borrowings of Jewish customs and practices in his later essays on Jewish history, such as in the Muslim rituals of purification and prayer, and family law.¹¹⁵ In the area of dietary restrictions, Geiger contended that Muḥammad was well aware of Jewish legal practices, and sought to reform and relax some of these laws. This theme was repeated again in his later works, such as in *Judaism and Its History*. In this work, Geiger states that Muḥammad “received those truths [of monotheism]; he was not their creator, he simply took them over out of Judaism. The rise of Islam reveals to us a fragment of Jewish history which would have remained entirely hidden for us, without it.”¹¹⁶ Further to this, Geiger considers that what Islam preaches as its truth were of Jewish origins.¹¹⁷ The extent of the Jewish origins of Islam was so profound that for Geiger, only by studying Islam that one could better understand Judaism. It must be noted that Geiger had referred only minimally to Christianity, suggesting that the socio-political situation of Muḥammad’s career would make clear the point that Islam borrowed less from Christianity as it did from Judaism.¹¹⁸ As the above has shown, Geiger relied heavily on parallelism and chronology and argued that

¹¹⁴ Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, 21.

¹¹⁵ See for example *Judaism and its History*, trans. Charles Newburgh (New York: The Bloch Publishing Co., 1911), 258-59.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 257. Geiger also calls Islam as “[a] pupil of Judaism in its religious views and sentiments ...” See *ibid.*, 259.

¹¹⁸ See *ibid.*, 258.

Judaism being the oldest of the three monotheistic religions as evidence for borrowing and influence, and this could be dismissed as too simplistic and presumptive an approach.¹¹⁹ His working assumptions, in retrospect, are untenable,¹²⁰ but one needs to be reminded that in the early nineteenth century, his arguments would have been logically sound given the state of research in his days.¹²¹

Among Geiger's peers who held on to similar ideas was Gustav Weil (1808-1889), a key figure alongside Geiger in German-Jewish *Koranforschung*. Weil perceived Muḥammad as a reformer who sought to improve on the inflexibility of Judaism and the dogmatism of Christianity. Weil offered an important interpretation of Muḥammad's call for his people to return to an unadulterated monotheism, i.e. the religion of Abraham, which was at the heart of the prophet's reformist agenda. Thus, for Weil, Abraham as "a true believer and a muslim (i.e. devoted to God)" was central to the message of Muḥammad, which was to reintroduce the pure faith of Abraham as found in the Old Testament.¹²² Weil was however not suggesting that Muḥammad discovered this from a divine source. Rather, Muḥammad's ideas were learnt through interactions he had had with several informants. These included his companions (*ṣaḥāba*) 'Abd Allah b. Salām, Salmān al-Fārisī, and most important among them was Waraqa ibn Naufal. For Weil, these individuals were all very likely

¹¹⁹ For example, Geiger failed to discuss the extent to which wider regional customs already in practice had an influence on Islam, but focussed instead on Jewish influences.

¹²⁰ Yet, later findings would dispute his hypothesis, as the monotheistic notion had pre-existed Islam in the Arabian Peninsula. See Lassner, "Abraham Geiger," 126.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹²² Gustav Weil, *Mohammed der Prophet, sein Leben und seine Lehre: aus handschriftlichen Quellen und dem Koran geschöpft und dargestellt mit Beilagen und einer Stammtafel* (Stuttgart: Metzler'schen Buchhandlung, 1843), 41-42.

informants as their knowledge of preceding religions were intact because of their Jewish origins and familiarity with Jewish texts.¹²³ Waraqa ibn Naufal, known in the Muslim tradition as a Christian monk who was formerly a Jew, was particularly instrumental.¹²⁴ According to Weil, when Muḥammad was armed with such knowledge, he then sought to reform the corrupted teachings of Judaism and Christianity, as conveyed to him by the former adherents of these religions. The German Semitist Theodor Nöldeke (1836-1930) examined the origins of the Qurʾān in his doctoral thesis, which he completed in 1860, and applied the philological-historical critical method to Muslim sources, in the broader tradition of the Higher Criticism he learnt from the Old Testament scholar Heinrich Ewald. Like his predecessors, Nöldeke opined that the sources of revelations claimed by Muḥammad were Jewish. Taking Geiger's lead on his main theory, Nöldeke asserts in his *Geschichte des Qorans* that "not only most of the histories of the prophets in the Koran but also many of the dogmas and laws are of Jewish origin." Unlike Geiger, Nöldeke however recognises the influence of Christian ideas, but notes that even Oriental Christianity was itself "strongly infused with Jewish ideas."¹²⁵

Whilst Geiger examined what appeared as Jewish imprints on the Qurʾān and focused on scripture, there were yet others who discussed the Jewish influence on Islam in the historical sense. The views of the Dutch Orientalist

¹²³ Gustav Weil, *The Bible, the Koran, and the Talmud* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1846), xi.

¹²⁴ Gustav Weil, *Mohammed der Prophet, sein Leben und seine Lehre: aus handschriftlichen Quellen und dem Koran geschöpft und dargestellt mit Beilagen und einer Stammtafel*, 47.

¹²⁵ Theodor Nöldeke, *The History of the Qurʾān*, trans. Wolfgang H. Behn (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 5-6.

Arent Jan Wensinck are particularly relevant. Wensinck discusses various possible Jewish influences on what he calls the “Islamic cult” founded by Muḥammad.¹²⁶ For Wensinck, the Muslim claim to the religion of Abraham was only made in Medina (as opposed to the earlier career of the prophet in Mecca) because of Muḥammad’s political tensions with the Jews. Because the political aim to strike a deal with the Jews of Medina had failed, and that the Jews rejected the prophet despite his reverence for revealed books, Muḥammad felt that the Jews whom he encountered in Medina were probably not the Jews who kept to their original teachings. The claim to Abraham was then made,¹²⁷ and this fulfilled two key objectives. First is that Islam could cleanly break away from Judaism and thereafter present itself as “the original revealed religion”. Second is that it could now lay a claim to the city of Mecca and to its accompanying customs and traditions.¹²⁸ The change of the prayer direction (*qibla*) to Mecca must therefore be seen in the light of this tension with the Jews, contrary to the explanation given by the Muslim tradition. As discussed below in the views of the Dutch Orientalist Snouck Hurgronje, Wensinck, who succeeded Hurgronje as Professor of Arabic at Leiden, opined that arising from this Muslim claim to the religion of Abraham, its tradition would then backdate many Islamic doctrines and teachings to the pre-Islamic era, so as to argue in favour of their authenticity.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Arent Jan Wensinck, *Muhammad and the Jews of Medina* (Freiburg Im Breisgau: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1975), esp. 72-103.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

1.4.3 CHRISTIAN INFLUENCES ON THE 'ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS'

Some scholars discussed the Jewish sources of Islamic ideas with the aim of responding to the argument circulating at the same time that Christianity had a greater role in Islam's emergence. As articulated then by the Arabist Richard Bell, the problem of determining which had a greater role to play is not a straightforward one, mainly because of the difficulty to ascertain the nature of religious communities in Arabia in the seventh century. Writing in the early twentieth century, Bell is one of the earliest to raise this particularly intricate issue of the complexity in ascertaining late antique religious identities. As he notes,

For much is common to both [i.e. Judaism and Christianity], and we have to remember that there were many forms of Christianity intermediate between the orthodox Church of the seventh century and the Judaism out of which it sprang, and it was in the East, on the confines of Arabia, that we know these Judaistic forms of Christianity to have longest maintained themselves. Some things in the Qur'ān and in Islam which appear specially Jewish, may really have come through nominally Christian channels.¹³⁰

Bell, however, speaks of a possible common source of the three religions, in what seems to be reminiscent of Renan's views expressed several decades earlier.¹³¹

These three great faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Muhammadanism, are historically connected, and the root from which they all sprang is to be found in the prophetic impulse which the course of history called forth amongst the people of Israel.¹³²

¹³⁰ Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* (London: Macmillan, 1926), 14.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 13.

In agreement with most other scholars on the Qur'ānic claim to Abraham, Bell notes of the role of the political situation in Medina that gave rise to such claim.¹³³ Before Bell, the German scholar turned politician Carl Heinrich Becker had also begun discussing the possible links between Islam and Christianity,¹³⁴ as well as the origins of Muslim rituals.¹³⁵ But the greatest advocate of this idea is Julius Wellhausen, the German biblical scholar who was one of the many famed students of Heinrich Fleischer at Leipzig. Wellhausen started as an Old Testament scholar and became renowned for his work *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* but later ventured into *Islamforschung* towards the end of the nineteenth century.¹³⁶ He recognised the importance of the history of the Arabs and their religion for the purposes of understanding the history of the Hebrews. Like the linguist Goethe, Wellhausen therefore truly acknowledged the intrinsic value of comparison. As he explains,

¹³³ “The priority of Abraham to Moses and also to Jesus, enabled him at Medina, when his hopes of the Jews failed, to fall back upon a man of God, independent alike of Jews and Christians, whom he can associate with the Ka’ba and the new Arab faith.” *Ibid.*, 130. As to the appellation of ‘ḥanīf’ to describe Abraham, Bell reckoned that it was because “the recognition of the place of Abraham, and the idea of this externally existing religion again and again renewed by the prophets, came to Muhammad about the same time. Other prophets and other true believers were *ḥanīfs*.” *Ibid.*, 132.

¹³⁴ See Carl Heinrich Becker, *Islamstudien : vom Werden und Wesen der islamischen Welt* (Leipzig: Quelle & Meyer, 1924); C. H. Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, trans. H. J. Chaytor (London: Harper & Brothers, 1909). Becker asserts that “The Muhammedan movement at its outset was influenced not by the real Christianity of the time but by a Christianity which Muhammed criticised in certain details and forced into harmony with his preconceived ideas.” See *ibid.*, 26.

¹³⁵ As he writes, “It was contact with foreign influence which first provided the impulse to a systematic form of worship. Both Christians and Jews possessed such forms. Their example was followed and a ritual was evolved, at first of the very simplest kind. No detailed organisation, however, was attempted, until Christian influence led to the formation of the class which naturally took an interest in the matter, the professional theologians.” Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 81.

¹³⁶ This book first appeared as *Geschichte Israels* in 1878. On Wellhausen, see Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism: Religion, Race and Scholarship* (Washington: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 119.

I made the transition from the Old Testament to the Arabs with the intention of getting to know the wild seedling, onto which the shoots of Jahwe's Torah were grafted. For I did not doubt that it was from the comparisons with Arab antiquity that one could most easily tease an idea of the original condition in which the Hebrews entered history.¹³⁷

Wellhausen did not dispute the view that Muḥammad was illiterate. For Wellhausen, Muḥammad's religious ideas were learnt from the Sabaeans, a Gnostic sect from southern Babylonia, an evidence of which was the Islamic ritual of washing and the fact that the Sabaeans were baptists.¹³⁸ Even when Muḥammad received Jewish materials, Wellhausen considered the sources of those as Christian, and in some cases, Eastern Christianity.¹³⁹ He also noted that Jesus was placed the highest amongst all the Old Testament prophets in the Qur'ān.¹⁴⁰

Pursuing the origins of Muḥammad's eschatological piety and spirituality, Tor Andrae focussed on the broader question of the origins of Qur'ānic

¹³⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, 187. On Wellhausen's method, Reinhard G. Kratz notes there is "a pattern of interpretation which is there from the beginning and keeps recurring in all three spheres of Old Testament, Arabic, and New Testament studies. It is the development of, or more properly the opposition between, the original beginnings of a religion or culture which grew up naturally and are still completely earthy, and the later stage, in which things have assumed an institutionally established, artificial, and dogmatic state." See Reinhard G. Kratz, "Eyes and Spectacles: Wellhausen's Method of Higher Criticism," *Journal of Theological Studies* 60 (2009): 383.

¹³⁸ Julius Wellhausen, *Reste Arabischen Heidentums* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1897), 237-38. On opposing views to this, see Charles Cutler Torrey, *The Jewish Foundations of Islam* (New York: Jewish Institute of Religion Press, 1933), 4; Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*, 148.

¹³⁹ "Es ist wahrscheinlich, dass Muhammad denselben durch jüdische Vermittlung zugeführt bekommen hat, wenngleich man dessen eingedenk bleiben muss, dass der selbe Sagenstoff auch bei den orientalischen Christen im Umlauf war, und dass die Haggada ihre Quelle grossenteils in apokryphen Schriften hatte, die wenn sie auch jüdischen Ursprungs waren doch seit dem zweiten Jahrhundert immer ausschliesslicher in christlichen Besitz übergingen." Wellhausen, *Reste Arabischen Heidentums*, 235.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 236.

theological vocabulary.¹⁴¹ He does not dispute those who argued in favour of Jewish influences on Muḥammad as, according to him, the evidence for this is overwhelming when one considers the Qur'ānic polemic with the Jews. What Andrae sought to achieve was to show that sources of the Haggada which came to Islam originated from the Syrian coptic churches. As an example, Andrae points out that the Abrahamic legend as found in the Qur'ān is very similar to that in circulation among Christian writers, as are various other Qur'ānic narratives. Likewise, Muḥammad's criticism of the Jews seems to be modelled after the polemical attacks of Christians on Jews.

1.4.4 JUDEO-CHRISTIAN SOURCES AND THE 'ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS'

As the preceding sections have sought to show, some scholars favoured either Jewish or Christian sources as more influential over the formation of Islam and its ideas, in light of their own research and evidence. There was however another important perspective to the debate: that both Jewish and Christian sources (considered by some as a common tradition under the rubric 'Judeo-Christian') were fundamental to the emergence of Islam, and thus, to the formation of an Abrahamic tradition. In this sense, such scholars speak of a stronger interconnection between the three religions. It is also not a coincidence that it is this group of scholars, as shall be shown in the next chapter, who exercised

¹⁴¹ Tor Andrae, *Les origines de l'islam et le christianisme*, trans. Jules Roche (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1955).

considerable influence over Louis Massignon. A key figure in this regard is the Hungarian Jewish Orientalist Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921).¹⁴²

Goldziher's role in the founding of modern Arabic and Islamic studies has been widely recognised.¹⁴³ Like his teachers and predecessors, the prodigious young Goldziher had a comprehensive early learning that combined traditional Jewish sciences with classical studies. At the University of Budapest, he learnt from the linguist Arminius Vambery (1832-1913). In Berlin, Goldziher was influenced by the *Haskala* (i.e. Jewish enlightenment thought) through his teachers such as Abraham Geiger, Moritz Steinschneider (1816-1907), and to a lesser extent, H. Heymann Steinthal (1823-1899). In 1870, he completed his doctorate in Leipzig with the guidance of Heinrich Leberecht Fleischer (1801-1888), a philologist who had studied with Silvestre de Sacy at the Collège de France. Needless to say, Goldziher's intellectual pedigree is as impressive as it is diverse, with traces of both French orientalism and Jewish enlightenment

¹⁴² For a good comparison of the views of Ignaz Goldziher with several other scholars on this theme, see Jacques Waardenburg, *L'Islam dans le miroir de l'Occident* (The Hague: Mouton, 1963).

¹⁴³ Testimonies of this are abundant. See for example Louis Massignon, "Ignace Goldziher (1850-1921): notes sur sa vie, ses oeuvres et sa methodes," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 86 (1922); Robert Simon, *Ignac Goldziher: His Life and Scholarship as Reflected in His Works and Correspondence* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986). Jacques Waardenburg suggests that Goldziher's main achievement was to create Islamology as a proper science. See Waardenburg, *L'Islam dans le miroir de l'Occident*, 244. On other aspects of Goldziher's career, see Lawrence I. Conrad, "The Dervish's Disciple: On the Personality and Intellectual Milieu of the Young Ignaz Goldziher," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1990); "The Pilgrim from Pest: Goldziher's Study Tour to the Near East (1873-1874)," in *Golden Roads: Migration, Pilgrimage and Travel in Mediaeval and Modern Islam*, ed. Ian Richard Netton (London: Curzon Press, 1993). On a general discussion of the contributions of Hungarian-Jewish Orientalism, of which Goldziher is a key figure, see Maria Rethelyi, "German Jews as Hungarian Nationalists and the Emergence of Oriental Studies" (Phd diss., University of Chicago, 2009). For a discussion on what Goldziher wrote in Hungarian and what he wrote in German, see Lawrence I. Conrad, "A New Volume of Hungarian Essays by Ignaz Goldziher," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 17, no. 4 (2007).

thought.¹⁴⁴ His originality in thought is also widely acknowledged,¹⁴⁵ and can be seen in his views below.

There are many legacies of Goldziher in Islamic studies, especially his studies in the Muslim *hadīth* literature, for which he was more renowned.¹⁴⁶ For the purposes of this chapter, four aspects of his thought, derived from his various works, will be presented. Firstly, Goldziher discussed the evolution of religious communities, developing further the ideas of Geiger, Wellhausen and Nöldeke. Goldziher's contribution in this regard was critical, as he argues that although cultural borrowing was a real possibility, this in itself does not diminish the value of any particular tradition. Instead, this allows a people to shape and preserve their identity.¹⁴⁷ To be sure, Goldziher does not limit the possible sources of Muslim teachings to Judaism and Christianity. The focus of his writing was to discuss wherein lies the originality of Islam. Secondly, in congruence with some scholars before him, Goldziher recognises the role of the Eastern Church in

¹⁴⁴ According to Conrad, this point may have confused Edward Said in his critique on orientalism. See Conrad, "Ignaz Goldziher on Ernest Renan," 139-40. It is because of the eminence of his teachers and his peers that Goldziher's confidence was sometimes peppered with ambiguity and fear of derision. As Goldziher comments, "I saw nought but the most hideous disgrace. In my imagination I heard the disdainful laughter of Nöldeke, saw De Goeje shrugging his shoulders and D.H. [Müller] turning up his nose; the friends, the "coercers," I saw disappointed in their expectations, withdrawing their support." Quoted in *ibid.*, 164.

¹⁴⁵ See for example the comments by Russell Martineau in his preface to Goldziher's *The Mythology Among the Hebrews*, that although the latter pursued the scientific principles in the study of history as introduced by Kuhn and Max Müller, the application of these principles to the study of the Semitic race was Goldziher's own contribution. See Goldziher, *Mythology Among the Hebrews and Its Historical Development*, vii-viii.

¹⁴⁶ See Josef van Ess, "Goldziher as a Contemporary of Islamic Reform," in *Goldziher Memorial Conference, June 21-22, 2000*, ed. Éva Apor and István Ormos (Budapest: Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2005), 37-38.

¹⁴⁷ Olender, *The Languages of Paradise*, 128-29.

the development of Muslim dogma, as well as the influence of Syriac on Arabic in its grammatical structures.¹⁴⁸ As he writes in his *Muhammedanische Studien*,

From the point of view of cultural history it is of little account that Muhammed's teaching was not the original creation of his genius which made him the prophet of his people, but that all his doctrines are taken from Judaism and Christianity. Their originality lies in the fact that these teachings were for the first time placed in contrast to the Arabic ways of life by Muhammed's persistent energy.¹⁴⁹

In quite similar terms, he states elsewhere:

When the historian of civilization appraises the effect of an historical phenomenon, the question of originality does not claim his principal attention. In an historical evaluation of Muhammad's work the issue is not whether the contents of his revelation were a completely original, absolutely trail-blazing creation of his soul.¹⁵⁰

For Goldziher, Muḥammad's message was "an eclectic composite of religious ideas and regulations." These ideas could have been learnt through various contacts, whether Jewish, Christian, or others, but "seemed to him suited to awaken an earnest religious mood among his fellow Arabs."¹⁵¹ In the context of religious legislation, Muḥammad had also adopted foreign laws into his religion.¹⁵² Thirdly, Goldziher discusses the source of Islam's Abrahamic claim. For him, the Medinan phase in the Prophet's life was clearly instrumental, and it was in that northern Arabian city that Muḥammad claimed "to restore and

¹⁴⁸ Conrad, "Ignaz Goldziher on Ernest Renan," 152.

¹⁴⁹ Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, trans. C. R. Barber and S. M. Stern, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Chicago: Aldine, 1967), 21.

¹⁵⁰ *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, trans. Andras and Ruth Hamori (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 5.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ignaz Goldziher, "Islam," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Isidore Singer (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1901), 656-57.

reestablish the vitiated and misrepresented religion of Abraham.”¹⁵³ Muḥammad believed himself God’s messenger because he saw the imminence of the day of judgment and his conviction in his monotheism, both of which he learnt through Jewish and Christian sources around him and those whom he encountered in his travels.¹⁵⁴ When rejected by his own people, Muḥammad felt that he too was walking the paths of the biblical prophets. Muḥammad then sought to restore the ancient religion of Abraham, and made references to Jewish and Christian scriptures, although his knowledge of these were in many ways imperfect, and this in itself reflected the nature of his sources.¹⁵⁵ After this claim was made, ritual laws began taking shape in Medina (which was to be a considerable reformation of Jewish laws),¹⁵⁶ and the Qur’ānic stand towards the Jews hardened, as seen in its accusation of the Jewish corruption of their revealed books, especially the Torah.¹⁵⁷ What Goldziher considers here as the falsification of previous scriptures would carry on well into subsequent Muslim generations, who would later claim that the Jewish religion had been abrogated with the advent of Islam because the former held on to anthropomorphic conceptions

¹⁵³ *Mohammed and Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1917), 9. See also Ignaz Goldziher, "Islam," esp. 652. For an overview of modern scholarship and the Qur’ānic Jews, especially in relation to the break from the latter group in Medina, see Uri Rubin, "Jews and Judaism," in *E.Q.*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 33-34.

¹⁵⁴ Goldziher, "Islam," 652.

¹⁵⁵ For example, Goldziher notes that Muḥammad’s Jewish teachers were monks or half-educated Jews whose knowledge of Jewish were of haggadic sources, whereas those of Christianity were from heretical sects such as Collyridians and Docetae. See *ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 653.

¹⁵⁷ Goldziher illustrates this with the following example. "It was said, for example, that in order to rob the Arabs of an honor done to their ancestors the Jews wrongly inserted in the Pentateuch the choice of Isaac as the child whose sacrifice God demanded of Abraham and which the patriarch was willing to make, whereas in reality it was Ishmael." *Ibid.*, 657.

which were at odds with the unadulterated monotheism preached by Abraham.¹⁵⁸

Fourthly, Goldziher brings attention to the intricate link between the dogmatic movement within Islam, its sects, and Jewish religious philosophy. It is in this regard that the influence of Geiger's pioneering work became apparent on Goldziher. Beyond the prophetic era, transmission of Jewish knowledge continued, and shaped some of Muslim doctrines and understanding, such as the notion of torments in the grave and other eschatological themes. The Qur'ān itself came into a more complete form with the information gained from Jews who were very familiar with their scripture. These were known as *al-aḥbār*, the key personalities being Ka'ab al-Aḥbār (d. 654) and Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. c. 731). Narratives that originated from them would enter Muslim literature (cumulatively known as the *al-Isrā'īliyyāt*). Goldziher also speaks of the origins of Muslim law in the Jewish Halakhah, as are many aspects of Muslim literature that can be linked to the Haggadah.¹⁵⁹ With these views, Goldziher could be said to be the first Orientalist to have systematically shown the interconnectedness between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, not only in its formative period (i.e. during the prophetic era) but also beyond.

¹⁵⁸ This notion of *tahrīf* is a derivative of the verb *ḥarrafa* that occurs in several places in the Qur'ān, namely in sūra 2:75, 4:46, 5:13, 41. It is largely a general idea denoting distortion of scripture (through either alteration, falsification, letter substitution, omission, or mispronunciation) committed in the main by previous communities of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*). See for example, Gordon Darnell Newby, "Forgery", in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Brill Online, 2015); Gordon Nickel, *Narratives of Tampering in the Earliest Commentaries of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

¹⁵⁹ Goldziher also mentions Alfred von Kremer's works that trace some aspects of Muslim law to Talmudic-rabbinical law. He discusses all these in his section on "The Influence of Jewish on Mohammedan Law" in *ibid.*, 656-57.

Goldziher's contemporary and fellow Islamicist C. Snouck Hurgronje, whom he first met at the sixth International Congress of Orientalists in 1883, was also influential in concretizing the view of Islam's late claim to Abraham. Hurgronje studied biblical, literary and historical criticism at Leiden's Faculty of Theology, where he later became acquainted with the approaches of Abraham Kuenen and Julius Wellhausen. He had also studied with Arabists such as R. P. Dozy and M. J. de Goeje. Under the latter's influence and direction, Hurgronje chose to focus on Arabic and Islamic studies after graduating in April 1878. He had also decided to renounce his priesthood to undertake critical studies of religious texts. His doctoral thesis was the renowned study of the Muslim pilgrimage (the *ḥajj*), published later as *Het Mekkaansche feest*.¹⁶⁰ In another of his writings entitled *Der Islam*, Hurgronje, like C. H. Becker, admits the difficulties in establishing the historical veracity of Islamic history and Muḥammad's life.¹⁶¹ As to the sources of Muḥammad's knowledge of Judaism and Christian, Hurgronje's view was not unlike that of other scholars, that it was during Muḥammad's trade travels that he came in contact with Jewish and Christian monks. Hurgronje however added that in Muḥammad's personal

¹⁶⁰ Hurgronje had a special interest in ethnography, especially that of Muslim lands, and managed to visit Mecca for over five months, and wrote a monography on Meccan history and society published in 1888. See Jan Just Witkam, "Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje: a *tour d'horizon* of his life and work," in *Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936), Orientalist: catalogue of an exhibition on the sesquicentenary of his birth, 8 February 2007*, ed. Arnoud Vrolijk and Hans van de Velde (Rijksuniversiteit te Leiden: Bibliotheek, 2007), 12-13.

¹⁶¹ "This knowledge [i.e. on the life of Muḥammad] we can derive only from the dubious sources of *hadīth* and *sīra* ... It is easy to speculate about the life of Muḥammad; the assured facts are very few." C. Snouck Hurgronje, "Der Islam," in *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte*, ed. A. Bertholet and E. Lehmann (Tübingen: Brill, 1925; reprint, *Islam, Oeuvres choisies* (Leiden: Brill, 1957), 1-108.), 8. See also *Mohammedanism: Lectures on Its Origin, Its Religious and Political Growth, and Its Present State* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1916), 21-25.

meditations and reflections on the corrupt moral conditions of Mecca, the latter began to have visions of a new future. Muḥammad also knew about the day of the final judgement from Jewish and Christian sources. Thus, Hurgronje concludes in this regard that with Muḥammad, “the religion of the Old and New Testament had received its Arab form.”¹⁶² The Abrahamic legend plays an important role, insofar as Muḥammad’s knowledge of Judeo-Christian facts and his use of the legend for his specific aims.¹⁶³ In this regard, Hurgronje provides the first elaborate and coherent view of the Qur’ānic use of Abraham. According to him, there were two representations of Abraham. In Mecca, Abraham was referred to as only a messenger of God. Later in Medina, the patriarch became much more prominent and was characterised as the first *ḥanīf*, i.e. *muslim*, specifically after the Jews refused to accept Muḥammad’s prophetic mission.¹⁶⁴ Hurgronje contrasts this with the traditional Muslim reasoning as derived from the Qur’ān that this Abrahamic claim was made because Jews and Christians corrupted the teachings of Abraham. Hurgronje’s analysis of the evolution of the Muslim claim to Abraham provides a useful insight into how externalities (in this case the Jewish reaction to Islam) influence the formation of such claims.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² "Der Islam.", 27.

¹⁶³ For example, Hurgronje states that “Mohammed at a later period of his life is inclined to place Abraham above Jesus in certain respects.” See *Mohammedanism*, 33.

¹⁶⁴ “In Medina he was disillusioned by finding neither Jews nor Christians prepared to acknowledge an Arabian prophet, not even for the Arabs only; so he was led to distinguish between the *true* contents of the Bible and that which had been made of it by the falsification of later Jews and Christians. He preferred now to connect his own revelations more immediately with those of Abraham, no books of whom could be cited against him, and who was acknowledged by Jews and Christians without being himself either a Jew or a Christian.” *Ibid.*, 40-41.

¹⁶⁵ This point is further discussed in light of the concept of ‘Abrahamization’ in chapter five of this dissertation.

In response to claims of the Christian origins of Islam, as proposed by Wellhausen and others, Charles Torrey, an American historian, responded that it is in Jewish sources that most of Islam was derived. Torrey problematises the concept of 'Christianity' itself, arguing that Judaism and Christianity were not distinguished very clearly by Muḥammad, and in any case, Christianity was considered initially as a Jewish sect.¹⁶⁶ For Torrey, an evidence of this is the Qur'ānic use of *ahl al-kitāb* (people of the Book), especially in the Meccan period.

These theories prevailed in the nineteenth century and were generally well accepted in various other works that mentioned the origins of Islam. For example, L. A. Sédillot (1808-1875) in his *Histoire generale des Arabes* mentions that 'Mahomet' was inspired by Jewish and Christian ideas, and thereafter, founded a religion that sought to replace idol worship.¹⁶⁷ Muḥammad communicated with his family members, Khadija, 'Ali, Zayd and Abū Bakr, about restoring the old religion of Abraham to its original purity (strict monotheism), and thus, it became the Muslim belief that their religion is a restoration of the religion of Abraham.¹⁶⁸ Although Sédillot avoids the question of the truth of Muḥammad's message directly, his works, limited in its scope to a purely secular assessment, do imply that political and social motivations could explain Muḥammad's actions and words. Sédillot did not view the Prophet's character in a negative light but chose to remind readers of the achievements of the man, considering the difficult Arab milieu and culture he found himself in.

¹⁶⁶ Torrey, *The Jewish Foundations of Islam*, 7-8.

¹⁶⁷ L. -A. Sédillot, *Histoire générale des Arabes*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1877), 59.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

Another French scholar Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882), in his *Les religions et les philosophies dans l'Asie Centrale*, offers a mixed review of Islam, one that is at times fresh and balanced.¹⁶⁹ In assessing the origin of Islam, he traces it to a corruption of Aramaic or Sabeian ideas. Muḥammad, although wanting to reform his society, depended excessively on Judaism and Christianity, and their respective scriptural sources. He also states that the Prophet's mission was to restore the pure monotheistic faith of the ancient patriarchs and prophets, key among whom was Abraham.¹⁷⁰ Gobineau's views thus reflected most nineteenth-century thought on the interlinkages between the three religions, by way of examining the origins and evolution of Islam.¹⁷¹ Collectively, western scholarly perceptions of Islam in this period took place with a view of how it was related to its predecessors, in the form of Jewish and Christian cultures and thought. The overwhelming sense was one of complex connectedness and relationship, to the extent that one could not speak of Islam appropriately without making reference to religious communities that had existed before it.

1.5 CONCLUSION

The interest to examine the three religions from a comparative perspective began soon after the emergence of Islam for a whole spectrum of reasons.

¹⁶⁹ For example, he states that conversion to Islam cannot be forced upon Christians and Jews in a Muslim state and that the mandatory *jizya* incumbent upon them is to make up for their exemption from military service. See Le Comte de Gobineau, *Les religions et les philosophies dans l'Asie Centrale*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1900), 25.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

¹⁷¹ See also the views of Louis Amélie Sédillot and Arthur de Gobineau in Ahmad Gunny, *Perceptions of Islam in European Writings* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 2004), 85-86, 275.

Modern Orientalist thought had also begun examining the overlaps between the three, whether these were historical, spiritual, or philological similarities and differences. Such works did not only form the first inroads into an association of Islam with the 'Judeo-Christian' tradition with which the West has long been acquainted and associated, but also marked the beginnings of more serious scholarly approaches to compare the three religions that would endure well into the twentieth century.

This interest was fuelled by various factors that had permitted a scholarly approach that had shunned the polemical thrusts of the past. The period thrived with scholarly pursuits of genetical questions, in this regard, reflecting on how and why religious ideas emerged and evolved. This then led to the emergence of several new theories on the historical interlinkages and influences between the religions. With the aid of philological and historical methods prevalent at the time, scholars compared the three religions and traced the transmission of religious ideas between them.

As the works of scholars such as Wensinck and Hurgronje show, there was a need keenly felt by several scholars to seriously explore the Muslim claim that Muḥammad's mission was to restore the 'religion of Abraham'. Crucially, however, these works stop short of endorsing the Muslim claim as valid or true, or of suggesting that the three religions constitute a unit or category of the 'Abrahamic religions'. Nonetheless, they collectively provided a foundation for a comparative paradigm for a study of the teachings and claims of the three religions. A direct heir to this development would be the twentieth-century Islamicist Louis Massignon, as the next few chapters will discuss.

LOUIS MASSIGNON :
A RELIGIO-CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL INTRODUCTION
TO THE LIFE OF THE ISLAMICIST AND CATHOLIC MYSTIC

Although scholarly interest in comparing Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, had already taken root in the twentieth century, as the previous chapter has shown, it was the life and thought of Massignon that reformed the way in which the three religions would be collectively considered.¹ As opposed to his predecessors whose investigations were bound by historical questions, Massignon's reflections on the subject did more to resurrect the figure of Abraham itself in the modern period, and to introduce the notion of the 'Abrahamic religions'. However, most analyses on Massignon's thought have not established a clear link between his understanding of Abraham and his subsequent conception of the 'Abrahamic religions'. Rather, the conception of the latter is usually related only to his studies on aspects of Islam, beginning with the period in which he studied the tenth-century Muslim mystic Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj, and Muslim mysticism.

Admittedly, Massignon's most penetrating and original contributions are Muslim-related, and his comparative reflections on Islam in relation to Judaism

¹ See for example, Robinson, "Massignon, Vatican II and Islam as an Abrahamic religion."; Harpigny, *Islam et Christianisme selon Louis Massignon*, 89-90; Rocalve, *Louis Massignon et l'Islam*; Griffith, "Sharing the faith of Abraham: The 'Credo' of Louis Massignon." More recent analyses include Bernard Sichère, "A propos de la fraternité abrahamique," *Etudes* 412, no. 4 (2010): 497-98. On a curiously brief mention of Massignon in an otherwise detailed work on Abraham, see Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Abraham: A Symbol of Hope for Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1995), 219-20. Some have identified the idea with an Islamic origin revived in Europe by Kierkegaard before Massignon. See Gil Anidjar, "'Once More, Once More': Derrida, the Arab, the Jew," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Derrida (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

and Christianity as a family of faiths with a common Abrahamic ancestry, explain why his conception of the 'Abrahamic religions' has more often than not been discussed in such light. After all, the 'Abrahamic religions', one could argue, is an idea with Islamic origins.² But his choice of Abraham instead of the many other biblical figures as his focus begs a serious consideration of why and how the biblical figure captured his imagination, and how Massignon's perceptions of the figure and the sacred history surrounding it evolved and transformed as the life of the scholar and mystic traverses its vicissitudes. More critically, his focus and approach in dealing with the subject explicates the theological nature of the Abrahamic concept as it evolved in his thought. These aspects will be brought to the fore in an introduction to his life and works as shall be discussed in this chapter. It will not provide a biographical account of his life, a task that has been undertaken by others who have described well his illustrious and multi-faceted career.³ Instead, its focus will be on aspects that shed critical light on the evolution of his Abrahamic thought. The principle aim of this chapter is therefore to describe his religious, cultural, and intellectual world, and to present some of his key ideas. In view of the fact that interpretations of Massignon have tended to gloss over the relationship between his formative years and his later Abrahamic thought, which could partly be attributed to the difficulties surrounding the

² See Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 276; Anidjar, "'Once More, Once More': Derrida, the Arab, the Jew," 3. For a Christian argument that Islam is not an Abrahamic religion, see Michael Knowles, "The Galatian Test: Is Islam an Abrahamic Religion?," *New Blackfriars* 92, no. 3 (2011). For a Muslim interpretation with a similar argument, see Shabbir Akhtar, *The Quran and the Secular Mind: A Philosophy of Islam* (London: Routledge, 2008), esp. 27-28.

³ The most complete account of Massignon's life and career in English is that by Mary Louise Gude, *Louis Massignon: The Crucible of Compassion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996). For a more comprehensive analysis of his life, see Destremau and Moncelon, *Louis Massignon*.

interpretation of a complex figure such as Massignon, it is imperative that this chapter begins by discussing the particular approach that I have adopted in my interpretation of Massignon's Abrahamic thought. Thereafter, the chapter examines Massignon's religio-cultural world, and I first discuss his formative years, in which he struggled with his faith and eventually reconverted to Christianity in Baghdad.⁴ Subsequently, amidst his rediscovery of faith and his plunges into Muslim mystical thought, Massignon reflected intensely on the patriarch's prayers as he read them in the Bible. For Massignon, Abraham would become an enduring figure that provided for him profound meanings, illuminating his path, as it were, at various watershed moments.⁵ This will serve to illustrate the point that his spiritual experiences are fundamental to the formation of his worldview, and that the seeds of his Abrahamic thought were already sown in the period. Next, I discuss his broader socio-political world, especially his initiatives in rapprochement, both at socio-religious and political levels. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Massignon's intellectual world.

⁴ The choice of the term "reconversion" as opposed to "conversion" is made in reference to two facts: that Massignon grew up as a Catholic until he became an agnostic in his early twenties, and that he used the term himself (i.e. "*refait chrétien*") in his preface to his *Les trois prières d'Abraham*. See Louis Massignon, "N.L.," in *Les trois prières d'Abraham* (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 23. Massignon used a similar term, "revenue" in his draft. See "Les trois prières d'Abraham," (Bibliothèque nationale de France).

⁵ Several commentators have attempted to delineate periods in Massignon's life. The first to do so is Youakim Moubarac. See his Youakim Moubarac, *Pentalogie islamo-chrétienne: L'œuvre de Louis Massignon* 5vols., vol. 1 (Beyrouth: Éditions du Cénacle Libanais, 1972-1973), 169-99. Moubarac's brief but illuminating summary with a good bibliography of Massignon's works remains an important introduction to the life and thought of the Islamicist. As such, it is not surprising that many subsequent commentators became influenced by his analysis of Massignon's thought. Recent works which adopt Moubarac's approach are Harpigny, *Islam et Christianisme selon Louis Massignon*, 27-28; Rocalve, *Louis Massignon et l'Islam*, 16. See a caution on the arbitrariness of such delineations due to the interconnectedness between Massignon's scholarship and spirituality in Maurice Borrmans, "Aspects théologiques de la pensée de Louis Massignon sur l'Islam," in *Louis Massignon et le dialogue des cultures* (Paris: Cerf, 1996), 111.

Here, I trace his scholarly career and point out the major influences that impacted on his intellectual outlook. I also show how Orientalist thought is integral to his worldview, and the extent to which Massignon's thought converge with, and diverge from, past Orientalists.

2.1 METHODOLOGY IN INTERPRETING MASSIGNON

Thus far, studies on Massignon's thought can be characterised by three main interpretive tendencies. First is to generalise Massignon's thought by focussing solely on what many consider to be its leitmotif, i.e. rapprochement and ecumenism.⁶ Accordingly, his Abrahamic thought could also be seen in this light.⁷ Although the identification of this leitmotif has been widely acknowledged, it would be methodologically unsound to subsume the entirety of his thought and oeuvre under it. This is especially because this leitmotif was arguably only in its infancy in the early phases of his life, and that his life was a lot more complex than simply a representation of a singular ideal. It follows then that the causality between this leitmotif and the idea of the 'Abrahamic religions' cannot be assumed, and must instead be proven. The second tendency concerns the identification of the starting point for Massignon's Abrahamic thought. Because of the intricate connection of the subject with Islam, many commentators begin with Massignon's works on Islam as the start point to examine his Abrahamic

⁶ Among the many testimonies on this is Martin Buber's description of Massignon in his condolence letter to the latter's family upon hearing of the latter's demise. " ... je sais que jusqu'au bout il a lutté pour son idéal, une véritable entente entre les hommes." Martin Buber, "Letter to Louis Massignon 29 Nov 1962," in *Martin Buber Archives* (1962).

⁷ This is as recently analysed by Aaron Hughes, although he is careful to point out that Massignon's conception needs to be understood within the latter's assertion on the supremacy of the Catholic faith. See Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions*, 61-63.

thought.⁸ As noted before, the period of his reconversion to Catholicism has not been examined with the view of exploring its impact on his Abrahamic thought, but instead, treated separately. Yet, Massignon's references to, and affiliations with, the figure of Abraham had already begun in this early period. Third is the complexity of Massignon's life, with its multi-faceted dimensions. In addition, Massignon's lived experience and perceptions conveyed to his friends and acquaintances bear as much testimony to his ideas as the statements and arguments we find in his writings.⁹ For example, Massignon was not only a scholar who published articles for journals and reviews, but a man of immense correspondence who liberally expressed his thoughts and perceptions to his acquaintances and interlocutors, however abstruse these were. Massignon's career had also spanned the scholarly, political, and social worlds, and these were often deeply intertwined with each other. Thus, much of what Massignon has to say is not quickly accessible if read in isolation of the diverse contexts he functioned in. However, most works have thus far focussed on either his scholarly articles or his correspondences and do not combine the sources which allow a more cohesive analysis of Massignon's thought. Interpretations of Massignon's thought are also beset by the problem of dealing with his writing

⁸ This is as seen in Harpigny's proposition of an "Abrahamic" cycle in Massignon's life, which has been well-accepted by others, such as Rocalve and O'Mahony. See Harpigny, *Islam et Christianisme selon Louis Massignon*, 79-106; Rocalve, *Louis Massignon et l'Islam*, 15; Anthony O'Mahony, "'Our Common Fidelity to Abraham is What Divides': Christianity and Islam in the Life and Thought of Louis Massignon," in *Catholics in Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Anthony O'Mahony and Peter Bowe (Leominster: Gracewing, 2006), 154; Anthony O'Mahony, "Louis Massignon, The Melkite Church and Islam," *ARAM* 20 (2008): 273-74.

⁹ See for example Rocalve's point on this in *Louis Massignon et l'Islam*, 10. Roger Arnaldez describes Massignon as « un maître de vie et de pensée. ». Roger Arnaldez, "Abrahamisme, Islam et Christianisme chez L. Massignon," in *Cahier de L'Herne: Massignon*, ed. Jean-François Six (Paris: L'Herne, 1970), 125.

style. As most of his commentators have pointed out, Massignon tends to write in a spiritual way, and sometimes employ esoteric concepts and language. As shall be further discussed in this chapter, his language, which reflects his approaches and interpretive styles, bears a deep theological mark, and shuns a critical-historical approach. The lens with which he viewed scriptures (both Christian and Muslim) was heavily influenced by his own Catholic understanding but with a deep sympathy and concern for Muslims and their religious claims. It was thus his main preoccupation to include Muslims within the Christian economy of salvation, and this in turn, underpinned his conception of the idea of the 'Abrahamic religions'. Pursuant to this ideal, it became a trademark of his to focus on the root forms of words rather than their received cultural meanings, as that afforded him greater latitude to make connections between what would have otherwise been quite disparate theologies and histories. The contexts (both literary and personal) of his writings, as presented in this chapter, will serve as important keys to highlight the unique theological nature of his interpretations.

With such interpretive tendencies in mind, Quentin Skinner's method of historical contextualism aids in a careful interpretation of Massignon's thought that takes into account the contexts within which his ideas formed. This method is particularly useful in two ways. Firstly, it requires a consideration of his intellectual, socio-religious and political worlds, as each had an impact on the development of his thought. Secondly, it calls for an exploration of all genres of his writings on particular points. These include his scholarly works and articles, unpublished versions of his works, personal reflections, and correspondences with friends and acquaintances. By perusing and juxtaposing different works of his on related points or on a particular subject, a clearer picture of his thought on

any particular point emerges, and the confusing aspects of his thought could be better elucidated. To this end, Massignon's life and career will be presented in two interlinked and non-dichotomous parts: his religio-cultural, and intellectual world. The presentations are separate, so as to allow greater clarity in the discussion of themes that explain his life and thought in each specific area. Nonetheless, both parts inform and influence the other, and together form a cohesive whole that reflects the nature of his life and thought. The first seeks to highlight the key factors that contributed to his unique religious outlook and worldview. This primarily includes his spirituality, as influenced by his reconversion, as well as his attitudes towards other religions, especially Judaism and Islam. The second part addresses his intellectual world, and seeks to present his key works and connections in the scholarly field. This part will illustrate the extent to which Massignon inherited, or departed from, his Orientalists predecessors.

2.2 RELIGIO-CULTURAL WORLD

Amidst the turbulent socio-religious and political climate of fin de siècle France, Massignon's early education and religious world began to take form. This section focusses on the spirituality of Massignon, which was seminally shaped by his reconversion to Catholicism in May 1908 in Baghdad. The significance of his reconversion, in turn, can only be better understood in relation to what preceded in his life, especially in terms of the spiritual void that he experienced.

Accordingly, the discussion here will first present the contexts that led to this event, followed by developments that occurred in its wake.

Massignon was born on 25th July 1883 in Nogent-sur-Marne, a southeastern suburb of Paris. He grew up amidst the intense battle between the forces of rationalism inspired by science and positivism, and the counter-reactionary Catholic conservatism that took place in the political and literary scenes of France. The Catholic faith was already at the receiving end of the crushing blows of an emboldening scientific and rationalist regime. The young Massignon would witness the dust of these blows settling on the deserted benches of Parisian cathedrals. His parents had conflicting religious proclivities and each attempted to gently influence their prodigious child in their own ways. His father, Ferdinand Massignon, was an artist and sculptor better known as Pierre Roche. An agnostic who found spiritual solace and meaning in the arts, Ferdinand Massignon held on to a “profound and secret piety – *un visage d’orant*”.¹¹ Miracles played an important part in his worldview, perhaps because of his deep artistic appreciation of “the rhythms of nature”.¹² With such a unique vision of spirituality, Ferdinand Massignon did not exhibit any of the virulence of the protagonists, neither that of the liberals nor of the Catholic Church. A firm believer in the idea of personal freedom, he joined the League of the Rights of Man formed in the aftermath of the Dreyfus affair. On the other hand, Louis Massignon’s mother, Marie Hovyn, was a devout Catholic, and both she and her

¹¹ Destremau and Moncelon, *Louis Massignon*, 17.

¹² Massignon spoke about his father’s faith when he visited Japan in 1959. “He [Ferdinand] has ceased to believe in God, but he confided [*sic*] in the miraculous birth of France in the fifteenth century, in the virginal apparitions among trees witnessed by Joan of Arc, after her candle offerings to Our Lady of Bermont in the forest; and had made a solitary silent pilgrimage in 1889 to Domremy.” Cited and translated in Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 5.

husband saw through Massignon's baptism on 4 September 1883 at Nogent.¹³ Marie would read to the young Massignon the meditation texts of the seventeenth-century theologian Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, and the texts of Fénelon and Saint Francis de Sales.¹⁴ Despite her attempts at instilling traditional Catholic values in Massignon, it was his father's spirituality that appeared more attractive to Massignon, at least when Massignon entered adolescence. At seventeen, Massignon expressed his deep scepticism of the 1846 apparition of the weeping virgin at La Salette. Bewildered by the Church's tolerance of what he then considered were 'nonsensical' things,¹⁵ Massignon abandoned his Christian faith, choosing to focus his youthful energies on learning, especially the languages and cultures of the Arabs. Reflecting on the loss of his faith in his adolescent years, Massignon wrote to the poet and diplomat Paul Claudel on the Church's shortcomings in the ways it provided religious instruction for the young, the cause for the generation's loss of faith.¹⁶ Despite being an agnostic, Massignon's attraction to religious ideas remained. His encounter with the novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907) in 1900 at the age of seventeen deepened his curiosity in Huysmans' esoteric ideas. Massignon's father was a

¹³ This was in spite of some of Ferdinand's initial misgivings. Nonetheless, he also did not reject Massignon's conversion to Catholicism in Baghdad in May 1908. See Destremau and Moncelon, *Louis Massignon*, 17.

¹⁴ Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 6.

¹⁵ Letter to Claudel dated 29 December 1911, in Dominique Millet-Gérard, *Paul Claudel - Louis Massignon: Correspondance 1908-1953* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), 174. « Lu en 1901, sous l'Odéon, la brochure du P. Parent, qui me déplut violemment, et me fit juger bien mal l'Église qui tolérait de pareilles sottises. »

¹⁶ Letter 39, dated 28 August 1910, in *ibid.*, 99. "Dans l'esprit de 99% de nos contemporains, le catéchisme doit finir a dix ans, l'instruction religieuse tombe comme les dents de lait, la premier communion clot deux ou trois années d'enseignement impratique et suranne... Tous disent : "Quand ai-je perdu la foi? Après ma première communion..." Ils n'y avaient rien appris qui soutint leur adolescence durant la bataille virile."

friend of Huysmans; both brought together by their shared interest in the arts, and had arranged for Massignon to meet the writer. Huysmans was then working on the biography of Saint Lydwine of Schiedam, and spoke considerably and passionately about the figure to Massignon, and probably introduced the mystical idea of 'substitution' to Massignon in doing so.¹⁷ Massignon had already been exposed to some of Huysman's ideas in the latter's novel *L'Oblat* which he read as a *dispensé*.¹⁸ Apart from his literary works, Huysmans was a protagonist of what was a 'reactionary revolution' against the dominant secular intellectual trends of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, together with several other renowned French literary figures such as Léon Bloy, Charles Pèguy and Paul Claudel. This group of writers also had a decent following in France, and their robust yet often poetically articulated protest against the Enlightenment ideals had many admirers amongst many brilliant young French minds, such as Rivière, Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, and Massignon.¹⁹

¹⁷ This notion is closely related to several other concepts such as 'vicarious suffering' and 'redemptive suffering'. For a discussion of these concepts, see Richard Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution: The Catholic Revival in French Literature 1870-1914* (London: Constable, 1966), 149-222.

¹⁸ Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 13. He also discussed some of Huysmans' works with high-school friend, Henri Maspero. See Jean-François Six, *Cahier de L'Herne: Massignon* (Paris: L'Herne, 1970), 33.

¹⁹ See Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution*, 33-34. Claudel was however a fiery Catholic, who was contemptuous of anyone whom he deemed as enemies of the Christian faith. The sense of an overwhelming threat to a faith already weakened by a plethora of factors and by numerous aggressors had aroused violent sentiments in Claudel and his generation. His target list included Goethe, Renan, Rosseau and Blondel, and he rebuffed their thoughts with vehemence. See *ibid.*, 74. Massignon, however, did not share the virulence that Claudel exhibited. Thus, the former's views on Islam and its prophet were always presented with greater charity than those of Claudel. Massignon would often be searching for a deeper understanding of Islam, whereas Claudel would continue to pass doctrinal judgements. For example, in letter 87, dated 2 January 1912, Claudel called Muḥammad an Anti-Christ. Massignon responded with ambivalence, choosing instead to cite the views of Church figures. See Millet-Gérard, *Paul Claudel - Louis Massignon*, 178-82. On Claudel's role in the conversion of others, see Frédéric Gugelot, *La conversion des*

This 'revolution' was however not an unprecedented one in French history, and its antecedents could be found in the seventeenth century. In this regard, it is pertinent to revisit the polymath and philosopher Blaise Pascal's own encounter with Christianity and its own form of Catholic Counter Reformation. Pascal was particularly renowned for his *Pensées*, a collection of writings that sought to respond to the consequences of both the preceding European wars of religion and the scepticism of the Renaissance, especially in liberal thought.²⁰ He partook in a form of Christian renewal that centered on an intense spirituality and extended the work and tradition started by the likes of François de Sales, Bérulle, Saint Cyran, Bossuet, Bourdaloue and Fénelon, who popularised the notion of mystical piety from the sixteenth century on. After living an indulgent and decadent life (his 'période mondaine' between 1651 and 1654),²¹ Pascal experienced a gripping and intense epiphany and became a staunch believer in God since. For Pascal, God could only be known and comprehended through mystical vision, faith, worship, and prayer. In other words, God is not discoverable through reason alone.²² Pascal was clearly reacting to the dominant philosophical trends that privileged reason as the path to the truth. His proclamation of faith that captured the weightiness of his experience became eternalised with the words written on a parchment that was sewed onto his coat:

intellectuels au catholicisme en France (1885-1935) (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2010), 474-500.

²⁰ John Cruickshank, *Pascal: Pensées* (London: Grant & Cutler Ltd, 1998), 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

²² *Ibid.*, 26.

From about half past ten in the evening until half past midnight. Fire. 'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,' not of the philosophers and scholars. Certainty, certainty, heartfelt joy, peace.²³

In his *Pensées*, Pascal elaborates on this vision of God. For him, God's existence touches the core of the human soul and responds to his deepest needs, not one which the philosophers incessantly seek to rationalise.²⁴ When Pascal's niece was 'miraculously' cured in March 1656 in what became known as the 'Miracle of the Holy Thorn', Pascal thereafter regarded miracles as central to the Christian faith. Pascal did not waver in his belief that the world was in need of the mysterious and supernatural to recognise the existence of God,²⁵ and that reason cannot be the sole arbiter of truth. After Pascal, the eighteenth century philosopher Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) introduced several esoteric ideas, such as the "reversibility of merits". The notion of blood sacrifice was also central to de Maistre's thought, as he writes in his *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*. Huysmans' literary works such as those read by Massignon above would popularise de Maistre's idea within the larger Catholic populace in France.

Two intertwined key characteristics of the Catholic revolution, both the preceding and contemporaneous with Massignon, will find their way into his thought and inform his worldview. First, as has been discussed earlier, is the notion of mystical substitution interlinked with the idea of redemptive suffering.

²³ Blaise Pascal, *Les pensées* (Paris: Ed. Mignot, 1912), 38.

²⁴ Pascal explicates his understanding of God in his *Pensées* under Article 22 concerning "Man's happiness with God" that "Le Dieu des chrétiens ne consiste pas en un Dieu simplement auteur des vérités géométriques et de l'ordre des éléments ... Mais le Dieu d'Abraham, le Dieu d'Isaac, le Dieu de Jacob, le Dieu des chrétiens, est un Dieu d'amour et de consolation : c'est un Dieu qui remplit l'âme et le cœur qu'il possède : c'est un Dieu qui leur fait sentir intérieurement leur misère, et sa miséricorde infinie; qui s'unit au fond de leur âme; qui la remplit d'humilité, de joie, de confiance, d'amour; qui les rend incapables d'autre fin que de lui-même." See *ibid.*, 179.

²⁵ Byrne, *Religion and the Enlightenment*, 82, 87.

Second is the 'spiritual' interpretation of history. Thoroughly dissatisfied with the bold and arrogant confidence of positivism and individualism, the French literary figures escaped in a Christian world of their own construction that had scriptural radicalism as its pillars. For these figures, scripture and tradition become the sole determinant and criterion. This led to a 'powerful literary and social revolution' as a fearless response to the hegemony of rationality. The mystical and miraculous took the place of science along with its positivism. Within their worldview, the idea of miracles, as Huysmans confidently proclaimed, became "a resolutely accurate science".²⁶ The early Christian tradition of interpreting the Bible using analogical, anagogical and allegorical methods would become normative for this group. In Massignon's thought, this 'manifests itself most directly in the spiritual geography that "consecrates" his mystical point of view.'²⁷ In contrast to Renan, Massignon was with Pascal in viewing life from the perspective of *historia sacra* and in advocating the mythological and sacramental ideas of religion. This, as we shall see in the next chapter, had also heavily influenced how he related the histories of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which then led to the conception of the 'Abrahamic religions'. In this sense then, Massignon had set himself on a path of theological discovery governed in the main by mystical and Christian ideas.

Massignon encountered the mystical ideas of Pascal and de Maistre somewhat indirectly, and soon after, he began to seriously study the lives of mystics. We also find a stark similarity between Massignon's reconversion and

²⁶ Quoted in Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution*, 65.

²⁷ Patrick Laude, *Louis Massignon: The Vow and the Oath* (London: Matheson Monographs, 2011), xiii.

that of Pascal in 1654.²⁸ Similarly, many aspects of Massignon's early life resembled that of the philosopher. Massignon had also echoed Pascal's declaration of faith, when he highlights that the faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is preeminent in human history. Massignon was particularly attracted to the idea that a mystic would go through suffering for the sake of others in substitution.²⁹ His *memoire* submitted for *Licence ès lettres* in July 1902 under the supervision of the philologist and literary historian Ferdinand Brunot, was a linguistical study of love in the novel by Honore d'Urfe entitled *L'Astree*. In the course of preparing for the memoire, he came across the ideas of Christian mystics such as Eckhart, Ruysbroeck and John of the Cross.³⁰ A budding Orientalist, Massignon had also been interested in mystical personalities from other traditions, particularly Muslim figures.³¹ His reconversion in Baghdad, as shall be discussed next, would profoundly root him in a Christian worldview, and his encounter there with the world of a medieval Muslim mystic, Mansur al-Ḥallāj, brought optimism for him that Islam could finally find its place in the

²⁸ Vincent Monteil sees a strong resemblance between Pascal and Massignon. "We have known a living Pascal, greater, deeper, sharper and more universal than Pascal." See Vincent Monteil, *Esprit* (Paris: Dec. 1952), quoted in Landrien, "Some Aspects of the Meaning of Abraham in the Life, Works and Thought of Louis Massignon.", 113.

²⁹ This is as he reflects on the medieval Flemish mystic, Saint Christine the Admirable: "It was twenty years ago, around my twentieth year – far removed from the faith of my childhood. In the works of art I glanced at, among all those images of beauty, profane or profaned, tempting or suspect, which crowded in on the threshold of my imagination, suddenly this image appeared, adorned with a unique glory, the glory of sanctity." Quoted in Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 11.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ See Massignon's letter to his father, Ferdinand Massignon, dated 29 April 1907, describing his enthusiasm to understand al-Ḥallāj, as the latter, according to Massignon, had been poorly understood. « Par esprit de contradiction, je me suis mis à travailler assez assidûment, non pas au travail d'archéologie dont Maspero m'avait parlé ... mais l'étude critique du martyr d'un mystique de Bagdad au Xe siècle, sur lequel on a débité d'innombrables âneries. Ce fut, en réalité, un très beau caractère... » Daniel Massignon, *Le voyage en Mésopotamie et la conversion de Louis Massignon en 1908* (Paris: CERF, 2001), 71.

Christian economy of salvation.

2.2.1 RECONVERSION³²

In 1906, Massignon travelled to Cairo to work at the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology. There, he met a Spanish aristocrat, Luis de Cuadra, with whom he developed a relationship.³³ Massignon felt he had overstepped moral boundaries by engaging in what he later described as “violent escapades, disguised as a *fellah*, an outlaw milieu”.³⁴ His own account and choice of words here convey a notion of regret of preceding experiences in Egypt. Thus, the impact of such personal circumstances on his interpretations of events and his reflections on both religious history and theology cannot be ruled out. Given the weightiness of such events in his life, coupled with a worldview deeply entrenched in the Christian notions of suffering and redemption, it would have been of little surprise that he would interpret life events as imminent and transformative so as to liberate him from such emotional shackles. Two years later, an opportunity arose for him to partake in an archaeological mission to Mesopotamia. His duty there, as his accounts tell us, was to lead an official archaeological mission in search of a ruin between Karbala and Najaf (al-Okhaydir), under the protection

³² On the use of this term, see fn. 4 on page 77 above.

³³ This is also explained in his letter to his wife dated 20 October 1934. “Since 1908 certain things have become entangled in my mind—the memory of a liaison with a woman of the Paris music halls of 1904-1906, and then the sensual aberrations that came from unnatural lust, into which I was (indirectly) initiated by my friend the apostate Spaniard L. de Cuadra, as these aberrations were (according to him) the only possibility to really understand Arab Islam (1906-1908)—with the result that, since my conversion, I have been filled with horror and an instinctive aversion at the thought of the carnal act.” Quoted in Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, trans. Christopher McIntosh (Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2013), 120.

³⁴ “escapades violentes, déguisé en fellah, milieux de hors-la-loi..” See Louis Massignon, “Toute une vie avec un frère parti au désert : Foucauld,” in *EM*, ed. Christian Jambet (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2009), 128.

(*amân*) of the Alussis.³⁵ Baghdad then seemed the right place for him to pursue his spiritual, vocational and scholarly needs.

Baghdad was a major Ottoman province, which was at the time undergoing a period of instability. Massignon was aware that his presence would attract suspicion and the nature of his mission itself would court danger. The risks were amplified by his choice to live in the Arab quarter of the city, and with only the protection of a local family whom he had no choice but to trust.³⁶ In Massignon's own accounts of the event, he found himself in an unprecedented moment of danger.³⁷ Suspected to be a foreign agent, he was arrested whilst travelling alone on a steamboat on the Tigris river. Overwhelmed, Massignon attempted to take his own life, only to feel at that moment an unprecedented and unfathomable presence.³⁸ Massignon called the presence which he sensed as "the

³⁵ « Bagdad ; là, chef de mission archéologique officielle, mais vie ascétique, camouflé, sous protection, *amân* d'une famille arabe de nobles musulmans ; en vague costume d'officier turc permissionnaire, chevauchée au désert à la recherche d'une ruine entre Kerbéla et Nedjef (Al-Okhéïdir). » See *ibid.*

³⁶ On the political situation in which people were generally wary of the presence of agents, see Massignon, *Le voyage en Mésopotamie*, esp. 14-15. See also his letter dated 5 January 1908 to his close friend during his youth, Henri Maspero, describing how he was at ease with the Arab culture, in Six, *Cahier de L'Herne: Massignon*, 36. "Ici [Bagdad] je prends racine arabe, c'est-à-dire que j'ai trouvé des gens selon mon idée, - bienveillants et assez lettrés..."

³⁷ See *Notes sur ma conversion* prepared for Fr. Anastase in 1922 in Massignon, *Le voyage en Mésopotamie*. Massignon's brief account of his conversion was written in 1959. A longer account was written in 1955 under the title *Visitation de l'Étranger*. See *ibid.*, 76-77.

³⁸ "[A]rrêté comme espion, frappé, menacé d'exécution, essai de suicide par horreur sacrée de moi-même, recueillement soudain, les yeux fermés devant un feu intérieur, qui me juge et me brûle le coeur, certitude d'une Présence pure, ineffable, créatrice, suspendant ma sentence à la prière d'êtres invisibles, visiteurs de ma prison, dont les Noms frappent ma pensée : le premier Nom, ma mère (alors priaït à Lourdes), le cinquième le nom de Ch. De Foucauld. Sauvé par mes hôtes, à leur risques : Dakhâla, Ijâra, Diyâfa. À travers mille embûches, retour en France." Massignon, "Toute une vie," 128. To be sure, there are several different accounts of what actually transpired. One cannot also rule out that Massignon could have been confused in such a situation, as suggested in Baldick, "Massignon: Man of Opposites," 31. There were also political

Stranger”, described as ‘pure’, ‘ineffable’ and ‘creative’. The spiritual encounter itself was “interior, unheard-of, executing, supernatural, unspeakable”.³⁹ At that moment, Al-Hallāj’s infamous dictum, “Ana'l Haqq” (i.e. I am the Truth) provided him with some assurance and meaning,⁴⁰ as he found himself approximating the experience of the mystic who walked the same land many centuries before. This encounter with “the Stranger” on the vessel was the first of three spiritual encounters recorded in his testimonies. Soon after, Massignon was taken ill and hospitalised, and it was there that he felt another moment of conversion. This time, he recognised God as creator and expressed his desire to devote his life entirely to God.⁴¹ The words “Confession” and “the Holy Sacrifice” were also noted in his logbook entries dated 25 and 26 June 1908. He then encountered a third epiphanic moment, but this time, he felt as if God revealed his gentleness and acceptance of him, like a “father to a prodigal child”.⁴²

Massignon’s reconversion to his Catholic faith was further aided when he was put in contact with a Carmelite priest from Baghdad.⁴³ Gustav Rouet, the

factors at play. See Ian Latham, "The Conversion of Louis Massignon in Mesopotamia in 1908," *ARAM* 20 (2008): 252-53.

³⁹ « ... j’avais subi un autre coup: intérieur, inouï, suppliciant, surnaturel, indicible. » Massignon, *Le voyage en Mésopotamie*, 28. Translated by Ian Latham in Latham, "The Conversion of Louis Massignon in Mesopotamia in 1908," 256.

⁴⁰ “[T]entation de dire Ana'l Haqq, “Je suis la vérité créatrice”, mot attribué à Hallāj, que je prenais alors dans un sens moniste.” According to his notes, he mentioned “Haqq” (i.e. truth) without “Ana” (i.e. I). Massignon, *Le voyage en Mésopotamie*, 29.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴² “Sensation déchirante, soudain, de la présence de Dieu, non plus Juge, mais père, inondant l’enfant prodigue. Je ferme doucement la porte de ma chambre à clef et m’étends à terre sur le carreau, pleurant enfin ma prière après cinq ans de sécheresse de coeur, toute la nuit.” *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴³ Father Anastase-Marie de Saint Élie was a priest in Baghdad of Lebanese origin who accompanied Massignon on his return to France after his conversion in May 1908. The journey lasted over a month (4 June to 9 July 1908) and Father Anastase visited Massignon’s parents in Bretagne (25 – 31 July). This led to a period of correspondences

French consul in Baghdad, chose Father Anastase, also a scholar of Arabic culture and literature, to accompany Massignon in his return to France after his harrowing ordeal. The priest made sure that Massignon's spiritual needs after the experience would be well taken care of. Whilst on the train to Beirut, Massignon felt that he was seized by a spiritual presence again, and hastily made a confession to Father Anastase. The latter requested that Massignon write an account of his reconversion, to which Massignon acceded.⁴⁴ Massignon acknowledged Father Anastase's assistance, and began a correspondence with the latter after returning to France, especially on matters pertaining to the Christian faith.⁴⁵ Massignon's mother, Marie, would often assure the priest of her son's wellbeing and acknowledged that he had helped Massignon to deepen his faith.⁴⁶ Not untypical of the zeal of new converts, Massignon's passion and desire to deepen his faith remained, and he found encouragement through other converts, with whom he corresponded to gain support and guidance. A key personality with whom he communicated was the renowned French poet and diplomat Paul Claudel. They first corresponded after Massignon arrived in France from Baghdad. Claudel had also undergone a somewhat similar conversion in 1886, when seated in the Church of the Notre-Dame de La Salette,

between Massignon and his family with Father Anastase immediately after his conversion. See *Autour d'une conversion: Lettres de Louis Massignon et de ses parents au père Anastase de Bagdad* (Paris: Cerf, 2004).

⁴⁴ See *Le voyage en Mésopotamie*, 32.

⁴⁵ For example, see letters 13, dated 23 August 1908, and 25, dated 9 December 1908, in *Autour d'une conversion*, 28-29, 48-49.

⁴⁶ See for example, letter 15, dated 27 August 1908, in *ibid.*, 36. "Louis [Massignon] est en ce moment très pénétré de la présence de Dieu. Je le vois très heureux de ce soutien, et j'en bénis la main qui l'a conduit."

he felt a gripping presence.⁴⁷ On 3 November 1909, almost a year after his return from Baghdad, Massignon met Claudel.⁴⁸ Claudel clearly functioned as a spiritual advisor to Massignon, giving him reassurances when he felt insecure and uncertain on spiritual matters. For example, in one of his letters, Claudel reassured Massignon that he should see himself, being a new convert, like a patriarch and a king.⁴⁹

Massignon had thus completely returned to Catholicism, but the circumstances within which the reconversion took place would not be easily lost on him. His rediscovery of God in the Arabic language,⁵⁰ in the land of the Arabs, and owing to their hospitality, were particularly paradigmatic in deepening his attitudes towards Muslims. Although it was in keeping with the Arab tradition that foreigners must have a protector who takes care of them and monitor their every move, Massignon keenly felt the sincerity and care of his hosts, the Alussians, in Baghdad, and was immensely touched by their acceptance of his

⁴⁷ On Claudel's conversion, see mainly Paul Claudel, "Ma conversion," in *Œuvres en prose de Paul Claudel* ed. Paul Claudel (Paris: Gallimard, 1965). Richard D. E. Burton compiles an analysis of Claudel's four accounts of his conversion in *Blood in the City: Violence and Revelation in Paris 1789-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 149-58. Burton points out that that term 'conversion' itself is misleading, as Claudel, like many other 'converts' of his era were born Catholics and baptised. As such, they 'reverted' as opposed to converted.

⁴⁸ In his homage to Claudel entitled "Sortes claudelianaes", Massignon admitted that he benefitted from a "mental decentering of the reader" by reading Claudel. The profound religious experience of Claudel, which Massignon so dearly shared, is deeply reflected in the former's writings, as Massignon observes. Claudel's texts thus produce "the gently persuasive intervention of another personality, triggering a relationship. Personal, spontaneous, and incisive, such a sentence burrows its way in, secretly reminding us of the original upheaval that marked us both with a single and identical sign." See "Sortes claudelianaes," *Parole Donnée*, 389, quoted and translated in Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 141.

⁴⁹ Letter 28, dated 25 March 1910. See Millet-Gérard, *Paul Claudel - Louis Massignon*, 83-84. According to Claudel, "tout converti est une espèce de patriarche, un père de tribus comme Abraham et Melchisédech."

⁵⁰ See Paul Nwyia, "Massignon ou une certaine vision de la langue arabe," *Studia Islamica* 50 (1979): esp. 127.

stay and work in their midst. The significance of their hospitality cannot be overstated.⁵¹ Massignon held Hajj 'Ali Alussi, the head of the Alussis, in high regard and considered him as one of his three 'masters'.⁵² He felt indebted to his hosts in many ways, especially because they risked their lives to ensure his safety, especially since his archaeological mission could have been easily perceived as a kind of espionage.⁵³ They saved him, "at their risks and peril", and ensured his safety living in the Arab quarter of Hayderkhaneh in Baghdad. They had also introduced him to the educated class of Muslims in Baghdad, taking care of his safe travel in the desert, and visited and prayed for him when he was hospitalised.⁵⁴ Massignon's choice of al-Ḥallāj for his study, a figure long rejected in Muslim orthodoxy, was in many ways tolerated by the otherwise strictly conservative Alussis who followed the strict Hanbali *mazhab*. In fact, they had also assisted him to get hold of manuscripts on the mystic. This toleration, as some commentators opine, can only be interpreted through the notion of the sacredness of the guest, who must be respected under all circumstances.⁵⁵ This very early experience with Muslims would be paradigmatic for him. Following this, it considerably influenced his reading of the scriptures of Islam (both the Qur'ān and its hadith literature), especially with respect to its associations with

⁵¹ See Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 29.

⁵² Louis Massignon, "Les maîtres qui ont guidé ma vie," in *Louis Massignon et ses contemporains*, ed. Jacques Keryell (Paris: Karthala, 1997), 17-19.

⁵³ Some have argued that Massignon was involved in some kind of espionage for the French government. See Gilles Munier, "Louis Massignon et les dessous de l'orientalisme français," (2009).

⁵⁴ Jacques Keryell, *Louis Massignon la grâce de Bagdad* (Paris: Pierre Téqui, 2010), 126.

⁵⁵ As Massignon understood it, "But I was his guest. He took me as I was and tried to make me reach my destiny." Pierre Roche, *Exposition de l'art du fer forgé, du cuivre, et de l'étain au musée Galliera, mai-septembre 1905, rapport de Roche au nom du jury* (Paris: Librairie-Imprimeries Réunies, 1905). Quoted in Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 30.

Abraham. Not only did the experience in Baghdad underscore for him the sacredness of hospitality, but the potential status of Islam as an Abrahamic religion, as he began to understand it, became a key determinant of his conception of the 'Abrahamic religions' as shall be shown later. He internalised Abraham's experience as both guest and host,⁵⁶ and the idea of sacred hospitality (*l'hospitalité sacrée*) would become a key theme that engaged him throughout his life. As one commentator notes, Massignon acknowledged with deep gratitude the role of his hosts in rediscovering the God of Abraham, and committed himself to their service since.⁵⁷

To further understand Massignon's attitudes towards Islam and Muslim as a Catholic, we need to look to another Catholic figure, Father Charles de Foucauld, for whom Massignon developed a deep respect, and with whom he had substantive correspondence.⁵⁸ In North Africa, Charles de Foucauld served in the French army, and he later became a hermit priest in the Trappist monastery in Tamanrasset. He returned to France in 1886 and converted to Catholicism at the age of 28. He then returned to Algeria where he served as a soldier and

⁵⁶ See Massignon, "Les maîtres qui ont guidé ma vie," 18-19. Massignon's gratitude to his hosts was expressed in a very profound way. "Si je suis redevenu croyant, après cinq années d'incrédulité, c'est à des amis musulmans de Bagdad, les Alûssy, que je le dois. C'est en arabe qu'ils ont parlé de moi à Dieu, en priant, et de Dieu à moi ; c'est en arabe que j'ai pensé et vécu ma conversion, en mai-juin 1908."

⁵⁷ » Dès lors, il s'engage, « par des vœux secrets envers les âmes de ses hôtes musulmans, qui l'ont aidé à retrouver la foi dans le Dieu d'Abraham, en commençant par le plus désespéré, qui lui a si étrangement fait connaître Hallâj ». Jean-François Six, *Le grand rêve de Charles de Foucauld et Louis Massignon* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2008), 29.

⁵⁸ On a brief exposition of Foucauld's relationship with Massignon, see Hugues Didier, "Louis Massignon et Charles de Foucauld," in *Louis Massignon et ses contemporains*, ed. Jacques Keryell (Paris: Karthala, 1997). An extended English version by the same author is his "Louis Massignon and Charles de Foucauld," *ARAM20* (2008). A more detailed work is Six, *Le Grand Rêve*. Massignon had also stated his indebtedness to Foucauld for the latter's sociological approach in studying Islam. See Massignon, "L'honneur des camarades de travail et la parole de vérité," 32.

dedicated his life to the monastery which he founded until he was killed there in December 1916. One of Massignon's earliest works, *Léon l'Africain*, displayed scholarly promise in Foucauld's estimation. But as their correspondences would show, it was the fervent Christian belief in the context of their continued attraction to Islam and commitment to Muslims that united them most. As a scholar markedly observes, "both encountered Islam when they were agnostic and have been marked by it throughout their lives: Islam seduced them at first, after which they detached themselves from it in some way and converted to the Christian faith."⁵⁹ Foucauld was very keen for Massignon to join him in his ascetic life in the deserts of Algeria but Massignon declined as he had decided to build a career as a scholar instead. In spite of this, communication between the two men continued. For example, when Massignon chose to go to Cairo and start a family, Foucauld suggested that Massignon could introduce Jesus to Muslims in a wise and contextual manner.⁶⁰ As Massignon writes to his friend Henri Maspero, he was intending to create a Christian family after much prayer and reflection.⁶¹ When he was mobilized during the First World War, he asked Foucauld if he should be in the front lines. The latter agreed and encouraged Massignon to pursue danger and hardship, in order to be an exemplar of sacrifice

⁵⁹ Jean-François Six, *Itinéraire spirituel de Charles de Foucauld* (Paris: Seuil 1958), 55-8, quoted in Didier, "Louis Massignon and Charles de Foucauld," 346.

⁶⁰ According to Foucauld, where appropriate, Jesus' name need not be mentioned. See Letter cited in Six, *Le Grand Rêve*, 38-39. "Dans vos rapports avec les musulmans, rapprochez-les de JÉSUS : par les moyens les meilleurs – variables selon les circonstances – parfois en ne parlant jamais de Lui mais en vous faisant aimer et estimer d'eux, vous Son serviteur."

⁶¹ "J'ai bien réfléchi, prié, offert à Dieu ma vie : et je crois que c'est sa volonté sainte : qu'il soit béni – confiant en Lui, je vais tâcher de fonder un foyer chrétien." Six, *Cahier de L'Herne: Massignon*, 40.

and devotion.⁶² Massignon's Christian faith was intact, and this can be attributed in large measure to the continuous encouragement and guidance he received from those with whom he kept close contact. In this regard, both Claudel and Foucauld played a significant role not only in the growth of Massignon's faith, but also in inculcating his desire to bring others to Christ.

As the above has shown, Massignon's commitment to his faith post-reconversion is not in doubt. What bothered him more was the fate of the religious 'Other', especially Muslims, not only because he felt perennially indebted to them, but also because they shared religious claims that Christians like Massignon held on to. The question of the relationship between his faith and that of Muslims was thus not purely a scholarly one, but one of personal importance. In 1908, Massignon put together a series of writings that would make up a treatise on the question of the salvific state of Muslims. Originally entitled *Manuel d'apologétique pour les musulmans*, Abbot Poulin, one of his spiritual advisors, later endorsed the work under the title "*méditation sur la vocation donnée à Abraham et au fils de sa servante*".⁶³ When he was invited to teach in Egypt in 1912, he consulted Claudel again. Both his letter and Claudel's response show that they had thought of the opportunity in terms of bringing Muslims closer to Christ. As Massignon mused, "If I accept, I can try to make the young men there think in Arabic about the "great problems" in a different way than Messieurs the missionaries of anarchy who have preceded me. Is my duty

⁶² Letter 79, dated 1 December 1916. "Il ne faut jamais hésiter à demander les postes où le danger, le sacrifice, le dévouement, sont les plus grandes : l'honneur, laissons-le à qui le voudra, mais le danger, la peine, réclamons-les toujours. Chrétiens, nous devons donner l'exemple du sacrifice et du dévouement." See Six, *L'Aventure de l'amour de Dieu* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1993), 214-15.

⁶³ However, Foucauld disagreed and strongly felt that it was from Jesus that everyone has the duty to become Christians. See Six, *Le Grand Rêve*, 105.

there? Pray for me.”⁶⁴ As was customary for Claudel, the opportunity was perceived in providential terms, and he thus encouraged Massignon to accept it.⁶⁵

Massignon’s attachment to Islam and Muslims had also grown at the same time he was probing deeper into Muslim mystical thought. A serious student of Oriental studies, Massignon had a “rage to understand and conquer Islam at all costs”.⁶⁶ This desire led him to spend long bouts of time in the Middle East doing archaeological work and deepening his interest in its language, cultures, and people. It is highly likely that a combination of both (i.e. the exposure to Christian mystical ideas and interest in Islam) that subsequently led him to specialise in Muslim mysticism. Massignon’s major case study with regards to Muslim mysticism was the life of al-Ḥallāj, which was a product of a lifetime worth of study, and would require a separate study of its own. The focus here is to discuss how his interpretations of al-Ḥallāj explicate the nature of his spirituality and his mystical worldview. Although Massignon had begun studying al-Ḥallāj before his arrival in Baghdad in 1908, it was his epiphany there that unleashed a fresh set of meanings on the significance of the saint for his worldview and religious understanding.

⁶⁴ Letter 107, dated 10 August 1912. *Cahier de L’Herne: Massignon*, 40. Translated in Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 75.

⁶⁵ Letter 108, dated 12 August 1912. Millet-Gérard, *Paul Claudel - Louis Massignon*, 229.

⁶⁶ “rage de comprendre et de conquérir à tout prix l’Islam.” Massignon, “Toute une vie,” 128.

2.2.2 AL-HALLĀJ AND MYSTICAL IDEAS

Massignon's views of Islam in relation to Christianity were built, in large measure, on his interpretations of al-Ḥallāj. The figure also holds the key to Massignon's reconversion to Catholicism in the midst of a very welcoming Muslim milieu and in spite of his increasing interest in Islam. His interpretation of al-Ḥallāj convinced him of the truth of the Christian faith. According to Massignon, his reconversion was made possible through the intercessory prayers of others, such as al-Ḥallāj, Huysmans and Foucauld.⁶⁷ Unlike Huysmans and other French Catholic writers of the period who thought of the concept of such prayers purely from within the Christian context,⁶⁸ Massignon had a broader understanding that did not preclude figures from non-Christian traditions.⁶⁹ Having interpreted al-Ḥallāj as a Christic figure, whose death was also almost exclusively translated in Christian terms, his significance for Massignon's reconversion to Christianity becomes paramount.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Massignon had learnt that Huysmans prayed for his reconversion at his deathbed. Whether Massignon understood Huysmans' role correctly, and thereafter, conceived of the notion of substitution properly, is open to debate. See Baldick, "Massignon: Man of Opposites," 36.

⁶⁸ For example, while Jesus was seen by Huysmans as the first in the line of substitutes, Massignon understood Abraham to be the first and Hallāj to be one of those substitutes. See Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 59-60.

⁶⁹ Massignon thought the idea of *khilāfa* in Islam is analogous to the Catholic concept of substitution. In this and many others, Massignon's distinctive reading of history comes to fore. See letter 4, dated 17 October 1908, in Millet-Gérard, *Paul Claudel - Louis Massignon*, 45-47. He had also offered himself as a substitute for the Spanish convert to Islam, Luis de Cuadra, as early as 1909. See Maurice Borrmans, "Première Partie: Aux origines de la Badaliya," in *Badaliya: au nom de l'autre (1947-1962)*, ed. Maurice Borrmans and Françoise Jacquin (Paris: Cerf, 2011), 19-20.

⁷⁰ Letter 1, dated 8 August 1908. Millet-Gérard, *Paul Claudel - Louis Massignon*, 39. "Hallâdj mourut implicitement (et peut-être explicitement) chrétien catholique, unissant à la pratique du sacrifice de soi la croyance dans le sacrifice du Verbe fait chair, homme-Dieu (cela est explicite)."

Al-Ḥallāj is crucial in Massignon's understanding of Islam because the former demonstrates that the mystical union with God, an essentially Christian doctrine, had taken place even within the Muslim tradition.⁷¹ Massignon would be careful to insist that al-Ḥallāj remained a figure within the Muslim tradition and should not be considered, like his 'Abbasid executors would proclaim, as a Muslim heretic. To this end, Massignon uses philological arguments in asserting the rootedness of al-Ḥallāj's mystical practice to the Qur'ānic and Muslim tradition. He argues that "how much the doctrinal presentation of the works of al-Ḥallāj depends on the terminology fixed little by little by his predecessors. Almost all his vocabulary, his principal allegories, his very rule of life, are found in previous Muslim mystics."⁷² Al-Ḥallāj had proclaimed his experience publicly without fear of the stringent repercussions of Muslim law, only because he was ready to bear the consequences of his proclamation to "transform his ordeal into a sacrifice of reparation, offered in love for the community of Islam."⁷³

The significance of al-Ḥallāj in Massignon's measure is perhaps the mystic's greatest sacrifice to save the Muslim community and his passion of love that surrenders in totality to God in prayer and suffering.⁷⁴ In the preface of the

⁷¹ Patrick Laude, *Louis Massignon : The Vow and the Oath* (London: Matheson Monographs, 2011). On his methods in interpreting al-Ḥallāj, see Louis Massignon, "Le martyre de Hallaj à Bagdad," in *OM*, ed. Youakim Moubarac (Liban: Dar Al-Ma'arif, 1963), 273-74.

⁷² Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 114.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁷⁴ "Dans la longue et parfois tragique histoire des vocations mystiques en Islam, on ne trouve pas, après ni avant, d'accents aussi surhumains ; où toute la passion de l'amour se prosterne devant son Dieu personnellement présent, avec vénération et abandon filial. Ils sont, en al Hallāj, les fruits d'une vie libérée de tout par les renoncements et les douleurs, constamment renouvelée en Dieu par la prière pour les âmes des autres, et couronnée par la passion de l'unité de la Communauté islamique, poussée jusqu'au désir (exaucé) de mourir anathème pour son salut." *La passion d'al-Hosayn-Ibn-Mansour Al-Hallaj : Martyr mystique de l'Islam*, vol. 2 (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1922), 531.

second edition of his work on al-Ḥallāj published posthumously in 1975, Massignon characterised the figure as ‘one of the “royal souls” whose sacrificial life transforms human history.’ Al-Ḥallāj therefore stood at the apex of the Muslim *abdāls*, the Abrahamic heirs who intercede on behalf of humanity. It is probably fair to say that he was Massignon's *sufi* syekh. He hauntingly describes this relationship: “Not that the study of his life, which was full and strong, upright and whole, rising and given, has yielded to me the secret of his heart. It is rather he who fathomed mine and who probes it still.”⁷⁵

His idiosyncratic reading of al-Ḥallāj as a Christic Muslim had convinced him of the veracity of the Christian faith without the need to jeopardise his charity towards Islam. For Massignon, al-Ḥallāj is the missing node between Islam and Christianity, and only through figures like him could Islam be brought within the Christian salvific scheme. It is also the Holy Spirit at work to guide figures such as al-Ḥallāj.⁷⁶ Even al-Ḥallāj's teaching to “destroy the Ka'ba of your body that it may resuscitate, created anew”⁷⁷ hauntingly echoes Jesus' words in the Jerusalem temple.⁷⁸ His view was certainly an isolated and controversial one, both in the context of general Christian and Muslim understanding. For example, Paul Claudel felt differently about al-Ḥallāj, expressing to Massignon the complex

⁷⁵ Quoted in Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 112.

⁷⁶ “Mais c'est surtout au-dedans de l'islam lui-même que des grâces éminentes, semées directement par l'Esprit Saint, sont venues germer çà et là ; vocations héroïques, ascétiques et mystiques, vies d'oraisons nocturnes et de jeûnes.” “H.Ismaël,” in *Les trois prières d'Abraham* (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 108.

⁷⁷ Massignon, *Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr*, trans. Herbert Mason, abridged ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 172.

⁷⁸ See for example, Joh. 2:19, Mat. 26:61, and Mark 14:58.

nature of formulating with certainty such theological positions.⁷⁹ As shall be explained below, Massignon's interpretations on this matter were not drawn from the Muslim self-understanding, but rather derived from his own spiritual hermeneutics. Massignon ardently defended his position, citing that al-Ḥallāj should be recognised positively, as he epitomised in Islam the Christian doctrine of the love of God, by pushing the boundaries of his obedience in order to save others, to the extent that he eventually became anathema to Muslim law.⁸⁰ For Massignon, al-Ḥallāj was more Abrahamic than even the great mystic Ibn 'Arabi, whom Massignon opines as not having lived the Abrahamic message of faith by "choosing to substitute a living relationship with God with a static, theoretical, and monistic metaphysics."⁸¹ His studies on Muslim mysticism showed that Massignon interpreted the role of mystics such as al-Ḥallāj, al-Ghazālī, and al-Moḥāsibī within the Abrahamic paradigm. With this, he used mystical thought and figures to argue that Islam has a tradition that goes back to Abraham.

In all these, it must be noted here that Massignon interpreted Muslim mysticism and some of its key figures such as those mentioned above from a peculiar vantage point, one that had been decidedly shaped by his unique Christian worldview and his embrace of its mystical ideas and concepts. He had thus paid little heed to the opinions of Muslim orthodoxy, as clearly shown both

⁷⁹ To Claudel, al-Ḥallāj "is hardly Christian....The sentiment of divine love without Christ and without Christ crucified has inspired many heresies." See Letter 112, dated 29 August 1912. Millet-Gérard, *Paul Claudel - Louis Massignon*, 236. Translated in Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 61.

⁸⁰ "L'ordre (= le commandement de Dieu), c'est l'essence de l'Union." "Il pousse l'esprit d'obéissance jusqu'à souhaiter *d'être anathème de par la loi*, pour sauver les autres.... Cela est tellement inattendu et *chrétien* dans l'Islam qu'il fallait le noter, surtout quand on sait qu'il fonda positivement un ordre, d'ascétisme et de chasteté, « pour obtenir que descende sur (ses membres) l'Esprit Saint dont naquit Jésus fils de Marie". See Letter 112, dated 29 August 1912. Millet-Gérard, *Paul Claudel - Louis Massignon*, 236-41.

⁸¹ Laude, *Pathways to an Inner Islam*, 39.

in his choice of al-Ḥallāj as key figure within the Muslim tradition, as well in his imposition of Christian understanding on Islam. Even his Christian understanding is not without problems, as Claudel's opposition to some of his ideas on al-Ḥallāj made clear. Not unexpectedly, Muslim scholars took issue with his approaches, and Massignon had to respond to this in an elaborate article published in the journal *Politique étrangère* in 1952.⁸²

Nonetheless, his project remains clear: he wanted to bridge Islam and its followers to his Christian faith, and to find a way, even if implicitly, to include them within the schema of Christian redemption. Although the merit of his scholarly approach in studying Muslim mysticism, symbolised by a process of "introspective reconstitution", has been recognised and likened by some to a "Copernican revolution" in Islamic thought and the studies of its religious features,⁸³ its theological implications can be said to be at best highly controversial. Neither Muslim nor Christian theology would be able to entertain such a move, as the orthodoxies of each would find his approach as a transgression of their respective principles. Massignon's approach therefore could only be thought of as a theologoumenon that was uniquely his, but which would find a persuasive expression in his efforts at rapprochement, in particular, the forging of deeper and more meaningful bonds with both Muslims and Jews. The ultimate expression of this is his notion of the 'Abrahamic religions'.

Massignon's absorption of spiritual ideas and notions in his life can be seen in the way he interpreted events in his life as "intersigns" that appeared to

⁸² See Louis Massignon, "L'Occident devant l'orient, primauté d'une solution culturelle," in *EM*, ed. Christian Jambet (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2009).

⁸³ Rocalve, *Louis Massignon et l'Islam*, 99-100.

him as revelations of future directions in his life.⁸⁴ Dates and events were of such importance that he kept self-designed calendars with which he noted the dates of his intercessors and religious events.⁸⁵ Many have also testified to his deep spirituality, such as Annemarie Schimmel, German Orientalist and a speaker at the Eranos Conferences in Ascona, and the philosopher Gabriel Marcel.⁸⁶ All these underscore how deeply a spiritual person Massignon was in his personal life, and the extent to which his spiritual intuitions determine the direction and language of his scholarly works. This could also be seen in the ways in which he sought to bridge between different communities, both in the religious and political realms, as discussed in the next two sections.

2.2.3 RELIGIOUS RAPPROCHEMENT

One of the key areas in which Massignon's theological and spiritual vocabularies were well translated into actual initiatives is Christian-Muslim relations. Hailed as the first of several luminous prophets of Christian-Muslim dialogue,⁸⁷ Massignon's journey in this regard started with a deep desire to understand Muslims firsthand through a process which he hoped would be unadulterated by the trappings of preconceived ideas. Resemblances and commonalities between religions intrigued him, and his works include a great deal of discussion on

⁸⁴ Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 74.

⁸⁵ Massignon prepared two calendars: one lunar-based and the other gregorian-based. Both calendars are appended in Louis Massignon, *Les trois prières d'Abraham* (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 119-22.

⁸⁶ See Hakl, Eranos, 119.

⁸⁷ Maurice Borrmans, *Prophètes du dialogue islamo-chrétien: Louis Massignon, Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, Louis Gardet, Georges C. Anawati* (Paris: Cerf, 2009).

historical, spiritual, and theological commonalities. But before discussing Massignon's contributions and initiatives in this area, it is necessary to outline the theoretical principle which formed the basis for his vision in these domains. For Massignon, this is "the given word" (*parole donnée*).⁸⁸ Thus, "the human word ... is a poignant personal call that removes us from ourselves, from our country, from our parentage, all towards love."⁸⁹ Consequently, unrestricted self-expression is paramount in Massignon's measure. Developing relationships with the 'Other' demands according the "guest" the space and freedom for unrestricted self-expression.

A word is a request for further explanation. And how do we request something that we desire to have but that escapes us - except to become a host to our foreign interlocutor. The 'other' cannot be understood if we simply attach him to us. Instead, we must host him.⁹⁰

There is already an inherent impediment to understanding at the outset, which is the 'foreign' nature of the 'Other' that denotes the presence of a barrier between individuals. This misconstruction of the 'Other' flows from what he calls the problem of annexation or appropriation, a hermeneutical means that readily presents itself to us as we seek to make sense of something new and different around us. Here again, Massignon employs the concept of hospitality, because it reminds us to recognise that the same demands of being a good host is warranted when we relate to the 'Other'. The metaphor of asylum, which he employs, underscores the importance of this attentiveness. It highlights the

⁸⁸ See Edward W. Said, "Islam, Philology, and French Culture: Renan and Massignon," in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London Faber and Faber, 1984), 282-89.

⁸⁹ Cited in Waardenburg, *L'Islam dans le miroir de l'Occident*, 259.

⁹⁰ Cited in Gerard Troupeau, "Louis Massignon et la langue Arabe," in *Louis Massignon et le dialogue des cultures*, ed. Daniel Massignon (Paris: Cerf, 1996), 34.

desperately profound nature of the need of the 'Other' to be properly heard and understood.

Massignon draws on the mystical vocabularies of al-Ḥallāj on this point. He quotes the mystic that "to understand something is not to annex it [to something we have already understood], but to decentralise ourselves and move to the core of the other [that we seek to understand]. He then goes on to explain, "the essence of language is a type of "decentralization". We cannot make ourselves understand [the other] except to enter into the system of the other."⁹¹ He further explains that "language is both a 'pilgrimage' and a 'spiritual displacement', since a language is not elaborated but to get out of oneself in the direction of another: in order to evoke with him an Absentee, the third person ... the Unknown."⁹² This then requires that we live the life of the 'Other' and experience it, and ultimately embrace the demands for justice and fairness of treatment that the 'Other' demands.⁹³ But communicating through words is only part of the whole equation. For Massignon, one also needs the qualities of sympathy, charity and compassion.⁹⁴ If one wishes to consider Massignon as an ecumenist, then he was a spiritual ecumenist, who sought to master the interiority of the 'Other'. For Massignon, once we have 'interiorised' ourselves in

⁹¹ Louis Massignon, "L'involution sémantique du symbole dans les cultures sémitiques," in *EM*, ed. Christian Jambet (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2009), 268.

⁹² Louis Massignon, "Valeur de la parole humaine en tant que témoignage." Translated in Laude, *The Vow and the Oath*, 2.

⁹³ Louis Massignon, "Réponse à un ami musulman," in *EM*, ed. Christian Jambet et. al. (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2009 (1947)), 7.

⁹⁴ As shall be noted in the next chapter in the discussion on Massignon's tractate as a response to a medieval Muslim polemical treatise, Massignon would sympathise with claims of such polemicists and seek to explain why such claims and the fervour with which they were expressed existed in the first place. He would then gently provide counterarguments and highlight the positives of the Muslim worldview where these were present. See pages 142-147 below.

the traditions of the 'Other' that we sought to understand, and once we speak using the same words and concepts, we have truly understood them.

Massignon persuasively articulated the need to not only understand but also accept Muslims as the 'Other', but this he claimed could only be achieved by interiorising oneself in the traditions of the 'Other'. As the preceding section on al-Ḥallāj has shown, this process of interiorisation had only taken place in one aspect of the highly diverse and complex Muslim traditions, i.e. that of the mystical strand, and even so, as informed by the doctrines and life of the tenth-century mystic. It is this overarching theme in both his spiritual and scholarly life that subsequently determined the direction of his ideas. This fact must be duly recognised, so as to aid in a clearer assessment of Massignon's Abrahamic thought.

Massignon's scholarly interest in examining comparable themes between Christianity and Islam could be seen in his studies on the resemblances between the figure of Fatima, the daughter of Muḥammad, in the veneration of the Shi'ites for her, and the Virgin Mary. He saw in both figures the embodiment of the divine. Likewise, he was drawn to the figure of Salman Pak, an Iranian Christian convert to Islam and a close companion of Muḥammad. In the context of Christian-Muslim encounters, Massignon was inspired by the thirteenth-century mystic St. Francis of Assisi (from Damietta Egypt), in large measure because the latter's encounter with Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil resembled that of the Prophet Muḥammad and the Christians of Najran, in which the Christians were challenged to prove the veracity of their creed. Another similar tradition was the

cult of the seven sleepers of Ephesus.⁹⁵ For Massignon, these similarities could only mean that bridges between Christianity and Islam could be built to sustain and maintain dialogue and reconciliation between the two communities.

Massignon had also initiated an annual pilgrimage of both Christians and Muslims to a shrine dedicated to the seven sleepers at Plouaret in northern Brittany, from 1954 until the year of his death in 1962. In these pilgrimages, Christian pilgrims from Brittany were joined by a delegation of Muslims, mostly from Paris, where they read “angelic greetings” written in Arabic, and joined in a procession leading to the fire of joy which marked every “pardon”. The pilgrimage concluded with a meal constituting a lamb slaughtered according to the ritual of Abraham.⁹⁶

An enduring and emotionally evocative initiative of Massignon’s is the *Badaliya* group of common prayer, which he formed in 1913, together with an Egyptian Melkite Christian, Mary Kahil. Thus, instead of missionary work that sought to convert others to Christianity, Massignon believed that he could, through the *Badaliya*, pray for Muslims to receive God’s grace. In the statutes for the group in 1943, he explained his stand that “salvation did not necessarily mean exterior conversion. It is already a great deal to obtain that a larger number belong to the soul of the Church, and live and die in the state of grace.”⁹⁷ In a letter written to Father Jean-Francois Six dated 4 October 1961, Massignon

⁹⁵ Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 142-43. The Qur’ānic story of *ashāb al-kahfis* in Qur’ān 18: 9-26.

⁹⁶ See Herbert Mason’s experience in Herbert Mason, "A Memory of Massignon," *The Muslim World* 57, no. 4 (1967). See also Geneviève Massignon, "The Veneration of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus: A Devotion Common to Muslims and Christians," (1963), www.dcbuck.com/Articles/Pilgrimage/Pilgrimage.html#footnote1.

⁹⁷ Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 135.

explains that the *Badaliya* was founded in the tradition of St. Francis and St. Louis in Damiette, Egypt, with the aim of helping Muslims, who, as descendants of Hagar, are excluded from the promise of the Messiah, to discover Christ in themselves.⁹⁸ Although the group started with only Christian participants, it gradually evolved to include Muslims in prayer. The meetings were held in a church in Cairo known as the St. Mary of Peace, where dialogue between the two faith communities became commonplace.⁹⁹

The idea of *Badaliya* was certainly new to many who were more accustomed to traditional ways of converting Muslims. Some have even doubted its efficacy and objectives.¹⁰⁰ The question that needs reflection here is the intent and legacy of the *Badaliya*. Both the statement in the *Badaliya* statute and his letter to Jean-Francois Six clearly explicate Massignon's vision: to include Muslims in his Catholic salvific model, and to consider the insufficiency of Islam and its theological paradigm as understood by the overwhelming majority of Muslims (with the exception of figures such as al-Ḥallāj) on how they thought they could be saved on the account of their own beliefs. This inadequacy inherent in Islam could however be complemented by the prayer for grace by Christians, through the gatherings of the *Badaliya*. In sum, salvation, for Massignon, remains only through Christ and for those who accept him in their lives. But there is hope for Muslims, as they have come within reach of salvation, and it is with this hope that Massignon put in place the *Badaliya* initiative.

⁹⁸ See Maurice Borrmans and Françoise Jacquin, *Louis Massignon: Badaliya au nom de l'autre (1947-1962)* (Paris: CERF, 2011), 43.

⁹⁹ On a recount of the positive experience of attending the *Badaliya* meeting, see Landrien, "Some Aspects of the Meaning of Abraham in the Life, Works and Thought of Louis Massignon," 5-6.

¹⁰⁰ Laude, *Pathways to an Inner Islam*, 129.

Through the *Badaliya*, Massignon disputed the Muslim self-understanding, that salvation for the faith is self-adequate and complete, i.e. that Muslims, through living their own faith as determined by their sources, consider themselves saved. The departure of this stance from Massignon's own interpretations was not duly recognised in his works. In the light of this, the legacy of *Badaliya* as a platform for dialogue and rapprochement may remain relevant, but its theological undertones remain highly problematic.

In the context of world ecumenism, Massignon had also participated in the "World Congress of Faiths". The Congress was convened in London in July 1936, with the focus on "Fellowship through Religion", and saw eminent scholars (such as translator of the Qur'ān into English Abdullah Yusuf Ali, philosopher Nicolas Berdiaeff, Oxford scholar of religion Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, S N Das Gupta, President of the Hebrew University Judah Magnes, Rector of Al-Azhar University and prominent exegete Mohammed Mustapha Al-Maraghi) representing different faiths delivering speeches which beseeched greater unity amongst followers of the various religions amidst global instability and violence.¹⁰¹ In his article written for the conference, Massignon cited a story from Abu al-Faraj Al-Asfahani's famous *Kitab al-Aghani* (Book of Songs) of two friends (a Christian and a Muslim) who converted into the religion of the other in the hope of remaining united in the next world, and then questioned if this was indeed "true fellowship".¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Marcus Braybrooke, *A Wider Vision : A History of the World Congress of Faiths* (Oxford: One World, 1996).

¹⁰² Louis Massignon, "Tu Vertex et Apex," in *OM*, ed. Youakim Moubarac (Liban: Dar Al-Ma'arif, 1963), 787.

Massignon had also struck deep friendships with several Jewish scholars, key among whom were the American rabbi and founder and president of the Hebrew University, Judah Magnes,¹⁰³ and the philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965). With the latter, Massignon had a particularly long correspondence that spanned a decade (from 1951 to 1961). In his letters, Massignon often invokes the commonality between Jews and Christians in their belief in the God of Abraham as a sign of fraternity. In his first letter to Buber, Massignon suggests that the journal *Ihud* (March 1953 edition) be published as it could, in his opinion, contribute towards reconciliation between the Arabs and Israelis, without which the state of Israel would not be sustainable.¹⁰⁴ He wrote to Buber in the spirit of Christian-Jewish fellowship and he found strength to deal with the problems in the Middle East through the ritual of common fasting with Buber and Jews.¹⁰⁵ Buber acceded to Massignon's request for a common fast on Yom Kippour (19 September 1953) and echoed the latter's aim of praying for the forgiveness of the common faults of humankind. The *Badaliya* had also organised

¹⁰³ Massignon appeared to have a deep respect for Judah Magnes. He admired the latter's efforts to "reclaim equality for Islam and the Arabs". Upon hearing the death of Judah Magnes, Massignon described him as "a soul of high witness of Israel is now in the bosom of Abraham". See "La mort de Judah Leib Magnes," in *OM*, ed. Youakim Moubarac (Liban: Dar Al-Ma'arif, 1963; reprint, 1948).

¹⁰⁴ "... [E]t pour préparer une réconciliation des Arabes avec Israël : réconciliation sans laquelle l'Etat Israëli ne peut pas subsister". "Letter to Martin Buber 21 April 1953," in *Martin Buber Archives*, ed. National Library of Jerusalem (National Library of Jerusalem, 1953).

¹⁰⁵ "Je voudrais jeûner avec vous pour Israël, à la manière hébraïque (la même, je crois, quel' islamique, que nous avons suivie les 12 juin, 14 août, et 4 sept.) durant le mois qui vient : quel jour tombe en Octobre le Yôm Kippour cette année? Répondez-moi. Pour l'amour d'Israël." "Letter to Martin Buber."

communal fasting for Muslims, Christians, and Jews, on several days in 1953 together with the followers of Judah Magnes and others.¹⁰⁶

2.2.4 POLITICAL RAPPROCHEMENT

The *Badaliya* and various other initiatives showed how Massignon sought to forge a paradigm of theological inclusivity, albeit a highly problematic one, but he remained consistent in his concern for Muslims, as can be seen in his political initiatives. In this regard, he translated this concern through the Abrahamic language of hospitality, which he deemed imperative to be honoured by western powers for whom he worked.¹⁰⁷ Soon after the First World War in which Massignon served in combat,¹⁰⁸ he was inducted into the workings of the Quai d'Orsay (the headquarters of the French foreign service) on Middle Eastern affairs centering on the thorny and highly complex issue of Palestine and the establishment of the Jewish state.¹⁰⁹ He had contributed to the Faizal-Weizmann Agreement drawn up in January 1919, and served as an adjunct to the Sykes-

¹⁰⁶ Some of the days of fasting, such as on 12 June, coincided with the final day of Ramadan, and 19 September with Muslim fasting on the day of *'asyoura* and the Jewish *yawm kippour*. The fasts were held to both counter the repressive colonial policies against North African Muslims, and in the case of Palestine, among those who wanted a reconciliation and equal rights for both Jews and Arabs and for refugees to be able to return to their homes. See Massignon, "La signification spirituelle du dernier pèlerinage de Gandhi," 353.

¹⁰⁷ Louis Massignon, "Colloque universitaire du 2 juin 1957 sur le problème algérien," in *Opera Minora*, ed. Youakim Moubarac (Liban: Dar Al-Ma'arif, 1963).

¹⁰⁸ Massignon was awarded the Croix de Guerre for this involvement and bravery in the frontline.

¹⁰⁹ On Massignon and the Palestinian issue, see Agathe Mayeres, "Massignon and Zionism," *Bulletin du Centre de recherche français à Jérusalem* 20 (2009); Jean Moncelon, "Louis Massignon et la Palestine," *Le cahiers d'orient et d'occident*, 2006.

Picot mission,¹¹⁰ in which he met the enigmatic Lawrence of Arabia.¹¹¹ Through this, Massignon witnessed in quick succession the hopes of Prince Faisal (the son of King Husayn of Mecca) for an Arab independence and the subsequent agony of failure, due in the main to the Balfour Declaration. With the imminent establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, which the Declaration permitted, Massignon saw the failure from the perspective of a betrayal of Arab hospitality.¹¹² In his diplomatic involvements, Massignon advocated several suggestions to the French government. In essence, viewing the issue of the Arabs and their rights under French guidance from the perspective of honouring the former's hospitality, France must therefore respect the unity of the Arab world and honour their culture and language. The Palestinian problem, for Massignon, must be treated as a religious and humanitarian problem. Groups that seek to enter Palestine must also only be limited to those who are true seekers of the Holy Land.

His political writings, wide ranging and penetrating, deserve a study of its own.¹¹³ It suffices to note here of his deep commitment to find long-lasting solutions to the political problems of his days. In 1921, at the Société de sociologie de Paris, he spoke on the question of Zionism and Islam. Massignon

¹¹⁰ See his discussion of this in Massignon, "In Memoriam : Sir Mark Sykes - Remarks about the Present Disruption of British Policy in the Near East."

¹¹¹ "Mes rapports avec Lawrence en 1917," in *OM*, ed. Youakim Moubarac (Liban: Dar Al-Ma'arif).

¹¹² "In November it was the Balfour Declaration (Zionism) that wiped out the promises he had made to the Arab nationalists about Palestine, and then when we arrived in Syria, the gradual implementation of the Sykes-Picot agreement, which until the last moment he had hoped would be rejected." Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 102.

¹¹³ Some of his key writings include the following: Massignon, "Mes rapports avec Lawrence en 1917."; "L'Occident devant l'orient, primauté d'une solution culturelle."; "Le probleme des refugies et son incidence sur le Proche-Orient," in *Opera Minora*, ed. Youakim Moubarac (Liban: Dar Al-Ma'arif, 1949; reprint, 1963).

knew the Zionist Aaron Aaronsohn,¹¹⁴ and this acquaintance could have contributed towards his sympathetic stand on the Zionist vision. Yet, he had also, at the same time, expressed a dream of reconciliation from the perspective of hospitality. As he puts it emotively, "Our entrance into Jerusalem was done under the sign of desecration."¹¹⁵ Massignon's position on the matter was similar to that of Judah Magnes, whom he described as "the conscience of Israel."¹¹⁶ By 1949, Massignon's views had shifted fundamentally, precipitated by the Arab-Israeli war of 1948 and the explosion in the number of Palestinian refugees. Then, he strongly argued in favour of the right of Muslims to the Holy Land.¹¹⁷ An interesting conversation between Massignon and Jacques Berque explains Massignon's stance on the matter.¹¹⁸ He expressed his grief to Buber when news

¹¹⁴ "Indeed, I knew Aaronsohn (...) [H]e sacrificed a lot for this [meaning, to work in agriculture], and he introduced me to people around him who were doing likewise. I visited a colony where I saw Jews who had sacrificed a future in the liberal professions in order to work on the land. Working the land is the foundation stone. If Jews are prepared to devote themselves to working on the land, Zionism will be established. I hope we will come to that." Lecture on Zionism and Islam at the Paris Sociological Society, quoted and translated in Mayeres, "Massignon and Zionism," 3.

¹¹⁵ "Son pays l'avait chargé de tromper son Hôte, et Lawrence ressentait le sacrilège commis contre la Parole donnée à un Arabe, comme je devais le ressentir à mon tour lors de Meïsseloun. Notre entrée dans la Ville Sainte s'était faite sous le signe de la désécration." See Massignon, "Mes rapports avec Lawrence en 1917," 427.

¹¹⁶ Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 171-72; Harpigny, *Islam et Christianisme selon Louis Massignon*, 101-02.

¹¹⁷ Louis Massignon, "Ce qu'est la terre sainte pour les communautés humaines qui demandent justice," in *EM*, ed. Christian Jambet et. al. (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2009).

¹¹⁸ "Je pense que, pour le problème de l'avenir des Arabes, il faut le situer dans le sémitisme. Je pense que, au fond même des difficultés des Arabes, il y a cette difficulté dramatique, cette haine fratricide entre Israël et Ismaël. Je pense qu'elle doit être surmontée." Berque replied "Seulement, croyez-vous que le débat dans lequel plongent à la fois les Juifs et les Arabes se réduise à ce dialogue et ne soit pas emporté dans un phénomène plus vaste, que j'appellerai la variation anthropologique du monde? La civilisation technique n'est pas seulement la résultante d'un dialogue entre Israël et Ismaël, mais aussi une grande phase de l'humanité, phase dont les Occidentaux ont pris l'initiative. Aux Juifs comme aux Arabes, cette variation anthropologique s'impose pareillement, bien que, je le reconnais, ils semblent jusqu'ici y avoir réagi diversement." "Dialogue sur "les Arabes"," ed. Christian Jambet et. al. (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2009), 681.

came of the desecration of Nazareth with the attacks on civilians by the Israeli police.¹¹⁹

The political situation in North Africa had also intensely occupied Massignon's mind and time. Deeply concerned with French colonial policies that concern the situation in Morocco and Algeria, he founded the Comité chrétien d'Entente France-Islam in 1947, together with Jean Scelles and André de Peretti. As the group manifesto makes clear, the aim for the group of French Christians was "to be the first to bear witness: to commit ourselves to work for loyal civic and social understanding with the Muslims: for our common destiny."¹²⁰ He had also written to Martin Buber about the goal of the group to pressure the French government to make "honourable amends" to the injustices done towards the North Africans.¹²¹ Although he was already aware of the Indian nationalist Gandhi's *satyagraha* (philosophy of non-violent resistance) in the early 1920s, the real impact of such an approach would only come to fruition with the political crises afflicting the North Africans.

Transmitting his political ideas through the language of hospitality, Massignon hoped for better relations between the Christian West and the Muslim states in North Africa and the Middle East. His Abrahamic worldview had therefore become further entrenched in these realms, guided by his spiritual

¹¹⁹ Louis Massignon, "Letter to Martin Buber," in *Martin Buber Archives* (National Library of Jerusalem, 1954).

¹²⁰ Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 162.

¹²¹ "Nous avons fondé un comité "France-Maghreb" pour essayer de forcer le gouvernement à faire amende honorable. Mais il a lié partie avec de véritables criminels, des esclavagistes, marchands de chair humaine pour le compte des Américains d'Eisenhower (cheptel militaires "berbères"; prostituées enfermées (la France est la seule à n'avoir pas encore signé l'accord international de 1949 interdisant la traite des êtres humains); tortures et exécutions arbitraires, depuis Tunis jusqu'à Casa." Louis Massignon, "Letter to Martin Buber 8 September 1953," in *Martin Buber Archives* (National Library of Jerusalem, 1953).

intuitions. In a like manner, Massignon's intellectual world was formed by an amalgam of spiritual and scholarly ideas, and his Abrahamic thought guided his interests and scholarly activities, as the next section shall discuss.

2.3 INTELLECTUAL WORLD

That Massignon was a key Orientalist with significant contributions in Islamic studies in the twentieth century is well established.¹²² Edward Said, in his classical work *Orientalism*, plots the changing nature of Orientalist discourse in the interwar period, and points to the works and thought of Hamilton Gibb and Massignon as exemplars of this new trend "to understand culture *as a whole*, antipositivistically, intuitively, sympathetically."¹²³ Their works and thought thus took place within the broader "cultural self-definition that transcended the provincial and the xenophobic" in the interwar period.¹²⁴ As Said observes, Massignon's vocation as a philologist who produced highly technical studies of Muslim mystical vocabulary was thus a part of the project of Curtius, Vossler, Auerbach, Spitzer, Guldoff, Hofmannsthal.¹²⁵

Yet, there remains some ambivalence as to what one ought to make of Massignon's intellectual career. Said surmises that Massignon was one of French Orientalists who positioned themselves on a high vantage point to observe

¹²² Jacques Waardenburg situates Massignon within French Orientalism in the line of scholars such as Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy and his students, A. P. Caussin de Perceval, E. Quatremère, J. Reinaud, J. H. Garcin de Tassy, Ernest Renan, C. Defrémery, A. Barbier de Meynard, Hartwig Derenbourg and A. le Chatelier. See Waardenburg, *L'Islam dans le miroir de l'Occident*, 140.

¹²³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978; repr., 2003), 258.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 257.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 258.

Muslim cultures. This did not only create distance but placed Islam in opposition to Western cultures and religions. Said remarks further: "Given its special relationship to both Christianity and Judaism, Islam remained forever the Orientalist's idea (or type) of *original* cultural effrontery, aggravated naturally by the fear that Islamic civilization originally (as well as contemporaneously) continued to stand somehow opposed to the Christian West."¹²⁶ Said raises Massignon's juxtaposition of the Orientalist methods (as representing modernity) and the ancient traditions, "the peculiar asymmetry" that the former finds troubling.¹²⁷ Thinking from the Semitic perspective (and situating the Oriental within it) meant "[assigning] the Islamic Orient to an essentially ancient time and the West to modernity."¹²⁸ Further to this, Said somewhat essentialises Massignon's thought as simply being a refinement and repetition of his predecessors among French Orientalists.¹²⁹

Was this, however, the only way of interpreting the project which Massignon pursued? To have a proper assessment of Massignon's scholarly interest and accomplishments, and to ascertain any ideology that has driven his works, one needs to carefully trace his career and situate his works in their appropriate contexts. As such, in this section, I discuss Massignon's scholarly involvements and career, with the aim of showing the character of his intellectual involvements that underscore his spiritual bent in general. This section will also discuss both the continuity and discontinuity of his works with previous scholarship.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 260.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 269.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 270.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 271.

As a bright young man who grew up in an era of French imperialism in the Orient, Massignon's interest in this area started as early as 1893, when as a *lycéen* pursuing the baccalaureate at the Lycee Montaigne and later at the Louis-le-Grand, he became close friends with Henri Maspero, the son of the renowned Egyptologist Gaston Maspero. Henri, who later became a Sinologist, was instrumental in instilling Massignon's curiosity in the Arab world.¹³⁰ Massignon spent a considerable amount of time in Gaston Maspero's library, reading a variety of literature related to Oriental studies. A broad range of subjects attracted both these prodigious young men. As the correspondences between Massignon and Henri would show, they discussed many subjects such as Greek and classical literature, mathematics, history and archaeology, science, physiology, language, and politics. His letter to Henri Maspero in February 1901 further underscores this interest in Oriental studies.¹³¹

In his late teens, Massignon developed a serious interest in languages and their structures. Massignon and Henri also shared an interest in the study of religions. Together, they questioned conventional methods in the study of non-western religions, especially those adopted by missionaries. For both Henri and Massignon, the less-studied esoteric aspects of religious practice are equally central to a proper understanding of such religions. Maspero went on to become an authority on modern Chinese folk religion and Taoism, despite showing a similar early interest in the Middle East.¹³²

¹³⁰ When Henri died in 1945, Massignon wrote "A l'ami qui m'a fait, le premier, penser à l'Egypte at au "Livre" de ses Morts. Henri Maspero, mort à Buchenwald le 17-3-1945." Quoted in Destremau and Moncelon, *Louis Massignon*, 19.

¹³¹ Cited and translated in Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 5.

¹³² In 1904, he studied the financial system of ancient Egypt. See "Henri Maspero," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade et. al. (New York: Macmillan, 1987).

Massignon's interest in the Arab world brought him into intimate contact with the region and its culture. He first visited the region on a trip to Algiers in 1901. In one of his travels to Morocco, he encountered problems because of an apparent lack of Arabic, and thus decided to master the Arabic language thoroughly.¹³³ His first full-fledged study related to the region was his *mémoire* on Leo Africanus, which he wrote for his *Diplome d'études supérieures* with the guidance of French specialists of North Africa such as Hartwig Derenbourg and Alfred Le Chatelier in Paris, and Rene Basset, Edmond Doutte and William Marcais in Algiers.¹³⁴ His *mémoire* was a reassessment of a sixteenth-century work on the geography of Morocco, in which he compared Leo Africanus' observations with his own as he travelled there in 1904. In this work, Massignon had also delved into other aspects of the study of Muslim lands, such as on its religion, cultures, politics and economy. This was presented in the fourteenth international congress of Orientalists in April 1905 in Algiers, and published in 1906 under the title *Tableau géographique du Maroc dans les quinze premières années du xvie siècle, d'après Léon l'Africain*. This work foretold Massignon's profound interest with the cultures of the Arab world, which, in turn, introduced him to several of its most illustrious and controversial figures, one of whom was al-Ḥallāj. Massignon then earned a *diplome* in classical and spoken Arabic in February 1906 at the École Nationale des Langues Orientales Vivantes. In 1907, he studied philosophy at the University of Al-Azhar, becoming the second known Westerner after Goldziher in 1873 to be allowed to put on the customary Al-

¹³³ Massignon, "Toute une vie," 66.

¹³⁴ Destremau and Moncelon, *Louis Massignon*, 37.

Azhar dress.¹³⁵ In 1933, King Fuad of Egypt appointed Massignon, together with four other European Orientalists, including Sir Hamilton Gibb, as a member of the Royal Academy of the Arabic Language.¹³⁶ As noted above, Massignon's passion for Arabic grew hand in hand with his desire to discover the Orient, especially the Arab world. Through his research on the language, especially in the context of Muslim mysticism, Massignon was convinced that it was a key Semitic language and was a medium through which the experience of God could be effectively expressed. As his reconversion recounted above shows, Arabic held a special personal significance for Massignon largely because it was in Arabic that he rediscovered God.¹³⁷ His study of Arabic as Islam's liturgical language had also made him into what he describes as 'an "interiorized" Islamicist'.¹³⁸ Massignon goes so far as to suggest to Claudel in 1908 that it would be his service to God through the Arabic language that would ultimately earn him God's pleasure.¹³⁹

This devotion to the Arabic language and culture distinguished him from the bulk of French Orientalists, some of whom were his teachers. French imperial culture would dictate much of what and how the Arab world and Islam would be

¹³⁵ Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 66.

¹³⁶ Rached Hamzaoui, *L'Académie de langue arabe du Caire: histoire et oeuvre* (Tunis: Publications de l'Université de Tunis, 1975), 104, cited in *ibid.*, 130.

¹³⁷ Massignon was also reported to have said "Moi-même, je l'aime parce qu'elle m'a ramené au Christ." Quoted in Keryell, *Louis Massignon la grâce de Bagdad*, 117.

¹³⁸ "[E]n 1908, j'étais devenu, à travers l'apprentissage de l'arabe, langue liturgique de l'Islam, un islamisant « intérieuriste », converti au christianisme par le témoignage de Dieu qu'implique la foi musulmane... » Massignon, "Foucauld au désert devant le Dieu d'Abraham, Agar et Ismaël," 107.

¹³⁹ « C'est en arabe, sans doute, qu'il lui plaît que je le serve un jour... » Letter 54, dated 28 February 1911. See Millet-Gérard, *Paul Claudel - Louis Massignon*, 126.

studied, as represented in part by the works of the Alfred le Chatelier.¹⁴⁰ For Massignon, this approach would however “violate the virginal point of Muslims.”¹⁴¹ Sharing with Foucauld a deep sense of gratitude to Muslim and Arab hospitality, a divine quality that led him towards a deeper appreciation of their peoples and cultures, Massignon made it plain his devotion to studies on Islam and Muslims was “to give more to Muslim souls, make the subject of my courses converge with my prayer for them, go every year at any price to their country, offer more and more of my life for them.”¹⁴²

In his philological studies, Massignon aimed at identifying the fundamental characteristics of a certain language that mark their originality and set them apart from others.¹⁴³ By systematically comparing the structures of Arabic with those of other Semitic languages such as Hebrew and Aramaic to those of the Indo-European languages, Massignon found Arabic’s originality in three areas: phonetics, syntax, and lexical. In this regard, Massignon adopted, developed, and reacted to prevailing Orientalist works in the field. For example, he rejected the theories of Comte de Gobineau and Ernest Renan of the non-originality of Islam's mystical tradition as Semites because, according to these scholars, there is proof of borrowing in its vocabulary. On the contrary, Massignon argues that Arabic is a language highly appropriate for mystical

¹⁴⁰ Massignon would soon replace le Chatelier at the Collège de France as holder of the Chair of Muslim sociology when the latter vacated it in 1926.

¹⁴¹ Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 110. See also Massignon, "Toute une vie," 127.

¹⁴² Cited and translated in Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 121.

¹⁴³ For example, he says “J’ai essayé de définir l’originalité foncière des autres groupes de langues en dehors du nôtre, et de dessiner, en particulier, le profil d’indentation, le galbe caractéristique de l’outil de travail intellectuel, tel que se l’est forgé une langue sémitique comme l’arabe.” Quoted in Troupeau, "Louis Massignon et la langue Arabe," 35.

experience and encounter with God. Following Goldziher in the latter's refutation of Renan's theory, Massignon argued against the incapacity of the Semites in the arts and sciences. His spiritual approach in his studies extended to the field of Muslim sociology, which he modelled after the approaches of the ascetic Foucauld.¹⁴⁴ His articles on the subject include discussions on the archaeology and use of sacred space in Al-Okhaider (written in 1909), Baghdad (written in 1911), the subject of Muslim *awqāf* (written in 1951),¹⁴⁵ and the City of the Dead in Cairo (written in 1958).

Massignon was well-connected with key Orientalists of his time, being an avid participant of the International Orientalist Congresses from 1905 to 1959. Those of considerable influence in the formation of his thought include the Jewish scholar Hartwig Derenbourg (1844-1908), chair of Islamic studies at the

¹⁴⁴ Massignon explains the ways in which he connected with Foucauld in several articles. For example, he notes: "I needed [Foucauld] to communicate to me, by spiritual contact and in very simple words, conversations and letters, his experiential initiation into the true understanding of the human condition, his experiential science of compassion which then bound him to devote himself to the most abandoned people." "Toute une vie," 126. On adopting some of Foucauld's sociological studies of Muslim societies, he writes: "I owe a debt to Charles de Foucauld, for having laid out methods of sociological research on Islam, through many "explorations" and experiences of everyday life in Muslim countries. They have guided me throughout more than thirty years of teaching at the College de France: beginning with the internal structure of the corporate links between the groups of craftsmen in Fez and the rest of Morocco, and culminating in the discovery of the permanent social value of the only Semitic language of the Qur'an, whose adaption to modern life I have studied since 1933." Quoted and translated in Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 85.

¹⁴⁵ Unlike any studies on Muslim waqf which focusses on the technicalities and legalities as a religiously sanctioned financial instrument, Massignon notes its spiritual character. "[The essential role of the awqaf is to] perpetuate the community in time and space, since they allow the maximal extension of the Hijra, from the hegira of the voluntary expatriated, of those displaced for religious reasons, to places where the science of their common faith can be renewed: *fi sabil Allah*." Louis Massignon, "Documents sur plusieurs waqfs musulmans," cited and translated in Laude, *The Vow and the Oath*, 9.

École des langues orientales in 1885,¹⁴⁶ Ignaz Goldziher, and Snouck Hurgronje. Goldziher, whom he first met in the Orientalist congress in Algiers in 1905, had recommended for him to teach Muslim philosophical language at the Egyptian University in Cairo. On 15 August 1908, he attended the Orientalist Congress in Copenhagen, and had the two leading figures on Islamic studies, Goldziher and Hurgronje, read and discuss his thesis on al-Ḥallāj. It is in recognition of Goldziher's impact on Massignon that he wrote a considerably detailed commemorative piece on Goldziher in 1922¹⁴⁷ as a biographical introduction to Bernard Heller's bibliographical study of Goldziher's works. Massignon acknowledges the very vast and complex influence Goldziher had on scholars of Islamic studies, not only through his works, but also through his correspondences.¹⁴⁸ One should also note that Massignon, being a man of immense correspondence, may have taken after Goldziher in this regard.¹⁴⁹ Hurgronje had also taken a keen interest in Massignon's works and thought, as

¹⁴⁶ Massignon dedicated his *thèse complémentaire* to Derenbourg's memory. As already noted earlier in the thesis, it was Derenbourg who tutored Massignon in reading Muslim mystical texts in 1907.

¹⁴⁷ Subsequently reprinted in 1927 and 1969. According to Robert Simon, Massignon's piece is one the three most important on Goldziher. The other two are by C. H. Becker (1922) and V. V. Bartold (1922). See Simon, *Ignac Goldziher*, 159.

¹⁴⁸ See Louis Massignon, "In Memoriam: Ignace Goldziher," in *Bibliographie des Oeuvres de Ignace Goldziher*, ed. Bernard Heller (Paris: Impr. Nationale, 1927). As one of Goldziher's students would recall, Goldziher's idea of scholarship was unconventional. For him, it would include correspondences and attendance at the Orientalists' congresses. Goldziher's advice to one of his students: "Two things I enjoin on you if you want to prosper in life: answer every letter or card you receive, even if your answer be negative; and take part in the Orientalists' congresses with lectures. This is as important as literary work." Thus, for the likes of Goldziher, "letter writing was a true need, ... [in which] the objectivity of scholarly treatises mingled with the almost confusing subjectivity of personal confession." See J. de Somogyi, My reminiscences of Ignace Goldziher, *Muslim World*, LI, 1961, 9., quoted in Simon, *Ignac Goldziher*, 159.

¹⁴⁹ Which does not come as a surprise, as he considered Goldziher one of his most important teachers. Massignon, "Les maîtres qui ont guidé ma vie."

seen in his correspondences to another Orientalist Theodor Nöldeke.¹⁵⁰ Their intellectual partnership was evident,¹⁵¹ and Hurgronje recognised Massignon's contributions in the study of Muslim mysticism, although he found the latter's ideas difficult to accept on a whole.¹⁵² Massignon, on his part, was very respectful of Hurgronje, and addressed the latter as his "well-respected teacher" in his letters.¹⁵³ He had also consulted Hurgronje on some of his writings, and acknowledged both Hurgronje's guidance,¹⁵⁴ as well as his hospitality which Massignon received in his visit to Leiden.¹⁵⁵ Massignon had also critically

¹⁵⁰ See letter 168, 14 August 1921, in C. Snouck Hurgronje, *Orientalism and Islam : The Letters of C. Snouck Hurgronje to Th. Nöldeke* (Leiden: P.Sj.van Koningsveld, 1985), 291. letter 182, 21 Aug. 1923, in *ibid.*, 313.

¹⁵¹ Letter 138, dated 14 July 1916, in *ibid.*, 244; letter 197, 22 December 1924, in *ibid.*, 334.

¹⁵² "... I know well the author [huge work on al-Ḥallāj] and appreciate his work. Although the subject interests me, it is almost indigestible because of its heaviness." Letter 173, dated 24 November 1922 *ibid.*, 300. "In the context of mysticism, Massignon is at the moment definitely the best [scholar] in mystical literature, and he wants to explain *tasawwuf* [Muslim mysticism] entirely from within Arabian Islam, though he admits that this was a kind of Arabized Christianity itself, and that later, all kinds of foreign influences had been worked into it. Massignon has strong arguments for his position, but on the whole, I cannot agree with him." See Letter 199, dated 2 July, 1925, in *ibid.*, 338.

¹⁵³ In his letters, Massignon addresses Hurgronje as "Cher Maître". See Louis Massignon, "Letter to Snouck C. Hurgronje 5 August 1912," in *Brieven van Louis Fernand Jules Massignon (1883-1962) aan Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936)*, ed. University of Leiden (Leiden University Library, 1912); "Letter to Snouck C. Hurgronje 10 August 1912," in *Brieven van Louis Fernand Jules Massignon (1883-1962) aan Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936)*, ed. University of Leiden (Leiden University Library, 1912); "Letter to Snouck C. Hurgronje," in *Brieven van Louis Fernand Jules Massignon (1883-1962) aan Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936)*, ed. University of Leiden (Leiden University Library, 1912); "Letter to Snouck C. Hurgronje 22 September 1912," in *Brieven van Louis Fernand Jules Massignon (1883-1962) aan Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936)*, ed. University of Leiden (Leiden University Library, 1912).

¹⁵⁴ "Letter to Snouck C. Hurgronje 5 August 1912.". He had also written to Hurgronje to present a paper at the International Congress of the History of Religions in Leiden under the title "De l'influence du soufisme sur le développement de la théologie morale islamique avant le IV^{ème} siècle de l'hégire." See "Letter to Snouck C. Hurgronje 10 August 1912."

¹⁵⁵ In his letter, he expressed his gratitude for Hurgronje's warm reception of his stay in Leiden, where he was seated by Hurgronje in the same table with the latter's close circle of friends, despite his junior status as a scholar in the field. He had also extended an

engaged with Asin Palacios, a Spanish scholar, on the subject of comparative mysticism.¹⁵⁶

His intellectual influence transcended state boundaries. In Egypt, he taught a course in the history of Arabic philosophical language (entitled in the original Arabic as *al-muḥādhārāt fī tārikh al-iṣṭilāhāt al-falsafīyya al-‘arabiyya*) at the University of Egypt (from 25 November 1912 to 24 April 1913). According to one of Massignon’s students, Ibrāhīm Madkūr, those who attended the courses included key intellectuals of the Al-Nahda (Egyptian renaissance) movement such as Taha Hussein, Mansur Fahmi and Ali Al-Inani.¹⁵⁷ As the editor of the published lectures notes, Massignon had the onerous task of not only comparing and combining Arabic and western philosophical language, but also introducing the study of philosophy to Arab students.

In Paris, Massignon mentored many students and wrote prefaces on their respective works. These include subjects such as Qur’ānic linguistics (the function of Qur’ānic metaphors) by T. Sabbagh,¹⁵⁸ Muslim philosophy (the study

invitation to Hurgronje to visit him in Paris. See "Letter to Snouck C. Hurgronje 22 September 1912."

¹⁵⁶ For example, see his responses to Asin Palacios’ study on Dante in Louis Massignon, "Les recherches d’Asin Palacios sur Dante: Le problème des influences musulmanes sur la chrétienté médiévale et les lois de l’imitation littéraire," in *EM*, ed. Christian Jambet et. al. (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2009).

¹⁵⁷ Ibrāhīm Madkūr, "Foreword," in Louis Massignon, *Muḥādhārāt fī tārikh al-iṣṭilāhāt al-falsafīyya al-‘arabiyya* (Cairo: Institut Francais d’Archaeologie orientale du Caire, 1984).

¹⁵⁸ T. Sabbagh, *La métaphore dans le Coran* (Paris: Librairie d’Amérique et d’Orient, 1943). Sabbagh appears influenced by Massignon’s general message of rapprochement, dedicating his work to his fellow citizens “who practice and preach fraternal unity of the compatriots of all religions.” Sabbagh writes: “A ceux de mes Concitoyens qui, les premiers, ont pratiqué et prêché l’Union fraternelle des Compatriotes de toutes Confessions, unique voie de salut pour le Pays, je dédie ce livre.” Massignon points, in his preface, to the Royal Academy of the Arabic Language in Cairo, of which he was a member, and the discussions in 1934 on “tadmin”, on the legitimacy of using a word in a different way from its common daily meaning, and its Qur’ānic meaning.

of Al-Farābī) by Ibrāhīm Madkūr,¹⁵⁹ Islamic law by Muḥammad Ma'rūf Dawālibī,¹⁶⁰ the philosophical system and mysticism of Ibn 'Arabi by Mehmet Ali Ayni¹⁶¹ and Hachem Hikmat,¹⁶² politics by Francois Nourissier,¹⁶³ theology by Robert Chidiac,¹⁶⁴ Georges Anawati and Louis Gardet,¹⁶⁵ writing on the historical development of kalam, sociology and history by Jeanne Cuisinnier,¹⁶⁶ and Vasilii Petrovich Nikitin.¹⁶⁷ In 1926, Massignon wrote to Dr. Jacobson of the Hebrew

¹⁵⁹ Ibrahim Madkour, *La place d'al Fārābī dans l'école philosophique musulmane* (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1934). In his preface, Massignon points to the important method of Madkur, which combines careful Arabic philological background with western thought and methods. Madkur refers to Massignon as "the great Arabist scholar" (le grand savant arabisant) on several occasions. See *ibid.*, fn.7, 101. He refers to Massignon's *La Passion* in discussing some terms (such as "moi" and "Toi") in the Hallagian sense in *ibid.*, 186.

¹⁶⁰ Muhammad Ma'ruf Dawalibi, "La jurisprudence dans le droit islamique" (Thèse de doctorat, Université de Paris, 1941).

¹⁶¹ Mehemed-Ali-Ainî, *La quintessence de la philosophie de Ibn-i-Arabî*, trans. Ahmed Réchid (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1926). Massignon's preface here appears more like a letter to the author written in Paris on 14 February 1926, which signifies the close links and collaborations which Massignon maintained with scholars from parts of the Muslim world.

¹⁶² Hachem Hikmat, *Critère de l'action = Mīzān al-a'māl : traité d'éthique psychologique et mystique Ghazzālī, 1058-1111* (Paris: G. P. Maisonneuve, 1945).

¹⁶³ Francois Nourissier, *L'homme humilié : sort des réfugiés et "personnes déplacées" : 1912-1950* (Paris: Spes, 1950).

¹⁶⁴ Al-Ghazali, *Réfutation excellente de la divinité de Jésus-Christ d'après les Évangiles; texte établi, traduit et commenté par Robert Chidiac*, trans. Robert Chidiac (Paris: E. Leroux, 1939).

¹⁶⁵ Introduction à la théologie musulmane : Essai de théologie comparée ; préface de L. Massignon (Paris, 1948). In his preface, Massignon notes that "ce manuel nous prouve aussi, et amplement, que, si l'ash'arisme a su réintégrer, dans le kalam fondé par les mu'tazilites, un minimum indispensable de donnée révéle, - il n'a pas explicité toutes les perspectives concevables, sur le mystère de Dieu se révélant aux hommes, que le Coran nous ouvre, dans ses allusions condensées et percantes au désir de Dieu chez Abraham et chez Moïse, au passage, à la règle de vie, - ri'aya -, de Jésus parmi nous." The author relied on Massignon's works on Hallaj and Muslim mystical language, in the latter's characterisation of a city between the conquered inhabitants and the conquering religion, a kind of hybridisation where there is a communal life between Arab Muslims (in the first two centuries of Islam) and their Christian counterparts.

¹⁶⁶ Jeanne Cuisinier, *Sumangat : l'âme et son culte en Indochine et en Indonésie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951).

¹⁶⁷ Vasilii Petrovich Nikitin, *Les Kurdes : étude sociologique et historique* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1956). Massignon wrote the preface in May 1943, highlighting

University of Jerusalem suggesting for the transcription of Hebrew texts written by Jewish scholars in the Middle Ages into Arabic.¹⁶⁸ This, Massignon believed, could contribute towards a reconciliation between Palestinian Arabs and Israelis as part of a “cultural reconciliation” because of the indebtedness of medieval Arabic texts to the writings and thought of eminent Jewish scholars. In the letter, Massignon had also offered to be a member of a committee which could oversee the project, as part of recognising the preeminence of the Hebrew language.

In the light of the above, his dedication to the study of Islam, especially in its mystical tradition, is abundantly evident. Massignon was also well-plugged into the network of Orientalists in Europe in the mid-twentieth century, and this ensured the flow and exchange of ideas between him and his peers, as well as his predecessors, especially in the area of historical research on the subject of Islam and other monotheistic religions. However, in the field of mystical studies, Massignon remained a solitary figure, with very discrete ideas derived not only from objective scholarly studies, but also an unwavering commitment to a spirituality and worldview which privileged the place of the sacred in the world. This will be further discussed next.

the important contribution of Nikitin’s work in addressing the different aspects of the Kurdish problem, where there is not much that was understood about Kurdistan in the mid-twentieth century. In discussing Kurdish women, Nikitin acknowledges Massignon’s input on the influence of Yezidi women on the noble families of the Kurds. “M. Massignon attira mon attention sur l’influence exercée par les femmes yezidies chez les nobles kurdes.” See *ibid.*, fn. 1, 99.

¹⁶⁸ "Letter to Dr. Jacobson 19 July 1926," (Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1926).

2.4 THE SACRED IN MASSIGNON'S EPISTEMOLOGY

As noted above, a key idea to which Massignon was attached both from personal and scholarly perspectives is that of the sacred and its paramount importance in the world. His perceptions of history are not unlike those of this group of Catholic writers.¹⁶⁹ *Historia sacra*, i.e. the body of sacred Jewish, Christian, and Muslim histories, as contained in their respective scriptural, exegetical and historical sources, is the source of Massignon's historical knowledge. This approach was forged in the years following his reconversion and paved the way for Abraham to play a significant role in his life. This explains why Massignon would accept the Old Testament narratives on Abraham uncritically. Arising from this understanding, he relied on a typological interpretation that views the world as a continuum of ancient history. He details this mystical interpretation in his article on Marie Antoinette, in which he discusses the role of successive witnesses (akin to the concept of *abdāl* in Islam) who reclaim justice and the truth and deflect from the masses their painful crises.¹⁷⁰ As mentioned earlier, Massignon had also written an article on the City of the Dead in Cairo, in which he conveys the transhistorical sense wherein the perennial convergence of the living and the dead denotes that continued relationship between the two in the

¹⁶⁹ However, apart from this, it must be said that Massignon's attitude differs from those of the Catholic writers. In the main, Massignon did not harbour the mistrust and disgust they had for the Republic, which was to many of them their premier enemy as the latter were anti-clerical. On the contrary, one finds Massignon's relations with the government ambivalent at worst, and one of cooperation and mutual benefit at best.

¹⁷⁰ Massignon, "Un voeu et un destin: Marie-Antoinette, reine de France," in *EM*, ed. Christian Jambet et. al., Vol. I (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2009).

life of Muslims.¹⁷¹ This transhistorical approach in his sociological interpretation of Muslim cities and communities is unique and departs from the norms of sociology. In view of this, its scholarly worth remains questionable. Nonetheless, in this example and others discussed earlier, what could be discerned is Massignon's unique epistemology that centers on the sacred.

Although there is a distinctive character to his thought and approach, Massignon was not alone in privileging the sacred. From the mid-1930s, Massignon was part of the Eranos conferences in Ascona, Switzerland, first conceived by Olga Frobe-Kapteyn, as a movement of thinkers who privileged the sacred as an epistemic source. He first spoke in the conference in 1937, and regularly attended it for around eighteen years, until his lecture in 1955, of which his political rhetoric on the subject of an independent Algeria and his anti-Zionist views possibly earned him a dismissal.¹⁷² At Eranos, Massignon met many of his other established peers. Henry Corbin was one of Massignon's students, and a regular at the Eranos conferences himself. Corbin acknowledges Massignon's stand on history, that he "gave us the courage to take a stand even against the certainties and positivistic laws of mundane history."¹⁷³ After the Liberation in 1945, Massignon co-founded with Maurice de Gandillac and Marcel Moré, the periodical *Dieu vivant* (which remained in circulation until 1955). This group of intellectuals met during the war and discussed the idea of publishing a journal with a task, as the title makes it clear, to revive the place of spirituality

¹⁷¹ Louis Massignon, "La cité des morts au Caire," in *OM*, ed. Youakim Moubarac (Beirut: Dal al-Maaref, 1963).

¹⁷² Hakl, *Eranos*, 118.

¹⁷³ Corbin, "Discours de M.: Le professeur H. Corbin a l'occasion de la mort de L. Massignon," *La Faculte des lettres de l'Universite de Teheran* 10 (3) (1962), 4, cited in *ibid.*

and the sacred “in a period that recalls the darkest pages of the Apocalypse because of the violence and extent of the cataclysm unleashed, and likewise because of the atmosphere of spiritual death that is suffocating the world.”¹⁷⁴ *Dieu vivant* was thus a protest against modernity and its positivistic science,¹⁷⁵ and this fitted in perfectly with Massignon’s epistemic assumptions.¹⁷⁶ Although Emmanuel Mounier criticised his periodical, Massignon responded by defending his worldview that is rooted in the ‘sacred’, and likewise, that of the periodical too.¹⁷⁷ Massignon’s intellectual thought was therefore clearly characterised by the centrality of the ‘sacred’. Several scholars, such as the renowned Orientalist Sir Hamilton Gibb, have acknowledged this. His concise summary of Massignon’s legacy, written as an obituary shortly after the latter’s death in 1962, notes of the unique character of Massignon’s works. Most notably, Gibb remarks, “Oriental studies could not for [Massignon] be confined to the classical realms of history, literature, or philosophy”, owing to the intrinsic relationship between ideas and realities in Massignon’s worldview.¹⁷⁸ Thus, unlike mainstream scholarship that advocates and permits only objective analysis, Gibb surmises that Massignon “absorbed and transformed” his object of study “by an individual intuition of

¹⁷⁴ Marcel More, *Dieu vivant* 1 (1945): 5, cited in Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 156-57.

¹⁷⁵ “The world of human servitude and destruction cannot be combatted by more refined and subtle techniques, but broken open only through the irruption in the visible world of an invisible world rooted in Transcendence.” Marcel More, *Dieu vivant* 16 (1950): 11, cited in *ibid.*, 157.

¹⁷⁶ A similar vision of history is discussed in Massignon’s article “Notre Dame de La Salette”. In total, five of Massignon’s articles were published in *Dieu vivant*. For the list of articles, see *ibid.*, 263, fn. 5.

¹⁷⁷ Massignon, “Un nouveau sacré.”

¹⁷⁸ H. A. R. Gibb, “Louis Massignon (1882-1962),” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 95, no. 1-2 (April 1963): 119.

spiritual dimensions.”¹⁷⁹ Gibb is not alone in making such observations. The historian Maxime Rodinson, in his preface to the onomastic studies of René Dagorn on Abraham, argues that the view Massignon assumed, that the Arabs were descendants of Ishmael, could only be accepted on the basis of metahistorical reasoning, and not by using methods of secular history.¹⁸⁰ In a more recent account, Robert Irwin goes so far as to describe Massignon as “the holy madman” with recondite ideas, whose “history of Islam was permeated by esoteric and Christological themes that only he and his disciples found in that history.”¹⁸¹ Irwin could have well been guilty of an exaggerated,¹⁸² and at times, plainly false caricature of Massignon’s life,¹⁸³ although a cursory look at all of Massignon’s writings attests to this spiritual slant in his works.¹⁸⁴ Thus, it is

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 120. Edward Said argues that Gibb is himself not entirely innocent of such epistemic qualities; the only difference between Gibb and Massignon being the latter’s non-concealment of “his metaphysical speculations”. See Said, *Orientalism*, 280. See also the argument of Patrick Laude that “With Massignon, scholarship is literally informed by inner experience, and it is in point of fact initiated by it.” See Laude, *Pathways to an Inner Islam*, 35.

¹⁸⁰ Maxime Rodinson, “Preface,” in René Dagorn, *La geste d’Ismaël* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1981), xxiv.

¹⁸¹ Robert Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and Their Enemies* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 229.

¹⁸² Irwin goes so far as to describe Massignon with adjectives such as “mad”, “weird” and “bizarre”. He describes Massignon’s work on al-Ḥallāj (originally the former’s doctoral thesis) as “a weird book by a weird man about another weird man.” See *ibid.*, 222.

¹⁸³ For example, Irwin’s view that Massignon disliked Shi’a Islam and the Jews, and that Massignon understood Abraham first and foremost from within the Muslim tradition, could be contested. See *ibid.*, 223-24, 26, 28.

¹⁸⁴ Four bibliographies are very useful to this end. (1) Youakim Moubarac; (2) CERF; (3) Pierre Rocalve; (4) Jacques Waardenburg. The latest and most comprehensive compilation is that of CERF. This edition has helpfully grouped almost all of Massignon’s articles into themes that clearly point towards this slant in Massignon’s writings, such as (1) *La visitation de l’Étranger*, (2) *Témoins et intercesseurs*, (3) *Le témoin essentiel: Al-Hallāj*, (4) *Massignon politique le savant et le mystique*, (5) *Le miroir du coeur et la nuit de l’esprit*, (6) *Topographies spirituelles*, (7) *L’eschatologie musulmane et le shī’isme*, (8) *Formes symboliques en terre d’Islam*, (9) *La foi aux dimensions du monde*. See Louis Massignon, *EM*, ed. Christian Jambet et. al, II vols. (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2009).

already a well-noted observation that Massignon, both as an intellectual and a mystic, had a certain unique way in interpreting religion and its history.

These are notable observations of Massignon's epistemology that must be considered in an interpretation of his thought. Massignon was not as interested in the historical truths of these claims, as understood in a positivistic sense, as he was in the theological basis and import of such claims. The evolution of his idea of the 'Abrahamic religions' took place in this context. Concomitantly, this raises the question of the existence, or lack thereof, of any scholarly value and intellectual merit, to his views, a point already raised by a scholar who studied Massignon's thought.¹⁸⁵ The limitations of a theological approach, especially as particularistic as Massignon's must be recognised, here and elsewhere, for the comparative study of religion. But as many scholars have now cautioned, such an approach with its attendant epistemic assumptions, nonetheless should be given a legitimate place in the study of religion. This argument is fully explored in chapter five below.

2.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented the life of Massignon from the perspectives of his spirituality, scholarship, and activism. These were intractable elements that collectively shaped his thought and worldview. Massignon's scholarly pursuits were informed by his spiritual quests and his research findings, in turn, provided him with more insights on his spiritual and mystical interests. For instance, his philological studies and research on mysticism as well as the broader study of

¹⁸⁵ See Waardenburg, "Louis Massignon (1883-1962) as a Student of Islam."

religion reinforce the idea that the experience of the sacred is universal and timeless. Arising from this, Massignon recognises that this experience cannot be limited to the understanding as inherited in traditional Catholic teachings, and this view opened up to him new ways of understanding other religions. This is not to say that Massignon was totally objective in his observations on Islam. Rather, he approached it with certain epistemic assumptions which were largely shaped by his Catholic and mystical intuitions, and from them, put forth conclusions on how the religion ought to be understood.

These aspects played a huge role in shaping his outlook and worldview, and would have a direct bearing on his conception of the 'Abrahamic religions', as the next chapter will discuss. Central to Massignon's conceptualisation are the mystical notions of intercession and substitution, for which Abraham is treated as the premier example. Equally important is the fact that Massignon's faith had a strong mystical bent. It was in this context that he had approached the key issue of sin and redemption. Massignon's life, viewed from the perspectives of his spirituality and scholarship, shows the inseparability of the two and their symbiotic relationship in his vision of things. This would be reflected well in his reflections on the place of Abraham in the interconnected histories of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as will be examined next.

CHAPTER 3

LES TROIS PRIÈRES D'ABRAHAM AND THE BIRTH OF THE 'ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS'

"The faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the essential truth of the history of humanity, and Islam rightly calls Abraham as the first Muslim: this is theologically correct."

Louis Massignon¹

The events in May 1908 in Baghdad were both a climatic point in Massignon's spiritual agitation, which had been brewing since the days he became an agnostic, and a profoundly seminal moment that was to determine his worldview, vocation, and life trajectories. His intellectual heritage with deep roots in Orientalist thought on the historical origins of Islam would also contribute towards the formation of such a discrete interpretation of the interrelationships between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. With the background to his life and career presented in the previous chapter, this study now proceeds to examine his Abrahamic thought. The main task here is to discuss the ways in which Massignon presents the idea of the 'Abrahamic religions'.

Primarily, it seeks to respond to the following questions. Of what importance is Abraham for Massignon? How did he understand and interpret Abraham's place in the three religions and how did he present the idea of the 'Abrahamic religions'? It seeks to uncover the meanings of the concept and its

¹ « La foi au Dieu d'Abraham, d'Isaac et de Jacob est le fait essentiel de l'histoire humaine, et l'Islam salue en Abraham le "premier de musulmans", ce qui est vrai : théologiquement vrai. » Youakim Moubarac, *Abraham dans le Coran* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1958), 5.

epistemic importance. In other words, what did Massignon intend with his idea of 'Abrahamic religions' and how could this understanding help us interpret and utilise the concept? In order to trace the evolution in his thought on the subject, this chapter examines his works chronologically. I begin this chapter by examining Massignon's earliest interpretations of Abraham, which can be found in the period immediately after his reconversion in 1908, especially as he discusses them in some of his correspondences. Next, I examine some of his early published works in which he continues to reflect on the theme, especially in the period between 1912 and 1935, in which many drafts and versions of his *Les trois prières d'Abraham* were produced.² I then discuss various other related writings in the later period of his life, most important among which is the abridged version of his *Les trois prières d'Abraham* published in the journal *Dieu vivant* in 1949. This later period in his life is when Massignon's efforts for rapprochement became more intense and were expressed with more urgency. A summary of his final lectures at the Collège de France on the three prayers of Abraham concludes the list of his writings on the 'Abrahamic religions'. This chapter is summed up by an analysis of the epistemic significance of the 'Abrahamic religions' as conceived by Massignon, especially to highlight the spiritual paradigm within which his presentation of the idea took place.

² See the foreword by Daniel Massignon in Massignon, *Les trois prières*, 7-16.

3.1 REDISCOVERING THE GOD OF ABRAHAM³

In the period which Massignon reconverted to his Catholic faith in Baghdad, he began to reflect on the figure of Abraham and its related sacred histories.

Although there is little in Massignon's contemporaneous account of his reconversion that directly refers to Abraham, some allusions to the biblical accounts of Abraham could be found in his descriptions of his reconversion. For example, Massignon calls the epiphanic experience the "visit of the Stranger", a plausible reference to Abraham's great encounter with the three strangers at Mambre.⁴ In addition, there were important contextual elements in his reconversion that also feature prominently in his understanding of Islam and his conception of the 'Abrahamic religions',⁵ chief among which was the hospitality of the Arabs, as discussed in the previous chapter. The Arab hospitality that he experienced firsthand was of major importance in two ways. First, it underscores the primacy of Muslim and Arab hospitality to his appreciation of Islam, and the hospitality extended to him would become a debt he felt he had to repay by way of committing himself to the Arab world. Secondly, the memory of Abraham is re-enacted to him in the case of Muslim hospitality as a lived virtue.⁶

³ Giulio Basetti-Sani writes on the reconversion of Massignon as the latter's mysterious encounter with the God of Abraham. See Basetti-Sani, *Louis Massignon*, 42.

⁴ See Massignon's reference to Abraham as "*l'étranger*" in Louis Massignon, "P.Sodome," in *Les trois prières d'Abraham* (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 33.

⁵ The importance of this is also highlighted in Keryell's analysis of Massignon's life. See Jacques Keryell, *Jardin Donné: Louis Massignon à la recherche de l'Absolu* (Paris-Fribourg: Saint-Paul, 1993), 23-24.

⁶ "[L]a manière héroïque dont Abraham a pratiqué la vertu d'hospitalité ne lui a pas seulement valu d'avoir la Terre Sainte en héritage, mais d'y faire entrer tous les hôtes étrangers que son hospitalité a « bénis. » See Massignon, "Le respect de la personne humaine en Islam, et la priorité du droit d'asile sur le devoir de la juste guerre," 788.

It appears that soon after his reconversion, Massignon had begun reflecting on his experience and the narratives on Abraham. Massignon's correspondences with Paul Claudel provide the first clear indications of his interest in, and interpretation of, the life of Abraham, in the context of his reconversion. Writing about his rediscovery of faith in a response to Claudel's article entitled *Développement de l'Église*,⁷ Massignon informs Claudel of his awareness and also perplexity of the traditional Muslim account of Abraham and especially its claim to the religion of Abraham.⁸ In particular, he wondered if the link between what is Islam's most sacred space, i.e. "the black stone of Mecca (Ka'ba)", and Abraham, as claimed by Muḥammad and narrated in the Qur'ān, really did exist.⁹ In another instance, both Claudel and Massignon discussed Christian teachings, and the former mentioned the biblical story of Abraham at Sodom in the context of the doctrine of fall and sin.¹⁰ In his response, Massignon expressed the personal significance of Abraham's experience in Sodom, and saw

⁷ Claudel's spiritual interpretations interest Massignon. This article, written by Claudel in 1900, together with *Connaissance du temps* (1902) and *Traite de la Co-naissance au monde et de soi-meme* (1903), constitute his *Art poétique*. In *Développement de l'Église*, Claudel ascribes spiritual and almost mystical meanings to the architecture of Church buildings across history, which he describes as an organic growth as opposed to conscious planning. He also contrasts this architecture with pagan shrines, and how, and on what basis were they constructed. See Aidan Nichols, *The Poet as Believer: A Theological Study of Paul Claudel* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 60-65.

⁸ Letter 1 dated 8 August 1908. See Millet-Gérard, *Paul Claudel - Louis Massignon*, 37-38.

⁹ "C'est ainsi que la prière musulmane dans sa loi primitive, se tourna d'abord vers le Temple vide. Puis, n'y trouvant rien, Mohammed se résigna à concentrer les prières sur la vieille qiblah de sa race – sur la pierre noire de la Mekke -, remontant ainsi de Moïse à Ismaël, fils d'Abraham, éponyme. Alors qu'en réalité cette pierre noire de la Mekke ... n'a aucun rapport, sans doute, avec l'histoire d'Abraham ..." Ibid.

¹⁰ Letter 83, dated 15 December 1911. Ibid., 165-66.

in the patriarch's intercession a role for himself in the hope to save and intercede for others.¹¹

There were also retrospective reflections on his reconversion in 1908 which attest to the importance of Abraham in Massignon's understanding of faith. In these reflections, Massignon identified with Abraham much more directly than he initially did. One could however argue that as Abraham became more important in his life, he read Abraham back into his experience. This could have well been the case, but it does not rule out the possibility that Massignon soon saw his rediscovery of God in Baghdad in the context of Abraham's life and faith, especially given all the other evidence mentioned earlier. In sum, the biblical Abraham was a figure to whom Massignon was particularly attracted from early on in his life for two main reasons: (i) the patriarch's faith that Massignon understood as an archetype, which resonated very deeply with his own understanding of faith, especially as he experienced it in his reconversion in Baghdad, and (ii) the possible link between Abraham and Islam, and the promise this had for him of a more positive evaluation of Islam. The second posed a greater challenge to Massignon and troubled him more, as it would have profound repercussions on his own self-understanding if he were to take seriously the claims of Islam. In the light of these observations, this earlier phase in his life is crucial to a complete assessment of his conception of the 'Abrahamic religions'.

¹¹ "Je connais la prière d'Abraham, - je l'ai priée, tant, si désespérément, quand, en sortant de la cité damnée (en suis-je sorti, au fond), - je m'y suis senti retenu par tant de mains tendues, torturées, - que j'ai connues et que je veux sauver." Letter 83, dated 21 December 1911. Ibid., 166-67.

In the second decade of the twentieth century, Massignon followed through his initial reflections on the subject, as drafts of his writings on the three prayers of Abraham show. These were largely informed by the contexts in which he found himself in the period. His personal faith was deepening, as were his studies on Muslim mysticism. Given these conditions, he reflected intensely on the place of Islam in his Christian worldview. For example, he had begun drafting “the exile of Ishmael”, echoing here the biblical description of the Ishmael story, which was later changed to the “migration of Ishmael”. The draft title shows the extent to which Massignon’s thought at the time was determined by his Christian intuition. Two published works of his in the same period corroborate the idea that Massignon was very much committed to, and guided by, his Catholic faith in his interpretation of the Muslim claim. First is an article written on the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and Islam published in the *Muslim World* in 1915, and second is a tractate, published in 1917, relating to a medieval Muslim apologetical work.

3.2 TRADITIONAL CATHOLIC RECEPTION OF MUSLIM CLAIMS

Massignon’s article “The Roman Catholic Church and Islam”, published in *The Muslim World* in 1915, is the earliest published of his work that relates to the Muslim claim to Abraham, presented from the perspective of the Roman Catholic Church’s historical position and inherited theological understanding of Islam. In this article, Massignon consolidates the views of Christian theologians on Islam

sourced from previous, mainly polemical, works.¹² He reiterates the common Christian stance on the superiority of its faith and its exclusive inheritance of the Abrahamic covenant. Here, Massignon writes that the Church's teaching dictates that Christians are "the true heirs of Abraham, to the exclusion of Moslems and Jews",¹³ which had become a well-accepted doctrine from the days of the apostle Paul (especially as espoused in his epistles to the Galatians). Massignon fleshes out further the relationship between the three religions in the context of their claims to Abraham. He writes that "Just as Ishmael has been excluded for Isaac's benefit, so the Mosaic synagogue and the Moslem community have been excluded for the benefit of the Christian Ecclesia."¹⁴ Like many others before him, Massignon does not engage in a historical criticism of the Muslim claim to Abraham in this article, and it can be surmised that he accepted the Christian understanding that Muslims were descendants of Abraham through Ishmael. Nonetheless, Massignon added two things to the Catholic understanding on the subject. First is that he focussed the discussion solely on Abraham and the relationship of the three religions with respect to the patriarch. Second is his philological reasoning in which he contends that "[t]he whole "calling" of the Arab race is reconstructed in this "fugitive" Hagar, whose "flight" to the desert is only "repeated" in the "Hegira" of Mohammed (same semitic root H.G.R.)."¹⁵ For Massignon, Islam's whole existence is predicated upon the deprived nature of its forefather, Ishmael and his "fugitive" mother, Hagar. This is clearly

¹² Louis Massignon, "Roman Catholic Church and Islam," *Muslim World* 5, no. 2 (1915): 135.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 130. Massignon later explains that this heritage refers to the fact that Christians are blessed with the Messiah and the right to the Holy Land.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 135, fn.

distinguishable from the honourable lineage of Jesus that harks back to Isaac and Sara. In doing so, Massignon differed from early Christian theologians such as John of Damascus, in that he did not cast Islam aside as a Christian heresy despite maintaining the inferiority of Islam's Abrahamic lineage relative to that of Christianity. It must be noted however that Massignon did not comment on the use of invectives in describing Muslims such as "Hagarenes", "Ishmaelites", and "sons of the bondswoman" but simply recounted them.¹⁶ Clearly insisting on the supremacy of his Christian faith, Massignon reiterates the Christian position that the Promised Land is theirs, and that '[t]hey must take it back from the present possessors, the Moslem Arabs of the seed of Abraham by Ishmael, son of Hagar; for these "Hagarenes", "Ishmaelites", these "sons of the bondswoman", are there only to perpetuate the truth of the divine promise until the return of the legitimate heir.'¹⁷

Two years after the above article was published, Massignon wrote an extended piece in which he developed further the arguments of the article above and addressed the theologically-oriented ways in which Christians could interpret Islam and its views on Christianity. This 1917 article had its origins in conversations between him and a Franciscan priest and colleague known as Père d'Alcantara.¹⁸ Circulating in France towards the end of the twentieth century was a fourteenth-century treatise translated into French with the title *Le Présent de*

¹⁶ The pejorative sense is also conveyed in the use of Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire in his *Philosophie de l'Histoire*. See Sadek Neaimi, *L'Islam au siècle des lumières: Image de la civilisation islamique chez les philosophes français du XVIII siècle* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), 93.

¹⁷ Massignon, "Roman Catholic Church and Islam."

¹⁸ Rocalve, *Louis Massignon et l'Islam*, 20.

L'Homme Lettré pour Réfuter les Partisans de la Croix.¹⁹ This treatise was a Muslim polemical work written by an ex-Franciscan priest, Fr. Anselmo de Turmeda (who converted to Islam under the name Abdallah Ibn Al-Torjomān).²⁰ Père d'Alcantara found the work troubling, perhaps unaccustomed to such scathing attacks on Christian scripture and in view of the fact that the writer was a convert from Christianity who claimed to have discovered the truth in Islam. Massignon then successfully managed to assuage the concerns of the priest after several evenings of discussions.²¹ At the latter's behest, Massignon composed a treatise entitled *L'Examen du présent de l'homme lettré* (The Examination of Gift of the Learned) as a critique. Although the treatise was written with the aim of rebutting the arguments of Ibn al-Torjomān, it was an apologia for the Christian faith, judging from its literary style and content. Massignon was not an expert (and less so at the point he wrote the treatise) on Christian dogma and

¹⁹ Massignon relied on the translated version of Ibn al-Torjomān's work by Jean Spiro which appeared in *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, 1886, tome XII. The work was given the French title *Le Présent de L'Homme Lettré pour Réfuter les Partisans de la Croix*. He took issue with the translator's work extensively, relying on his superior knowledge of classical Arabic. See Louis Massignon, *Examen du "présent de l'homme lettré" par Abdallah Ibn Al-Torjoman* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica (P.I.S.A.I.), 1992), 1-5.

²⁰ His work, entitled "*Tuḥfat al-Adīb fi al-rad 'alā ahl al-Ṣalīb*" (The Gift of the Learned In Refuting the People of the Cross), presents the background to his conversion to Islam (referred to as "*al-milla al-ḥanīfiyya*", i.e. the pure monotheistic faith, to underscore the uncorrupted nature of his new religion), the historical background of the time of Abū Fāris 'Abd al-'Azīz, the refutation of Christianity, and the affirmation of the prophethood of Muḥammad as announced in the Hebrew Bible, the Gospels, and various other scriptures. Two versions of the title are recorded. The other is "*Tuḥfat al-Arīb fi al-rad 'alā ahl al- Ṣalīb*". See Miguel de Epalza, *La Tuḥfa, autobiografía y polémica islámica contra el Cristianismo de 'Abdallāh al-Taryūmān (fray Anselmo Turmeda)* (Roma: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1971), 199.

²¹ Daniel Massignon, foreword to Massignon, *Examen du "Présent de L'Homme Lettré"*, ix.

theology,²³ but it was most probably his familiarity with Islam and its apologetical works, on top of the calling of his faith, that inspired him to compose the tractate.

Compared to the scathing tone of Ibn al-Torjomān, Massignon's language was much more calibrated. In this writing, Massignon disputed many traditional Muslim interpretations which Ibn al-Torjomān used in his work. Despite this, Massignon did not disparagingly rebuke Islam nor its followers, focused, it seems, to point out errors in the understanding of both Christianity and Islam.²⁴ Unlike his earlier, sketchy and somewhat non-committal, understanding of the Muslim claim to Abraham in his letters to Claudel, Massignon was far more resolute here on this point and displayed an acute familiarity with the subject. A particularly important example is his correction of a major error in translation which concerns the Muslim claim to Abraham. The term "*ḥanīfiyya*" was wrongly translated by Jean Spiro as « la doctrine hanéfite » (i.e. the doctrine of the legal school of Abu Ḥanīfa) when it should be referring to the Abrahamic monotheism which the prophet Muḥammad sought to restore. *Ḥanīfiyya*, as Massignon points out, was a reference to the « religion des hanīf » i.e. the religion of those who followed Abraham's untainted monotheism.²⁵ Massignon then lists some of Muslim teachings in relation to Abraham, such as Muḥammad's own understanding of his lineage and vocation conferred upon him through

²³ See Borrmans, "Aspects théologiques de la pensée de Louis Massignon sur l'Islam," 111. See also on Massignon's uncertainty to publish his works discussing Christian theology in Massignon, *Examen du "Présent de L'Homme Lettré"*, ix.

²⁴ This is perhaps, as Massignon seeks to emphasise, that the character of Muslim apologetics in its dialectical attack is "critical and tranchant" whereas Christian apologetics is "constructive and gradual", and defending its faith, the former is "literal and destructive" whereas the latter is "real and lively". *Examen du "Présent de L'Homme Lettré"*, 38-39.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

Abraham's son, Ishmael. As the race of Ishmael, the Muslim community earns its important piece of the divine promise as an elected people with its attendant duties and mission.²⁶ But Islam aspires for more through its claim to preach a faith in the God of natural law. In doing so, it associates itself with the primitive religion of the patriarchs from Adam to Noah and subsequently to Abraham. Islam claims that its teachings suffice to address man's social needs and seeks to reaffirm the relevance of the Law of Moses for all times. Although this law is rigorous, the fervour of its faith assures that it can be observed.²⁷ In this treatise, like in the article he wrote two years earlier, his recognition of the Abrahamic origins of Islam is intact. Nonetheless, Massignon explains further the theological nature of this origin that distinguishes it from that of Christianity in his disputation of Ibn al-Torjomān's interpretation of some biblical verses.

A key verse under discussion is Deut. 18:15 which recounts Moses' prophecy to Israel. The verse also serves as an announcement of the coming of a prophet like himself before the end of time. Massignon argues that Ibn al-Torjomān had spuriously interpreted Ishmael's destiny by ignoring the qualifier in the verse "from your (i.e. Israel's) race". By ignoring the qualifier, Ibn al-Torjomān could then claim that the above was a prophecy about the coming of Muḥammad as the final prophet and endowed with a universal message and mission. Massignon points out that the text makes a clear reference to the prophets of Israel, and therefore could only have been intended as a reference to Jesus.²⁸ Concomitantly, according to Massignon, Ibn al-Torjomān overstated the

²⁶ Ibid., 48-49.

²⁷ Ibid., 60.

²⁸ Ibid., 15.

significance of Ishmael by according the latter with a universality that was reserved only for Isaac and his descendants. For Massignon, this common Muslim claim was an error purported by apologists that gravely distorts the extent of salvation in Islam (because Ishmael prefigured Islam). Massignon acknowledges that while the Bible mentions God's blessings upon Ishmael and that the latter would himself establish a great nation, God's divine pact with Abraham was reserved for Isaac and his descendants. Massignon furnishes this with the evidence of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moria that prefigured Jesus' crucifixion on the Cross. This could have only meant that Christians are the true inheritors of God's promise to Abraham. Understood as such, the Muslim understanding as conveyed by its apologists that Abraham brought Ishmael (instead of Isaac) to be sacrificed must also therefore have been incorrect. As to why Muslim tradition advanced this version, Massignon held the view that this was to wrest Moses' prophecy away from Jesus and to assert the legitimacy of Islam over other religions.²⁹ In addition, Massignon found the proximity of dates between the founding of the Islamic establishment in Medina in 622 and that of the consecration of the Pantheon of Rome to the Queen of Martyrs in 699, as well as the exaltation of the True Cross at Jerusalem in 614, as further evidence of the truth of Christianity.³⁰

In this tractate, Massignon acknowledges that the Muslim religion makes a claim to Abraham, and that this is a priori not a false one. Nonetheless, Massignon rejects Muslim interpretations advanced by the likes of Ibn al-Torjomān (and Ibn Hazm, as he writes in his *L'Hegire d'Ismael*) solely on the

²⁹ Ibid., 14-15.

³⁰ Ibid., 59.

basis of his Christian understanding. This approach certainly lacks sympathy for, and more importantly, gives little recognition to, the common Muslim interpretation of its associations with Abraham, which the views of Ibn al-Torjomān and Ibn Hazm are representative. Although acknowledging the Abrahamic origins of Islam, Massignon's interpretation retained the supremacy of his own faith. As noted earlier, his earliest drafts of his *Les trois prières d'Abraham* date around the same period, and the title 'The Exile of Ishmael' reflects a similar view. Massignon attempts here to reconcile his faith with the claims of Islam but was balancing precariously on a theological tightrope. This was the assailing interpretive paradigm for Massignon then and remained so, at least into the 1920s as can be discerned from another article he wrote on the issue of the conversion of the Muslim world to Christianity (published in *Le Messager du Coeur de Jésus* in November 1923). In the article, he discusses the possible approaches to bring Muslims towards the Christian faith, highlighting the presence of 'Christic Muslims' such as al-Ghazālī, al-Moḥāsibī and al-Ḥallāj. His idea of 'Christic Muslims' is certainly unique to himself, and in introducing such an idea, Massignon did not hesitate to apply Christian theological dogmas to Islam, thus extrapolating, in this case, that there is the Muslim equivalent of Jesus' sacrifice and crucifixion. In essence, eager to see tighter bonds between Christianity and Islam, and seeing potential in the lives and practices of Muslim mystics, Massignon was aided by Christian concepts as he sought to reinterpret their lives. This position, revolutionary and controversial at once, is probably why he chose to remain anonymous in the publication of the article.³¹ At around the same time, Massignon had also begun expressing the relevance of Abraham

³¹ See "La conversion du monde musulman."

in a political context, arising from his involvement in the works of French foreign diplomacy. This is especially as he found that the key to a better future in the relationship between Muslims and the West rests with a resolution of the situation in the Holy Land, as shall be discussed next.

3.3 EARLY POLITICAL EXPRESSION OF THE 'ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS'

In 1921, Massignon spoke on the relationship between Zionism and Islam at the Paris Sociological Society. His diplomatic career, as summarised in the previous chapter, was largely focussed on the issue of Palestine and Israel. Unrelenting in his hope for reconciliation between the Arabs and the Jews, Massignon expressed this sentiment within an Abrahamic paradigm, relatively early in his career. In the lecture, he explained to the audience the ways in which Muslims relate to Abraham. He explained the difficulty of excluding Muslims from the Holy Land because of their very deep and fundamental spiritual and religious attachment to it (from the Prophet Muḥammad's night journey to the day of final judgment), whose roots hark back to Abraham.³² Massignon acknowledged the tension and the fact that the Jews have a fundamental hope and dream of making Jerusalem their home.³³ He expressed his support for the establishment of a Jewish state and reiterated that the God of Israel "is the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob, the legislator of the Jewish nation, and Zion is the only city in the

³² "Vous n'arracherez pas Jérusalem aux musulmans parce qu'ils croient trop profondément que le Prophète y a été transporté en extase, ils croient trop profondément qu'ils y seront jugés, vous vous heurtez là à un sentiment trop fondamental, et, le heurtant, vous vous excluez de toute possibilité de pacte avec eux, parce qu'en Islam, la seule foi qui compte est basée sur le serment d'Abraham." "Le sionisme et l'Islam," in *EM*, ed. Christian Jambet et. al. (Paris: CERF, 2009), 716.

³³ " ... les israélites ont toujours nourri au fond de leur coeur une espérance invincible, enragée". Ibid.

world where Israel can be reborn.”³⁴ Yet, for Massignon, an Abrahamic vision would also demand that the claims of both Muslims and Christians be heard. Hence, the path towards some kind of reconciliation, however arduous, needed to be negotiated. Massignon’s early position as derived from this lecture is not necessarily pro-Zionist, in that he was not simply expressing the hope for the creation of the state of Israel as a home for the Jews.³⁵ Rather, by invoking the figure of Abraham in thinking about the question of Palestine, and in constantly urging for recognition of the rights of both Christians and Muslims to the Holy Land, Massignon was advocating something far more nuanced, although his views remained politically naïve and neglected the political realities and challenges. For our purposes here, it should be noted that it was clearly his Abrahamic paradigm woven into his political vision that gave birth to such a quixotic stand. Massignon’s reflections on the place of the three religions within the Abrahamic scheme would continue over the next few decades of his life, producing penetrating insights on an Abrahamic idea in his *Les trois prières d’Abraham* as discussed next.

³⁴ “C’est le Dieu d’Abraham, d’Isaac et de Jacob, le législateur de la *nation* juive, et Sion est la seule ville au monde où Israël qui est mort puisse ressusciter.” Ibid., 717.

³⁵ On a study of Massignon’s views on Palestine and Israel, see Mayeres, “Massignon and Zionism.” Allan Harris Cutler, in his introductory essay to Basetti-Sani, *Louis Massignon*, argues that Massignon’s attitude towards Israel was an ambiguous one. As he writes, “[h]is uncompromising opposition to Zionism set in motion the great drama of his break with the Jewish world. He publicly dissociated himself from the struggle waged by the Jewish people during the present generation to build an independent Jewish state in Palestine and was thus forced to redirect the sincere love which he felt for the Jewish people back toward the origins of this people in the distant past [of Biblical times] ... The beginnings of the Jewish people go back to Abraham.” Ibid., 30-31.

3.4 THE THREE PRAYERS OF ABRAHAM

As early as 1912, Massignon had begun drafting his thoughts on Islam and especially on the Muslim claims to Abraham, and how these claims could be understood in relation to the well-accepted Abrahamic origins of Judaism and Christianity. This was at the same time he was working on his thesis on al-Ḥallāj and several years after his reconversion. He worked on numerous drafts over the next few decades and provided a summary later in his life. His handwritten manuscripts deposited with the archives of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF) were not clearly dated, and thus, do not provide firm information on when they were written. An indication as to when the drafts were written could be gleaned by examining his other published works and by identifying convergences between them as evidence of a particular strand of thought that belonged to this early period in his life.

Before discussing Massignon's *Les trois prières d'Abraham* in greater detail, it is important to note a principle theme that cuts across his reflections and the personal circumstances which influenced his writings. Although the book of Genesis provides a relatively generous account of Abraham in comparison to other biblical figures, both in terms of quantity, as well as breadth of themes, Massignon's reflections on Abraham focus on a very specific aspect of the biblical narratives: the latter's prayers at Sodom, for Ishmael at Beersheba, and for Isaac at Moria. The reasons for his focus on the prayers inform us of his primary interests and general religious outlook. Massignon had also found these prayers and their corresponding biblical narratives meaningful to his own quests and experiences. His exploration of the concept of uranism when he discusses

Abraham's prayer at Sodom could easily be considered out of place, unless one takes into account his homosexual encounters in the past. Similarly, Abraham's prayers for Ishmael would help Massignon in his ongoing quest to understand Islam and its role in the history of salvation. These prayers were undoubtedly significant to his religious life and spirituality, such that he meditated on them at each *Angelus* prayer.³⁷ In addition, Massignon went on a spiritual pilgrimage to biblical historical sites linked to Abraham in 1927. Whilst on an ethnographic mission in the Middle East, he visited Mambre (near Hebron), where Abraham received three angels, and Ur in Chaldea. It was also on this pilgrimage that he felt Abraham's sovereign protection (*la protection souveraine*) for all believers upon his entire life.³⁸ Abraham was therefore of paradigmatic importance to Massignon's religious worldview and spirituality. Abraham's prayers were also appropriated to reflect his own different life concerns and challenges. It is in these writings that Massignon began conceiving in serious ways the interrelationships between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as understood from their respective claims to Abraham.

³⁷ He began meditating on these prayers from 4th of July, 1920. See Massignon, "N.L.," fn.1, 23.

³⁸ Destremau and Moncelon, *Louis Massignon*, 244. The final destination of his pilgrimage was Jerusalem, where he observes that the Holy Land receives all pilgrims and is not the monopoly of any particular race, and it was there that he grasped the meaning of Abraham as the father of all believers. "...au cours de mes missions j'ai essayé de refaire l'itinéraire d'Abraham, du « Lèkhlèkha » (Gen. 12, 1) au « Hineni » (Gen. 21, 2). Je suis parti d'Ur en Chaldée, je suis allé tout près de Harran et jusqu'à Berséba où Abraham a abandonné son fils aîné Ismaël. Je suis allé à Mambré où il a demandé le pardon de Sodome, et enfin à Jérusalem. Là, j'ai compris que c'était le Père de toutes les croyances, qu'il a été le pèlerin, le *gèr*; celui qui a quitté les siens, qui a fait un pacte d'amitié avec les pays étrangers où il venait en pèlerin, que la Terre Sainte n'était pas le monopole d'une race, mais la Terre promise à tous les pèlerins comme lui. » See Massignon, "La foi aux dimensions du monde," 17.

3.4.1 THE PRAYER FOR SODOM³⁹

Massignon's *Prière sur Sodome* (originally in 19 pages) was drafted between 1925 and 1927, later expanded into 32 pages and first printed and distributed to 110 recipients in 1929. He updated his *Prière sur Sodome* in 1949, which he sent out to 200 recipients. The biblical story of Abraham at Sodom had caught Massignon's attention very soon after his reconversion, and had a deep spiritual and personal importance for him then, as it also did at the time he finalised his *Prière sur Sodome* many years after. Massignon sought to underscore the spiritual significance of Abraham in this writing, especially in the latter's intercession for the people of Sodom. The patriarch remained committed to his pact of fidelity with the people of Sodom who welcomed him to their city as a guest, and he offered to substitute himself for the people of Lot through prayer.⁴⁰ Through this intercession, Abraham gained the status of supreme intercessor.⁴¹ For Massignon, the failure of Abraham's prayer to stop God's punishment paved the way for acts of substitution by subsequent generations of righteous men in different societies so that they too can hope to spare humanity of God's wrath. As shall be shown later, this vision allowed Massignon to conceive of Abraham's continued relevance in the *historia sacra* of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

³⁹ The French title in the published version is *La prière sur Sodome*. See Massignon, "P.Sodome."

⁴⁰ "Ici, à Hebron, où il vient de circoncire Ismaël et de s'entendre promettre Isaac, il entre en contestation avec Dieu. Pour sauver des pécheurs avec qui il a refusé d'avoir part au butin, les Chananéens de Sodome." Ibid., 33.

⁴¹ "En cette soirée, sa prière, ébauche de l'intercession mariale, s'élève parfaitement pure et sainte ; le "sein d'Abraham" tressaille ; "l'ami de Dieu" est mûr pour les dernières angoisses de l'amour ; il assiste au décret divin, au seuil de la damnation." Ibid., 34.

There are two particular themes in his reflections on the prayer for Sodom that reflect their deep relevance for his personal life and experiences, in particular, his homosexuality in the years preceding the composition of these prayers. In this context, Massignon speaks at length on the phenomenon of Uranism.⁴² Here, Massignon reads the narrative on Sodom from sociological, historical and psychological perspectives. Unlike most of his other reflections, Massignon moves away from a purely scriptural exegesis. Massignon argues that a relationship constructed on the basis of “friendship of human connaturality” is not “anti-natural”, and therefore *prima facie* not problematic, so long as it is based upon a vow of celibacy and chastity.⁴³ Second is his use of the notions of ‘substitution’ and ‘suffering’. Massignon fervently believed that one should suffer in prayer to save others, as Abraham had done, for the forgiveness of sins of humanity that mirror those of the Sodomites.⁴⁴ Such a prayer should be done in silence and in intimate union with Jesus, together with the deep contemplative souls who live solitary lives of reflection, whether from Christian monastic orders or the “*Abdâl* of the Arabs”.⁴⁵ The personal side to these reflections can thus be gauged from the depth of his spiritual pronouncements in it. The relevance of Abraham’s role in interceding for sinners was keenly felt by Massignon. This therefore helps us in situating the first of his reflections within

⁴² He describes the crime of the Sodomites as “... la tentation uranienne de l’idéalisme qui délivre du joug de la nature et fait sombrer dans l’inversion physique.” Ibid., 36.

⁴³ “Mais, à l’origine, à l’état pur, cette amitié de la connaturalité humaine n’est pas encore “antinaturelle”; si elle s’approfondit dans la pudeur et la chasteté”. Louis Massignon, “T.P.Abraham,” *ibid.*, 139.

⁴⁴ “Le temps paraît venu où il faut, comme Abraham isolé au pays des “efféminés”, aller hardiment à Dieu et, pour sauver le petit troupeau des croyants présents et à venir, prier d’abord pour Sodome ; pour les âmes détenues dans cette cité ...” Louis Massignon, “P.Sodome,” *ibid.*, 52-53.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

his personal contexts. In this prayer, Massignon does not consider the historical relevance of Islam in relation to its Abrahamic siblings. This is only discussed extensively in the next prayer.

3.4.2 THE HIJRA OF ISHMAEL⁴⁶

According to his son, Daniel Massignon, the initial drafts on *Prière pour Ismaël*, initially entitled "*l'Exil d'Ismaël*", were already sketched between 1912 to 1917. These drafts were mostly handwritten, and in their earliest forms, contained a significant number of handwritten editorials. Between 1925 and 1927, he produced an updated version with a new title, *l'Hégire d'Ismaël* (with a length of 15 pages). This work was only finalised in 1935 with the title *l'Hégire d'Ismaël*, typescripted into 66 pages and distributed to 307 recipients. Massignon wrote an important preface drafted in 1925, as indicated in the unpublished version, to accompany this prayer.⁴⁷

Massignon's views on Islam are presented in the *l'Hégire d'Ismaël*, which is the most elaborate of all his reflections on the prayers of Abraham. Unlike many Christians for whom the story of Abraham and Ishmael has relatively little significance, Massignon treats it as one of the most important biblical saga, mainly because its key characters, i.e. Abraham, Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, mark out the nature of the relationship between Islam and both of Judaism and Christianity. In this piece, Massignon discusses the origins and fundamentals of Islam, situating the religion, together with its texts and cultures, within the

⁴⁶ The French title in the published version is *L'Hégire d'Ismaël*. See Louis Massignon, "H.Ismaël," *ibid*.

⁴⁷ "Les trois prières d'Abraham."

Semitic stream of religious development. Pursuant to his interpretive style and methods, Massignon reads the biblical texts typologically, in that past events are understood as prefigurations of future ones. Although his typological reading is derived from within the Christian tradition, it involves the novel aspect of relating the biblical texts to Muslim narratives. In this sense, we could think of Massignon as using an inter-scriptural typology. Whilst the use of the Hebrew Bible in the case of both Judaism and Christianity is intuitive, as both rely on the same Genesis text as the basic source of the Abrahamic narratives, the same cannot be said for Islam as the latter only recognises Muslim sources as authoritative. And as is the case, Islam has its own set of Abrahamic narratives in the Qur'ān. More importantly, Islam's claims to Abraham are constructed on the basis of a rejection of, and differentiation from, Jewish and Christian ideas.⁵⁰ In spite of all these, Massignon sees enough evidence in the relationship between the Muslim representation of Abraham and that of Genesis such that he could associate the two texts in new ways. Unlike the sacrifice of Isaac, which is typically interpreted in the New Testament as a prefiguration of the crucifixion of Christ, the exile of Ishmael and Hagar as a symbol of 'unprivilege' could only be read as a prefiguration of the status of Islam and Muslims, if one chooses to link it to the Muslim story and its claim to Abraham through Ishmael.

Massignon's approach of inter-scriptural typology is built on two closely-knit foundations: philology and historical parallelism. From a philological perspective, Massignon opines that "Hagar" has the same root with the arabic

⁵⁰ On this basis, it has been suggested that one may be thinking of different Abrahams with reference to the three religions. See Brague, *Du Dieu de chrétiens et d'un ou deux autres*, 29-31; Guy G. Stroumsa, "From Abraham's Religion to the Abrahamic Religions," *Historia Religionum* 3 (2011): 19; Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, esp. 8-12.

“*hijra*” (i.e. to leave).⁵¹ By examining root words, he sees the possibility of transhistorical connections, in which later events can be interpolated into earlier narratives, including biblical ones. Second is the historical parallelism between the biblical story and the history of Islam. The *hijra* (migration) of the Prophet Muḥammad from Mecca to the northern city of Yathrib resembled Ishmael's banishment together with Hagar.⁵² Muḥammad's return after the battles to his homeland, Mecca, also paralleled Abraham's return to Ur.⁵³ The change of the title of his work on the second prayer of Abraham from *l'Exil d'Ismaël* to *l'Hégire d'Ismaël* therefore indicates Massignon's intent to interpolate Muḥammad's *hijra* with Ishmael's banishment. That the history of Islam parallels the life of Ishmael is a clear indication to his mind of a divine plan that underscores the Abrahamic roots of the Muslim faith.⁵⁴ But it is only fair to note here that such an approach is grossly inadequate and can mislead, whether from a philological or historical perspective. In particular, even if the *hijra* was a pivotal moment in the prophetic career of Muḥammad, it was far from being its only feature, let alone its defining one. Despite this, Massignon derived from the event a theological significance, arguing from the perspective of historical parallelism that permitted him to

⁵¹ Massignon, "H.Ismaël.", 61.

⁵² Massignon also compared Gen. 21:16, and Qur'ān 53:1-18, in which he found a similarity between the bow distance of Hagar leaving Ishmael, and that between Muḥammad and the divine glory in the incident of *mi'rāj*, i.e. the night ascension. See *ibid.*, fn.4, 68.

⁵³ “Un Abraham qui serait rentré à Ur.” *Ibid.*, 78.

⁵⁴ “Exiled, he too, as was Ismaël in his *hijra*, which is the “counterpart” of Hagar's banishment, Muḥammad leaves Mecca for Yathrib, a city of tribes which had converted to Judaism .. There, due his contact with the Jewish tribes, his prior conscience of his [Abrahamic] roots fueled his desire to avenge his race. Before God, he claims for the Arabs alone the spiritual and temporal inheritance of Abraham.” *Ibid.*, 65.

accentuate the links between Islam and the biblical account of Abraham's life and mission.

Further to this, Massignon situates the origins of Islam in the common Semitic tradition to which all three religions belong. In particular, the Arabic language, with its special qualities,⁵⁵ convinces Massignon of this Semitic root, as it is Arabic (as opposed to Hebrew or Aramaic) that demonstrated the grammatical origins of Semitism.⁵⁶ There are also many Aramaic and Arabic words of a common Semitic origin, demonstrating in the process a progressive evolution of meanings from the former to the latter.⁵⁷ This common Semitic stream of thought would then shape and colour all three traditions.⁵⁸

A core characteristic of this Semitic stream is the idea of a sacred text that establishes the ideals of communal life; the Torah and the Psalms of the Jews, the evangelical books and the sacramental theme of the Passion for Christians, and the Qur'ān for Muslims.⁵⁹ One of the special qualities of the Semitic languages is that they are mediums for the transmission of divine revelation. This argument was however leading towards a controversial conclusion that concerns the veracity of the Qur'ān as a divine revelation. For Massignon, this conclusion can

⁵⁵ For example, he points out that Arabic occupies an intermediary position between the Aryan and agglutinant languages, and is the only surviving language of civilisation.

⁵⁶ Massignon, "H.Ismaël.", 93.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 93-96.

⁵⁸ For Massignon, even arithmetic proves this point. He finds that the arithmetic developed by Muslims has a spiritual dimension, an eminently Semitic thought, as they relate to messianic and Israelite apocalypses. His search for the spiritual dimension of things led him to even compare the different preferences for numbers in the three religions (for example, the number 5 for Islam, 10 for Judaism, and 7 for Christianity). See *ibid.*, 99-100. He also explores the significance of numbers in Semitic thought in "The Notion of "Real Elite" in Sociology and in History," in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, ed. Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1959), 112-13.

⁵⁹ "H.Ismaël.", 89-90.

only be logical, because if Arabic is of Semitic origin and the Qur'ān was in Arabic, then the scripture can be of divine origin.⁶⁰ And if this is the case, consequently the religion that the scripture represents must also be true.

These positive affirmations of Islam's theological truth notwithstanding, Massignon is careful to note major differences between the three religions and to point out the points of divergence in various areas. For example, the status of the Qur'ān as scripture is differentiated from that of the Bible. For Massignon, these differentiations follow from the Abrahamic status of Islam. The Qur'ān is therefore to the Bible how Ishmael is to Isaac.⁶¹ The Qur'ān is also a truncated version of the Bible, in which some parts remain unedited and where the Bible's influence can be found. Stylistically, the Qur'ān adopts that of the Decalogue and the Psalms. Where stories in the Qur'ān are not of Judeo-Christian origins, they relate to the political realities of the Prophet's era, and Arab paganism. The Qur'ān also differs from the Christian sense of scripture and the Judaic notion of covenant as it is a much simpler text that functions only as a reminder by a warner (i.e. Muḥammad) of the most primitive covenant.⁶² Because of its nature, the full extent and significance of revelation would be unknowable from purely within the Qur'ān or if sought solely within Islam. Herein lies the eminent role of Muslim figures of Judeo-Christian backgrounds in the lifetime of the Prophet such as Salman al-Farisi, a former Christian from Persia. Salman was "the perfect friend" who helped Muḥammad to be aware of the sacred elements of revelation

⁶⁰ Ibid., 89.

⁶¹ "Le Qur'ān serait à la Bible ce qu'Ismaël fut à Isaac." Ibid., 89.

⁶² "... c'est le simple rappel, par un avertisseur, du Covenant primitif de l'humanité et de son effrayant Jugement final, du décret qui l'a prédestinée et de la sanction qui la scelle". Ibid., 92.

as already understood by Christians.⁶³ This reading of the Muslim scripture fundamentally differs from that of the Muslim tradition, which views the Qur'ān not only as a complete text in its own right and a *sui generis* text, but confirms previous revelations.⁶⁴ In this regard, any Muslim reader of Massignon's views here will rightly find them of considerable condescension, and this could have jeopardised his rapprochement agenda.

In a similar vein, Massignon interprets the prophethood of Muḥammad. The life and sacred experiences of Muḥammad show that his relationship with the Divine was indirect. In particular, he was presented with the opportunity to access the Divine in what Massignon calls the "supreme Hijra" but refused, and this refusal would now open the access to others.⁶⁵ This is further accentuated in two events recounted in the Qur'ān in *sūra al-Najm*.⁶⁶ Like the status of the Qur'ān, this inaccessibility that characterises Islam and the mission of Muḥammad meant that he could not comprehend and work out fully the interior meanings of belief in God. In this sense, his spiritual mission was incomplete. The consequence of this, according to Massignon, is that the ultimate meaning of

⁶³ "C'est lui, l'ami parfait, le confident inspiré lui "en ouvrit le sens" chrétien ..."
Massignon makes a comparison between Salman and Muḥammad and Khadir and Moses. Ibid., fn.3, 84.

⁶⁴ See Qur'ān 5:48.

⁶⁵ "Non, Mohammad ignorait ce qu'il refusait, il n'avait pas encore vu ; viril, il n'était pas incliné à concevoir le *Fiat* de l'Immasculée ; sous l'emprise d'un ange, il ne pouvait que repérer et proclamer l'inaccessibilité divine ; et comment penser qu'agissant ainsi il devenait l'otage prédestiné de la première déception ? Son exclusion de l'union divine, comme l'exclusion de Moïse de la Terre promise, peut en avoir préparé l'accès pour d'autres en leur faisant désirer l'hégire suprême." Ibid., 70.

⁶⁶ "Le texte très elliptique de la sourate al-Najm (LIII) sur cette extase montre Mohammad enlevé par-delà 'l'horizon suprême', jusque par-devant un Buisson, 'l'ultime jujubier', haie d'épines derrière laquelle Dieu se cache, 'à une distance de deux portées d'arc ou un peu moins.'" Ibid., 69. As Patrick Laude points out, there is a conflation (most likely deliberate) on the part of Massignon between the two events, so as to press on with the idea of the inaccessibility of the Divine. See Laude, *Pathways to an Inner Islam*, 78.

devotion to God is left undiscovered, and the perfect life becomes unattainable. Because Muḥammad has declined the mystical engagement of love, it remains a secret undiscoverable by Muslims.⁶⁷ But neither did Massignon draw this view of the prophetic *mi' rāj* from Muslim sources nor from the self-understanding of Muslims. Instead, he opted for an interpretation that fitted in neatly with his worldview and matched his objectives of stitching together two religious systems. For example, in Muslim pious belief, the *mi' rāj* is the ultimate access to God as a privilege only afforded to Muḥammad. Contrary to Massignon's assumptions then, it was a mark of perfection and honour as opposed to insufficiency and incompleteness.

The above therefore shows the important distinctions that Massignon drew between Islam and its predecessors. Further to this, a unique Abrahamic feature marks each of them: the Islamic observance is a testimony of its faith, whereas Judaism roots itself in hope and a ritualization of its commandments, and Christianity is devoted to charity with its focus on the justification by virtues.⁶⁸ Because "Israel is rooted in hope, Christianity is devoted to charity, and Islam is centered on faith",⁶⁹ the tenacity of the Jewish hope and the insatiable Christian charity are both lacking in Islam. These observations underscore the argument that the Abrahamic as conceived by Massignon goes beyond

⁶⁷ "S'il retrouve gravée dans sa mémoire la tablette du décret créateur enjoignant à un chacun d'adorer, il n'en dégage pas le sens final du précepte ; sa volonté n'ose pas adhérer au conseil de la vie parfaite, décline les fiançailles mystiques ; dont il tait ainsi l'énigme, sous peine de mort, à tous les musulmans, à l'avenir." Massignon, "H.Ismaël.", 70-71.

⁶⁸ "L'observance islamique est avant tout le mémorandum d'un credo, alors que l'observance juive ritualise les commandements prévus dans l'Alliance jurée, et que l'observance chrétienne, après les vérités de son credo et les devoirs de commandement, use des sacrements pour la sanctification par les vertus." Ibid., 98.

⁶⁹ "Si Israël est enraciné dans l'espérance, et la chrétienté vouée à la charité, l'islam est centré sur la foi." Ibid., 98.

recognition of the common origins of these religions. Instead, each tradition carries the Abrahamic promise in significantly different ways. Arising from these important differentiations, Massignon sought to explain the expansion of Islam and its unique historical trajectory. The newly formed Muslim religious community underwent a massive and paradigmatic transformation after it became aware of its Abrahamic roots. With such a potent Abrahamic awareness on the part of the Prophet Muḥammad and his fledgling community, the movement propelled towards an abrupt and explosive transformation in its later Medinan existence. Although Massignon makes no detailed comparison between the earlier period of Islamic history in Mecca and that of Medina, he held on to the then generally accepted theory that Muḥammad became aware of his Abrahamic roots only in Medina as an outcome of his interactions with Jewish tribes resident there.⁷⁰ Thus, although Islam started out preaching a simple faith in one god in the context of a pagan society, it rapidly evolved into a highly charged movement because of its zeal to avenge a deprived past as embodied in Ishmael's unprivileged status. The exile and banishment of Ishmael meant that Muḥammad's mission was to restore the honour and dignity of his community, captured poetically by Massignon that "the history of the Arab race begins with Hagar's tears".⁷¹

⁷⁰ Laude, *Pathways to an Inner Islam*, 79. See also the view expounded by Snouck Hurgronje in chapter one above. However, in a footnote to *l'Hégire d'Ismaël*, Massignon curiously and fleetingly alludes to an observation of the philologist, Mark Lidzbarski, that the same vocalization of Ibrāhīm and Ishmael in Arabic (as found in the Qur'ān) is proof that Muḥammad was aware of his Abrahamic origins whilst in Mecca. This seems to have been his earlier understanding, as corroborated in his handwritten drafts, in which he flirted with the idea that Muḥammad had already known of his Abrahamic origin whilst in Mecca. The sentence carrying that idea was later altered, and never made it to subsequent drafts, nor the published version. Massignon, "H.Ismaël.", fn.1, 75.

⁷¹ "L'histoire de la race arabe commence avec les larmes d'Agar". See "Les trois prières d'Abraham: Père de tous les croyants," in *Parole donnée* (Paris: Julliard, 1962), 288.

Aware of the violated rights of Ishmael, Muḥammad then sought to forcefully reclaim Abraham solely for his race, in both spiritual and temporal terms. As a consequence, the relationship of Muslims with the Jews of Medina had to be reconsidered, especially after the Jews rejected his leadership. This had then caused a total rupture in the way Islam associated itself with the Jewish tradition. The ritualization of Islam swiftly followed suit and took on a legal character, at a time when Muḥammad heard an angelic voice which pressured him to implement God's laws and recounted to him the wrongs of the previously elected people. Muḥammad was told that the earlier communities had betrayed the law, acted against the prophets and conspired against Jesus and Mary. For such wrongdoings, the descendants of Isaac have been stripped of their Abrahamic inheritance, and the Arabs will replace them. This replacement becomes Islam's "positive mission". Massignon notes that this desire to break away from the Jews explains why Islamic ceremonial rites were quickly established. Jewish traditions and rites were replaced, thus, the fast in Ramadan takes the place of the fast on Kippour, the *zakāt* replaces the *shekkel* and the *shahāda* replaces the *Shema*.⁷² The rupture with the Jews is perhaps most powerfully reflected in the change in the direction of prayers (*qibla*) from Jerusalem (in the north) to Mecca (in the south). But Jerusalem remains its final *qibla*, whilst Mecca functions only as a temporary direction, as shown in Muḥammad's night journey and ascension (*mi'raj*). This is further accentuated

⁷² "H.Ismaël.", 75. However, he also points out that not all Muslim practices are of Jewish origins, as some of the laws were already practised in Mecca, such as circumcision at puberty (not at birth), the obligatory ablution before prayers, and Friday as the holy day (in contrast to Jewish law of circumcision at birth, the tahannot commendable before the Sepultur and the sabbath on Saturday). Although they may initially appear as a reaction to Jewish law, Muḥammad had already practised them in Mecca.

in how the mystics consider Jerusalem as the city of the supreme *hijra*. Jerusalem becomes for Islam, what Constantinople was for Christianity. This also explains why Muslims and their leaders such as Saladin had attempted to conquer the city at any cost.⁷³ Islam's fifth pillar, the *hajj*, was conceived as a means to achieve salvation founded upon the traditions of Abraham and is a more elaborated version of the Jewish Passover.⁷⁴ As discussed in the first chapter, the Muslim reaction to the Jews is a view held by several Orientalists. Massignon thus expresses his agreement with such views and interprets the history of Islam in the context of its disassociation from Jews within the established Orientalist framework set by his predecessors.

In Massignon's reading, the socio-political situation in Medina was therefore instrumental to the development of Islam. Muḥammad was prepared to defend his newly discovered roots in unprecedented ways, the most remarkable being his promulgation of the holy war, the *jihād*. Interpreting *jihād* in the Abrahamic context, Massignon explains that it carries a deep and ancestral motif that goes all the way back to Ishmael as a means to regain the abandoned promise and the refused privilege.⁷⁵ It was Muḥammad's conviction in the veracity of his mission that led him to take on Christians in the famous encounter known as the *mubāhala*.⁷⁶ Muḥammad received a delegation of Yemeni

⁷³ Ibid., 72.

⁷⁴ His discussion of this is further expanded in his article "La foi aux dimensions du monde."

⁷⁵ "H.Ismaël.", 64.

⁷⁶ According to the Muslim tradition, the *mubāhala* took place on 22 March 632. Massignon also explains this further in his article *Le signe maria*: "When the Nedjran Christians came to Medina in order to tell the Prophet that they recognized the Messiah of Israel not only as their prophet but as the Creator God, the reaction of Muhammad had been a violent protest in favour of monotheism: how to recognize God in the first

Christians of the Belharith tribe from Najran, challenged them to prove the truth of the Incarnation, and invited them to summon God to settle their difference. Muḥammad's audacity to counter the claims of Christians in such manner showed his confidence in the legitimacy of his Abrahamic mission. The Muslim claim to Abraham no longer becomes a banal matter of creed or doctrine but was ritualized in prayer and recited several times in the believer's daily life to accentuate its primacy for the faith.⁷⁷ Massignon views the prayer as a reference to a theological source, the only incorruptible fragment of Abraham's paternal legacy to Ishmael, rediscovered and venerated with jealous exclusivism. The Muslim faith itself relates directly to the prayer of Abraham, who was later famously proclaimed as the founder of all "muslims".⁷⁸ If Abraham is believed to have been the founder of Islam, it is not surprising then that several Muslim classical scholars have even regarded Abraham as superior to Muḥammad.

Beyond the prophetic era, the awareness of Muslims of their Abrahamic origins continues to fuel their zeal in protecting their religious identity from the reach of Jews and Christians. This explains the proliferation of Muslim apologetical works that sought to defend Islam and criticise other faiths, such as

coming of the son of Mary, as a Messiah reserved for Israel alone, which did not recognize him? Only a judgment of the universal God of Abraham, of whom Muhammad had rightly reasserted the universality (with the Christians against the Jews) could bring about the recognition, in the second coming of Jesus, of the universal omnipotence of God." See "Le signe marial."

⁷⁷ "H.Ismaël.", 66. The prayer to bless Muḥammad and his family, as how God blesses Abraham and his family, is recited once in each of the daily prayers for Muslims. However, Muslim jurists consider the prayer for Abraham as supererogatory (i.e. *sunna*).

⁷⁸ Ibid., 66. This is based on Qur'ān 22: 78.

that written by the renowned eleventh-century theologian Ibn Ḥazm.⁷⁹ The veneration of Muslims for their prophet, even among the most secular followers of the religion, is evidence of a concerted reaction against Israel's obedience to Moses and Christianity's cult of Jesus. The Abrahamic legacy in Islam, despite its limited form, is purer as opposed to the waning enthusiasm that Jews and Christians have for their Abrahamic origins. Arising from a comparison with Islam, Massignon reproaches the Jews for not recognising Jesus as the Messiah, and Christianity "for not having yet achieved that rule of monastic perfection, *rahbaniya*."⁸⁰ Moreover, these latter communities instead choose to preoccupy themselves with other worldly pursuits and neglected and abandoned their Abrahamic privilege.⁸¹

Massignon's vision of Islam and its relationship with other traditions under the banner of the 'Abrahamic religions' was fully presented in the prayer for Ismael. A fuller assessment of his Abrahamic thought will be discussed towards the end of this chapter, and it suffices to note at this juncture that Massignon positioned the mission of Islam as positive but restricted, and that its completion could only be achieved if complemented by the salvation received

⁷⁹ Massignon also points out that Ibn Ḥazm's criticism of doctrines of other religions predate those found in the modern West. See *ibid.*, 105.

⁸⁰ "T.P.Abraham," 141. Massignon also discussed monastic life (i.e. *rahbāniyya*) in Islam and argued for its permissibility in both classical and mystical exegesis. See *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1922), 123-31.

⁸¹ Elsewhere, Massignon contends that Islam continues to exist because of its Abrahamic faith, and that this simple and more primitive faith can be discovered more perfectly by Christians. See "Le signe marial," 220. "On peut dire que l'Islam existe, et continuera à subsister, parce que de foi abrahamique, pour contraindre les chrétiens à retrouver une forme de sanctification plus dépouillée, plus primitive, plus simple; à laquelle les musulmans n'atteignent que très rarement, j'en conviens, mais par notre faute, parce que nous ne la leur avons pas encore montrée en nous, et qu'ils l'attendent de nous, du Christ."

through Christ. In this respect, Islam finds its place within an economy of salvation through its association with Abraham.

3.4.3 THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC⁸²

The shortest of his work, *Le sacrifice d'Isaac*, was first published in *Dieu vivant* in 1949 and later reprinted in *Opera Minora*. Like elsewhere in his reflections, Massignon pursues a typological reading of the texts, which considers the New Testament as the fulfillment of the Old Testament. Accordingly, Abraham's interrupted sacrifice, as with his failed intercession at Sodom, meant that those who inherit his covenant would complete the sacrifice. Specifically here, the near sacrifice of Isaac, the Aqedah, prefigured the coming of Christ. As regards the Muslim accounts of Abraham's sacrifice of his son, Massignon has already addressed this in his *l'Hégire d'Ismaël*. The Muslim version clearly seeks to place the sacrifice outside of Israel and therefore to deny the Crucifixion.⁸³

Massignon's discussion of the prayer of Isaac was written with the aim of explicating his thoughts on Judaism and the question of Jews in Jerusalem in relation to Christians and Muslims.⁸⁴ The Aqedah constitutes a key event in the Jewish claim to Abraham. Yet, because it was a subject laden with political undertones (especially as it concerns the right of religious groups to the Holy Land), Massignon found it most challenging to pen down, as his letter to Dr. Jacobson of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem show.⁸⁵ Despite the brief length

⁸² The French title in the published version is *Le sacrifice d'Isaac*. See "P.Isaac."

⁸³ "H.Ismaël," 96.

⁸⁴ Harpigny, *Islam et Christianisme selon Louis Massignon*, 94.

⁸⁵ See page 127 above.

of his *Le prière sur Isaac*, the issue of where Jews stand in relation to Muslims and Christians had occupied Massignon intensely.⁸⁶ Another plausible reason for the brevity of this piece is its delicate theological consequence. Moreover, Massignon was seeking further advice on the Jewish interpretations of the Bible on Abraham's prayer for Isaac. It appears from a letter written by B. Blecher to Massignon dated 28 February 1939 that the latter had asked Blecher to help him locate Jewish sources and texts on Abraham's prayer for Isaac, and that Blecher had not been able to assist, up until the point the reply was written, because of other personal commitments.⁸⁷ Seemingly uncertain in this respect, he seemed rather contented with the Christian reading of Abraham's sacrifice on which he had written elsewhere. As the following summary of the three works presented below will highlight, Massignon read the *historia sacra* of all three traditions in comparison, but identified the ways in which they were individually unique. In this sense, he saw both commonalities in origins, but differences in their respective growth and development, and this perspective provides useful insights on the theological ways of interpreting the three religions in comparison.

3.4.4 SUMMARY OF THE THREE PRAYERS OF ABRAHAM

Although the focus in each of his reflections is slightly different, Massignon attempts to identify the interrelationships between the three religions centered

⁸⁶ It must be noted that although the "Sacrifice of Isaac" was written and circulated as a separate work, the subject is discussed in several other works of his.

⁸⁷ See Massignon, "Les trois prières d'Abraham."

on a common origin in the figure of the biblical Abraham. In his writings, five main themes can be distilled. First is the common Abrahamic origins that mark a genealogical relationship between a faith community and Abraham, evinced by historical prefigurations and linguistical developments. Applying this to Islam, Massignon argues that its roots as a faith community can be traced back to Abraham via Ishmael. Massignon did not, however, adopt the language of Islam, but instead used the language of Christianity. The vocabulary of his Christian faith was used to interpret Muslim history and doctrines. The second theme is the common Abrahamic spiritual vocation of intercession that is continually being performed by those Massignon calls the apotropaic witnesses (such as the *abdāl* of Islam), whose origins cut across traditional religious boundaries. Third is the function of the Semitic tradition, which bestows upon the three religions shared characteristics, such as the idea of sacred scripture, monotheistic thought, and even numerical significance. Fourth is the various Abrahamic diversities that arise from the different ways each religion carries the Abrahamic promise. In this regard, Patrick Laude rightly notes that for Massignon, Muḥammad appears to be “an Arab Abraham that would have ignored the central message of the Incarnation while keeping perfect allegiance to the original Covenant.”⁸⁸ The final theme is Abrahamic eschatology and values. Here, Massignon talks about a common eschatology in the three religions relating to the shared inheritance of the Holy Land and shared virtues derived from Abraham’s life that has the potential to cement the bonds between the three religions. This theme is further developed in Massignon’s political thought, as the next section discusses.

⁸⁸ "H.Ismaël," 82.

3.5 ABRAHAMIC ESCHATOLOGY AND THE HOLY LAND

The issue of the Holy Land was central to Massignon's Abrahamic paradigm. In this context, Massignon uses the concept of hospitality to assert the rights of various groups to co-exist there. For him, the biblical narratives on Abraham teach that the patriarch's hospitality should open the path to a shared inheritance of the most prized asset that is the Holy Land. As Massignon observes, "[t]he heroic manner in which Abraham lived the virtue of hospitality did not only bring him to inherit the Holy Land, but to allow all foreign guests whom his hospitality had blessed to enter the Land."⁸⁹ Massignon had also written to Martin Buber that he had prayed at the tomb of Abraham in Beni Na'im in one of his visits to Palestine, where the patriarch sought to intercede for the people of Sodom. For Massignon, western colonisation was not unlike Sodom in its neglect of the hospitality of their hosts extended to them.⁹⁰ The notion of sacred hospitality is closely related to pilgrimage. In particular, the *hajj* (Muslim pilgrimage) is a pillar of religious devotion that, arising from Islam's association with Abraham, becomes a key Abrahamic marker. Massignon characterises Muslim souls performing the *hajj* ritual as "Abrahamic". For him, it "is the only

⁸⁹ "Le respect de la personne humaine en Islam, et la priorité du droit d'asile sur le devoir de la juste guerre," 788.

⁹⁰ "Nous continuons à prier, et à jeûner pour la Justice, chaque premier vendredi. J'ai été prier à la tombe d'Abraham, - à Beni Naim, lieu de sa prière d'intercession pour Sodome, la Cité du Refus de l'hospitalité divine (comme la colonisation moderne refuse, lui aussi, l'hospitalité).

en très respectueuse fidélité devant Dieu, le Dieu d'Abraham, d'Isaac, de Jacob "non pas celui des philosophes et des savants"

"Letter to Martin Buber 27 February 1955," in *Martin Buber Archives* (National Library of Jerusalem, 1955).

collective means of sanctification, the asceticism and intercession to the door of the humblest; it is also and above all else the image of incarnation, the worldly pilgrimage of the Word.”⁹¹

There were two main ways in which Massignon’s conception of the ‘Abrahamic religions’ was employed in his role as a diplomat and social activist. Consequently, there is an important socio-political dimension to the ‘Abrahamic religions’. Firstly, Massignon presented his ‘Abrahamic religions’ in the context of the issue of Palestine and the establishment of the state of Israel. Secondly, Massignon used the notion of hospitality in discussing the issue of displaced persons, as well as on North African refugees in Paris. For Massignon, the Jews, as the descendants of Isaac, received the promise of the Holy Land and therefore should act like Abraham in his practice of hospitality, as it led to the acceptance of the first inhabitants of Palestine. In addition, it was also hospitality that led to the creation of a pact which paved the way for his intercession for the people of Sodom. As noted before, Massignon’s position on the “Promised land” had undergone an evolution, from one of exclusionism (i.e. that the land should be owned by Jews) to that of inclusiveness. The crux of the matter was, for Massignon, religious. He suggests that “it is only the deep affection for Jerusalem which can lead to reconciliation between these three antagonistic elements

⁹¹ As he writes in an article published in *Dieu vivant* in 1949, “Le pèlerinage, que ce soit celui de l’Exode hébreu qui culmina au Sinaï, avec la vision, avant de déboucher en Palestine, ou que ce soit celui du Croisé chrétien, peut et doit culminer au seuil de la vision béatifique, mais il nous mène ici-bas, par l’étape sacramentelle de l’hospitalité, de la Maison-Dieu, de l’Hôtel-Dieu, comme disait le Moyen Age, au repas communiel qui est l’aumône de vie spirituelle du Pauvre des pauvres. Le pèlerinage est le seul moyen collectif de sanctification, d’ascèse et d’intercession à la portée des plus humbles.” “Le pèlerinage,” 13.

[Jewish-Christian-Muslim], which are first and foremost religious elements.”⁹² In this context, he invokes Abraham to remind of a shared inheritance of the Holy Land.

If there is any nation where the temporal should give way to the spiritual so as to realize our needs for a united world, it is definitely Palestine: the only point of insertion, and the imposition of the spiritual on the temporal and on geography, as there is no other than the predestined history that is the Holy land, with Jerusalem, since the time of Abraham.⁹³

Again, the concept of Abraham’s hospitality had allowed Massignon to maneuver around the biblical right accorded to Jews to the Holy land, although he recognises that the sacrifice that Jews must make to realize this is the most arduous.⁹⁴ Thus, “Abraham’s hospitality is a preview of the final consummation of the gathering of all the nations blessed in him in this Holy Land which must not be monopolized by anyone.”⁹⁵ Massignon had also felt that “sacred religious personalities” as the spiritual heirs of Abraham would play a role for the problem of Palestine.⁹⁶ As noted before, Massignon advocated and practiced

⁹² Massignon, *Le sionisme et l’Islam*, quoted in Mayeres, “Massignon and Zionism.”

⁹³ “Le probleme des refugies et son incidence sur le Proche-Orient,” in *OM*, ed. Youakim Moubarac (Beirut: Dar al-Maaref, 1963).

⁹⁴ “Parmi les trois groupes, Juifs, Chrétiens, Musulmans, qui trouvent en la Palestine cette patrie, le sacrifice demandé aux Juifs est le plus dur, car ils voudraient garder pour eux seuls cette Terre, symbole de l’Israël spirituel auquel la Bible et les Psaumes convient les autres races ; la légitimité abrahamique de l’Islam n’a guère été reconnue que par Maimonide ; et l’adoption des Chrétiens reste douteuse, tant que l’authenticité de la naissance virginale du Christ ne sera pas, pour eux, et par eux, éclaircie.” “La Palestine et la paix dans la justice,” 740.

⁹⁵ “Le probleme des refugies et son incidence sur le Proche-Orient,” 526.

⁹⁶ “Et je crois, très profondément, au rayonnement social authentique, à travers les siècles, de certaines personnalités religieuses saintes, qui sont à l’origine ou aux noeuds de ces lignes de force spirituelle : Abraham, pour le problème de la Palestine, et un homme, un saint tué hier, Gandhi, pour le problème de l’Inde.” “Ce qu’est la terre sainte pour les communautés humaines qui demandent justice,” 747.

fasting with Jews in the hope for “a fraternal reconciliation between the children of Abraham, especially between the Israelis and the Arabs.”⁹⁷

The issue of Palestinian refugees had also preoccupied him, especially in his later years, as the number of his articles on this show. Massignon laments about the treatment of refugees using the language of sacred hospitality.⁹⁸ In fact, he fervently expressed this plea by describing Abraham as the most displaced person (D.P., as Massignon himself abbreviates). Accordingly, the displaced persons ought to be “discovered” as how God had been.⁹⁹ Without solving the problem of Palestinian refugees, world salvation is at risk. Although he sought to empathise with Israel’s painful experience as having been a D.P. for over two millennia, he reckons that the State could do more to avoid creating

⁹⁷ “ ... pour la réconciliation fraternelle entre tous les fils d’Abraham, spécialement entre Israël et les Arabes.” “Letter to Martin Buber 21 September 1961,” in *Martin Buber Archives* (National Library of Jerusalem, 1961).

⁹⁸ The full text of the quotation is as follows: “[Q]u’on ne sauve pas du désespoir les frères humains à qui on témoigne un “amour de condescendance”. Que nous ne serons pas acquittés au tribunal du dernier jour, si Celui qui nous jugera en leur nom et par leur voix nous dit : “J’avait faim et tu ne m’as pas donné d’espérance; j’avais soif, et ton verre d’eau était plein de drogues artificielles comme le “birth-control”; ta charité m’a traité en otage livré à ta fantaisie, c’est pourquoi tu seras jugé avec la Cité maudite, brûlée pour avoir voulu abuser de l’hospitalité que Loth avait accordée aux deux anges du Seigneur.” Cette société-ci périra si elle ne restaure pas le respect de l’Hôte, la sauvegarde de la Personne Déplacée.” See “Preface - L’homme humilié,” 534.

⁹⁹ “Voici mon témoignage, mais ce témoignage ne vaut, pour cette question des Personne Déplacées, que si c’est une espèce de découverte où je vous conduis. J’ai dit une fois que Dieu n’était pas une invention, mais une découverte. Il ne s’agit pas du Dieu des philosophes indo-européens, il s’agit du Dieu d’Abraham, de celui qui est, si je puis dire, actuellement, la plus profonde des personnes déplacées.” “Le problème des réfugiés et son incidence sur le Proche-Orient.”, 510. Elsewhere, this is similarly expressed. “Lorsque nous recevons une personne déplacée, c’est l’hôte et c’est Dieu que nous recevons.... C’est dans cette conviction du Dieu d’Abraham que je pense que nous devons envisager le problème de la définition technique, en droit international, des Personnes Déplacées, avec incidence sur le Proche-Orient où, précisément se trouvent certains Lieux saints qui seuls, justifient un traitement particulier à une catégorie spéciale de Personnes déplacées dont nous aurons l’occasion de parler davantage et qui se réclame du Dieu d’Abraham.” “Ce qu’est la Terre Sainte pour les communautés humaines qui demandent justice.”, 474-475.

Palestinian D.P.s, in part by invoking "a supranational sense of hospitality."¹⁰⁰ In his anguish amidst the deepening crisis that beset the political situation in the Middle East arising from erroneous western policies, Massignon placed his hopes for Jews and Muslims to resolve the problem.

Everything must be given and sacrificed to God, all that He has given us, the dearest, as for Abraham, ... and each time Israel tried to compromise with its liturgy, it has been harshly punished by God. The Church guesses the coming apostasy of the nations. In the end, it will be from Isaac and Ishmael's children that the renewal will come in order to give the witness of holy men and of a pure sacrifice, facing idolators, the apostate Christians.¹⁰¹

In the case of North African refugees in Paris,¹⁰² Massignon fought hard for assistance and support on their behalf, referring to acts such as providing a meal for these refugees as Abrahamic.¹⁰³ In sum, the concept of the 'Abrahamic religions' had an important socio-political role in Massignon's view, as the themes of reconciliation and hospitality that the concept powerfully embody were potent in offering Massignon hope to deal with the intricate and complex socio-political challenges in his days.

However, it must be noted that despite the continuous reference to Abraham and his faith in Massignon's discussions of the three religions in all his works above, the term 'Abrahamic religions' had yet been used in a direct way. Plausibly, the discussion on how each individual religion relates to Abraham in these writings may have led the focus away from invoking a concept that

¹⁰⁰ "Le probleme des refugies et son incidence sur le Proche-Orient," 518.

¹⁰¹ "Ce qu'est la Terre Sainte pour les communautes humaines qui demandent justice," 474-75.

¹⁰² See "Refugies europeens et migrations internationales."

¹⁰³ "The Qiddush of Abraham had blessed the meal he offered them, and then made the material food licit for the angels. This blessing has made the whole creation enter into this suprahuman society which is based on the meal of hospitality." Ibid., 538.

connects them together. Yet, their interrelationships arising from the Abrahamic inheritance, as well as in his political writings above, clearly show that the idea was already in gestation in the mid-1930s. The next section presents the first of such direct use of the term in a conference memorandum he prepared in 1936.

3.6 FROM ABRAHAM TO THE 'ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS'

Just around the time in which he distributed *l'Hégire d'Ismaël*, he wrote an important but largely summarized memorandum for the World Congress of Faiths held in London on 7 July 1936.¹⁰⁴ In this very brief article, Massignon speaks of the “three Abrahamic religions”, i.e. Israël, Christianity, and Islam,¹⁰⁵ spelling out clearly the differences between them. But here, Massignon clearly writes in the context of religious fellowship, and thus, explains his interpretation of ecumenism. For Massignon, one should not be syncretistic but must instead allow the uniqueness of each tradition to prevail and develop.

[T]hrough world fellowship of believers, union of creeds is to be reached, not by syncretizing, theoretically, and levelling (suppressing) positive dogmas to the lowest common level of natural rationalized religion; but that a true levelling shall, in fact, be realized judicially, at the very end, richer responsibilities beings charged more, and dogmas having been let fully develop, being judged on their fruits.¹⁰⁶

In this piece, he reiterates some of the ideas already written in *l'Hégire d'Ismaël*, such as the jealous exclusivism of Judaism, the simplicity of Islam, and the Christian charity. Likewise, he points out the limited role of Islam whose

¹⁰⁴ The document was however dated as 1937, but only published in Youakim Moubarac's *Opera Minora* in 1963. See "Tu Vertex et Apex."

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 789.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 787.

message was intended only for the unprivileged believers, “before Israël’s and Christendom’s special privileges, remembering both the “legacies” they boast of may condemn them on the Day of Doom.”¹⁰⁷

In 1949, Massignon wrote a shorter and more concise version of the three prayers of Abraham for publication in the journal *Dieu vivant* which he co-founded. In this version, he refers to the three religions as ‘*les trois cultes abrahamiques*’ (i.e. the three ‘Abrahamic religions’). It must be noted that this version was written in specific socio-political contexts: in the post-war period and when he was in his sixties. An introduction to the prayers also indicates clearly a new and urgent significance for the three religious communities to return to their shared Abrahamic origins. Although Abraham’s sacrificial and intercessional roles were already discussed in his *Note liminaire* of 1935, this version would further emphasise the importance of these functions of Abraham and his saintly inheritors who partake in Abraham’s intercessory vocation for humankind.

In this article, Massignon reconnects with spiritual figures with whom he was first acquainted in his early years, those whom he described as “men of prayer and spiritual desire” and with a “saving power”, such as Huysmans, Léon Bloy and Charles de Foucauld.¹⁰⁸ In this context, the monastic tradition is important as it provides humanity with God’s witnesses who are prepared to sacrifice themselves for others.¹⁰⁹ Massignon makes it clear here that such saintly individuals could come from beyond the Christian community. For

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 789.

¹⁰⁸ "H.Ismaël," 93-96.

¹⁰⁹ "T.P.Abraham," 131.

example, within the Islamic mystical tradition, the *abdāl* are also heirs to Abraham's power of intercession and healing compassion.¹¹⁰ Massignon invokes a *ḥadīth* of Muḥammad that prophecises about forty of such men in Islam through whom God will protect human beings. These are men of Abrahamic hearts and carry the burden of the patriarch in interceding for the sinful and saving humanity from God's wrath.¹¹¹ Likewise, the Muslim pilgrimage witnesses "pure, humble, and hidden souls" gather and bow before God in prayer and play the role of Abraham as an intercessor.¹¹² Further to this, there are many acts within the *ḥajj* that hark back to Abraham, such as sacrifice of animals as an emulation of Abraham's own sacrifice.¹¹³ Abraham's prayers are considered as "[a] word given, respected, the last refuge of divine

¹¹⁰ Massignon quotes the Muslim mystic al-Ghazālī on this: "There has always been men yearning towards God and God would not deprive the world of them for they are the pegs of the earth's tent. Their blessing attracts divine mercy upon the earth." See "Les saints musulmans enterrés à Bagdad," 98. Massignon undertakes this theme substantively in his presentation of the mystical vocation of al-Ḥallāj. See for example *La Passion de Husayn Ibn Mansūr Hallāj: La vie de Hallāj*, 1, 28-30, 581. "Dans cette architecture idéale, la notion islamique des "abdāl" ou "piliers invisibles" du monde à chaque génération s'accroche à la notion chrétienne des "âmes royales", compatientes et réparatrices, substituées au Christ dans sa Passion rédemptrice, cimes dressées sur le cycle liturgique à chaque époque de l'Eglise (cf. Huysmans, sur Lydwine de Schiedam). In another article, Massignon describes the role of the *abdāl* further. "De telles âmes amoureuses, qui ont reçu vocation de prier et souffrir pour tous (cf. la prière musulmane des Abdāl, du'â bi'l salâh, inspirée par Khadir-Elias), continuent de grandir, et de faire grandir, en intercédant, après leur mort. Ni l'échec, ni la mort ne flétrissent pour toujours le bon vouloir inachevé d'âmes immortelles, et l'avortement prétendu de leur passé défléuri ne les prive pas de pouvoir reflurir et fructifier enfin, chez les autres comme chez nous-mêmes." "Etude sur une courbe de vie: le cas de Hallaj, martyr mystique de l'Islam," in *OM*, ed. Youakim Moubarac (Liban: Dar Al-Ma'arif, 1963), 189.

¹¹¹ See also "The Notion of "Real Elite" in Sociology and in History," 114. On his discussion on the origins of the *abdāl*, see *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane*, 112-14.

¹¹² "T.P.Abraham," 141. Around the same period, Massignon wrote another article on the Muslim *ḥajj*, describing it as Abrahamic because the ritual gathers believers in Abraham's God.

¹¹³ "Le pèlerinage," 12.

transcendence, of the faithful testimony which quickens all faith and all hope."¹¹⁴

The intercession of Abraham and that of the patriarch's heirs is paramount to healing divisions vested in an era Massignon described in somewhat apocalyptic terms:

At that moment when the terror which conceals from us the approach of our final end makes us turn inwards, to return to our origins, when the toxic malice of our disagreements forces to seek out once again our common ancestors, it is wise to take up once again the links in the spiritual chain of pure witnesses upon which we depend (the *series episcoporum* of Christian ordinations, the *asanid* of the Muslim tradition), and which lead us back to Abraham all the more boldly the more desperate our situation.¹¹⁵

Abraham's role remains poignant and relevant because both Jews and Muslims continue to revere him.

More than any other defender of lost causes, Abraham is an intercessor. For the other saints who can cure us of despair merely cauterize our transitory wounds whereas Abraham continues to be invoked as their Father by twelve million circumcised Jews, who aspire to take possession for themselves alone of that Holy Land which was long ago promised to him, and by four hundred million Muslims who trust patiently in his God through the practice of their five daily prayers, their betrothals, their funerals, and their pilgrimage. The Jews have no more than a hope, but it is Abrahamic. The Muslims have no more than a faith, but it is Abraham's faith in the justice of God.¹¹⁶

Here, Massignon focusses on the shared origins in all three religions and appeals to this origin as a source of strength that each religion can harness, in order for divisions between them to heal.¹¹⁷ Massignon however laments the fact that

¹¹⁴ "The Three Prayers of Abraham," in *Testimonies and reflections: essays of Louis Massignon*, ed. Herbert Mason (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 7.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

¹¹⁷ This view is further expressed in articles he wrote about the Holy Land as a common eschatological theme in both Judaism and Islam because of their shared belief in the resurrection taking place there.

Christianity lacks the emphasis on the Holy Land as shown by the two other religions when, in fact, the true home for Christians has to be Nazareth. The Holy Land, as Massignon reminds, is ultimately a signpost of justice. Thus, “[i]t is there that we must go to hear ... the call of our common father, summoning all hearts which hunger and thirst for justice to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy City.”¹¹⁸ It is also in the Holy Land where one finds the land of their father, Abraham, and this “flight toward the bosom of Abraham, of a pure maternity, to which we must “return”, makes all three traditions united in their eschatological schemes.¹¹⁹ In the later phase of his life, Massignon became increasingly committed to a rapprochement between Christians, Jews and Muslims, accompanied by an increasingly passionate idiolect. In doing so, Massignon passionately invokes the name of Abraham as a common denominator for the three religions, a patriarch with an “ecumenical vocation” which was marked most supremely by his pact of loyalty with the cursed Sodomites.¹²⁰

This version therefore differs from his earlier reflections, in that the ‘Abrahamic religions’ here functions as a common eschatology and forms a kernel of shared virtues derived from Abraham’s life that has the potential to cement the bonds between the three religions. The commonality is invoked here specifically with a hope for a better future. Massignon demonstrably desires such

¹¹⁸ Louis Massignon, *Testimonies and Reflections: Essays of Louis Massignon, selected and introduced by Herbert Mason* (Notre Dame: Ind: Notre Dame University Press, 1989), 20. In his article *La foi aux dimensions du monde*, Massignon writes: “[C]’est à Nazareth que nous devons aller d’abord, là où notre vocation à tous a commencé, si nous voulons sortir de nous-mêmes à l’appel de Dieu et véritablement comprendre cette source de la Foi théologique, qui est l’acquiescement au sacrifice. » See “La foi aux dimensions du monde,” 17.

¹¹⁹ Massignon, *Testimonies and Reflections*, 8.

¹²⁰ “un pacte de loyauté de bagnards qui a été pour Abraham le surprenant point de sa vocation oecuménique...” “T.P.Abraham,” 134.

a goal to materialise and, to that end, even reproaches his own faith for lacking the enthusiasm to pursue such common eschatological destiny, which completes the Abrahamic cycle, from the past, to the present, and beyond. Thus, the 'Abrahamic religions' concludes with a promise and hope that the three religions will one day return to their source in the Holy Land, whose hospitality, it is hoped, will ensure that all will be received with open arms. Massignon's agenda for rapprochement comes out clearly in this expression, in that he desired for Islam to be accepted within a group of faiths already represented by the Judeo-Christian family.

In 1952, Massignon reflected again on the significance of Abraham's faith for him in a response to a questionnaire by André Dez, a French poet and philosopher. Dez had launched an extensive project of surveying views on the idea of God and its consequences on individuals for his journal, *L'Âge nouveau*. In responding to the question of one's understanding and imagination of God,¹²¹ Massignon points to Abraham's faith as its origin and archetype:

It is in the bosom of Abraham, above the Law and in the sacrifice of the «King of Justice» where Abraham was blessed, that all the inspired liturgies of human imploration will find the only "God", principe of their unity.¹²²

This response indicates to us that Massignon's understanding of Abraham did not take place solely within an interreligious context. This is particularly significant, given that this testimony was made in the later stage in his life.

Likewise, he invoked the concept in the context of speaking on theological

¹²¹ The first item in the questionnaire was on one's understanding and representation of God and the context in which one situates such representation. See "Réponse à l' « enquête sur l'idée de dieu et ses conséquences," 5.

¹²² Ibid., 6. « c'est dans le sein d'Abraham, au-dessus de la Loi, dans le sacrifice du " Roi de Justice " où Abraham fut béni, que toutes les liturgies inspirées de l'imploration humaine retrouveront le « Dieu » unique, principe de leur unité. »

commonality (as opposed to purely interreligious) in 1953. Massignon was then the vice-president of the France-Maghreb Committee, and in a press conference on June 29, he spoke at length on the Muslim theological and legal position on the notion of testimony (*al-shahāda*). The issue at hand was a highly controversial one, as it was in opposition to French colonial policies in North Africa. Massignon might have spoken with such passion so as to invite a crude retort from a member of the audience. “How can Muslims accept a declaration made by an “infidel,” a *kafir* [referring to Massignon himself], as disqualifying the testimony of a Muslim?” Massignon responded to not only reject the notion that he was a total outsider to Islam but also to put on record his understanding of the relationship between three religions. He reminded his audience of the validity of a non-Muslim testimony even on a Muslim subject because “there exists between men a common principle of reference, one same God of truth” especially in “the observance of a clear canonical precept.” For Massignon, the “testimony of the word” is of fundamental importance as it brings about “mutual understanding.” Massignon then argues that one who believes

in the equality of origin of the three Abrahamic religions, Israel, Christ and Islam, knows that they each refer to the same “God of Truth.” It is only the “[a]ge-old distortions by them of their own doctrines [that] may have led Jews and Christians to become “infidels,” as Muslim apologists argue [although] the latter allow that there are also Jewish and Christian souls that are pure, *tahirat*; that is to say, souls whose testimony is valid because they are transparent to divine light when they read particular verses of the Qur’ān, such as Sura 24:32 on the impurity of procurement.¹²³

¹²³ Massignon, “Islam and the Testimony of the Faithful,” in *Testimonies and reflections: essays of Louis Massignon*, ed. Herbert Mason (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 43-53, 52-53.

The “Word of God”, whether as Jesus in Christianity, or the “uncreated Qur’ān” in Islam, is a fundamental commonality between Christianity and Islam. Ultimately, “[t]he testimony of a Qur’ānic verse, recited as authentic, carries weight, regardless of the one reciting. Truth shines forth in holiness, even if it comes from the mouth of hell.” In his conclusion, Massignon questioned if understanding can ever be achieved if the common word is rejected.¹²⁴ Here, Massignon offers a paraenesis to argue not only that there is a profound commonality in the form of a shared monotheistic creed of all three ‘Abrahamic religions’, but also to reject the Muslim view that the faith of the Jews and Christians could not be accepted as valid (as “infidels”). In reference to his long-held idea of Christic Muslims, Massignon points out that there are within the Muslim tradition views that accept the faith of Jews and Christians. In this instance, Massignon’s understanding of the ‘Abrahamic religions’ implies that each refers to the same God of Abraham, and their respective scriptures remain sacred even if read by followers of another religion.

Towards the end of his career at the Collège de France, Massignon delivered a series of lectures on the prayers of Abraham.¹²⁵ The thrust of the lecture closely resembled that of the abridged version of *Les trois prières d’Abraham* in 1949, that is, to emphasise the reconciliatory force of Abraham in the modern world. In this period, Massignon’s message was largely focused on rapprochement between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. In this lecture, Massignon argues that Abraham’s historical existence could be attested to by the

¹²⁴ “L’Islam et le témoignage du croyant,” 649.

¹²⁵ The series was given the title “Des convergences de la prière abrahamique, à travers les tendances dogmatiques respectives : de l’Islam, de la Chrétienté, et d’Israël.” See *EM*, vol. 1, 847.

patriarch's prayers which remain unanswered, as seen in the continuing struggles of communities which each of the prayers represented.¹²⁶ The prayer for Isaac is still needed as the state of Israel (represented by Isaac) navigates its way through its political crises, that of Ishmael required as Muslims continue to seek the actualisation of Abraham's blessings, and that at Sodom still desired to bring back the divine hospitality to the colonised.¹²⁷ As each navigates its challenges, it brings its unique Abrahamic quality: the Jews with their hope, the Muslims with their faith, and the Christians with their love for justice.¹²⁸

In the last few years of his professorship at the Collège de France, Louis Massignon was asked if he indeed believed in Islam, because of the evident spiritual affinity between him and the religion. The French Islamicist responded, "I believe in the God of Abraham, real, imminent, personal."¹²⁹ This answer appears as a witty skirting of the question at first glance, but is a deep testimony of a connection between his *Weltanschauung* and the figure of Abraham, and seen in the context of the question posed to him, reveals his interpretation of the

¹²⁶ "La réalité de l'existence historique de "père de tous les croyants", Abraham, est attestée précisément par trois solennelles prières d'Abraham, encore inachevées ; celles qu'il fit pour sauver Ismaël dans son exil, Isaac dans son sacrifice, et les hôtes de Lot dans leur damnation même." See *ibid.*, vol.1, 847.

¹²⁷ "Car si Isaac est encore représenté aujourd'hui par la Knesseth d'Israël, si Ismaël a réapparu avec l'Islam pour réclamer la réalisation de la bénédiction d'Abraham, les prémices de Sodome qu'Abraham fit consacrer par Melchisédech dans une Oblation parfaite, type de l'Église, sont aujourd'hui représentées par cette Chrétienté orgueilleuse, méprisant comme Sodome l'hospitalité divine qu'elle a reçue des "peuples arriérés" dans ses colonies." *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ "Les épreuves subies actuellement par ces trois communautés abrahamiques portent pour chacune une marque spéciale : l'espoir (*ha-tikvah*) pour Israël, la foi (*ikhlâs*) pour l'Islam, l'amour de la justice pour la Chrétienté." *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ To the question posed to him in relation to his lectures at the Collège de France, "Croyez-vous à l'Islam?", Massignon responded, "Je crois au Dieu d'Abraham, réel, imminent, personnel." Massignon, "Le signe marial," 213. *Le signe marial* has been considered as a definitive statement of Massignon's position on Islam and its prophet. See preface of François L'Yvonnet to this article in *ibid.*, 212-13.

Muslim claim to Abraham. Massignon's understanding of the 'God of Abraham' foreshadows his religious self-understanding and unique vision that cut across traditional religious boundaries.¹³⁰

3.7 THE 'ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS': AN EPISTEMIC REFLECTION

The discussion above has sought to trace the evolution of the 'Abrahamic religions' in his thought that spanned several decades. The main source of his thought in this regard is his *Les trois prières d'Abraham*, which constitutes his interpretation of the place of Islam vis-à-vis the two earlier religions with which Islam is intimately connected, both historically and theologically. In this regard, Massignon's interpretation was derived from his unique worldview constituted from both scholarly findings and his spiritual interests. In his *Note Liminaire*, Massignon explains his methods and use of sources. His handwritten notes that relate to this preface attest to his awareness of the need to engage with biblical criticism, particularly source criticism.¹³¹ In the published version of the *Note Liminaire*, Massignon explicates his position on the matter, and dwells on the

¹³⁰ Massignon took the Muslim version of the patriarch's name, "Ibrāhīm", when he became a Franciscan tertiary in 1931. See Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 124. In his memorandum submitted to the World Congress of Faith in London in 1936, he shows awareness of how others perceive him and his thought. "Trying to live, among my Christian brethren, just as I live it among the others, my faith, hope and love, pregnant of the full dogma [*sic*]. My only way to love my friends is to love them personally, with all that may seem to them, in their R.C. friend "queer, obsolete, or borrowed". See Massignon, "Tu Vertex et Apex," 789.

¹³¹ In his handwritten notes, Massignon's focus on biblical criticism is even more evident. He seemed to have done some research on the matter, and aimed to incorporate them in his writings. For example, he writes of five types of criticisms: (1) critique textuelle; (2) critique verbale; (3) critique de parvenance; (4) critique d'interprétation; (5) critique de valeur. "Les trois prières d'Abraham."

inconclusiveness of the field (at the time of his writing) as a reason that could exonerate his approach of eschewing the findings of the field. Although Massignon admits of the possibility that the biblical prayers of Abraham were not those exactly uttered by the figure but composed ex post facto by biblical writers, he casts into doubt the findings of the discipline as representing the historical truth,¹³² although seemingly aware that his stance would attract some dissatisfaction from several quarters.¹³³

In his various writings on the subject, Massignon did not engage in a critical analysis of the Muslim texts except when these contradict the Bible. Generally, Massignon did not dispute the veracity of the Qur'ānic narratives, and adopted the reigning views of Orientalists such as Hurgronje to explain the socio-political background and motivations of some of these Qur'ānic narratives. Massignon, like many of his predecessors, were mainly critical of the Muslim tradition in this regard. Nonetheless, there is little else apart from this that shows a serious engagement with contemporaneous scholarship. He had made fleeting commentaries on selected sections of the Qur'ān related to the topic at hand. For example, neither did Massignon point to the fact that the Qur'ān was silent on which of Abraham's son was intended for sacrifice, nor did he note that there was no exegetical consensus in the Muslim tradition on the matter.¹³⁴ But it

¹³² See "N.L.," 24-25.

¹³³ For example, he admits from very early an acceptance of the biblical narratives. "Devant ceux d'entre eux qui ne croient plus, je confesse que j'accepte en simplicité les chapitres 16 à 22 de la Genèse, qui nous ont transmis ..." See *ibid.*, 23.

¹³⁴ See Qur'ān 37: 99-111, esp. 102 "Then, when (the son) reached (the age of) (serious) work with him, He said: "O my son! I see in vision that I offer thee in sacrifice. Now see what is thy view!" (The son) said: "O my father! Do as thou art commanded: Thou wilt find me, if Allah so wills one practising patience and constancy!" On Muslim exegetical traditions on the subject, see Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands : The Evolution*

is the intention of his writings which may explain this. Massignon seems to have written for a religious audience comprising principally his Catholic fraternity.¹³⁵ This is attested to by several things. First is the distribution lists of his writings, which indicate that most of the recipients of his writings were his Christian colleagues and acquaintances.¹³⁶ Secondly, he employs established Christian exegetical methods which accord scripture with various senses and meanings, such as the literal, allegorical, tropological and anagogical senses of scripture.¹³⁷ He also frequently adopts figurative and typological interpretation styles, from which he derives a transhistorical reading of human history that permits a continuity between past and present religious figures. Although Massignon occasionally quotes non-biblical sources, whether Talmudic, Greek or Muslim, in order to furnish details which the Bible does not provide,¹³⁸ all these do not remove the fact that the biblical narratives form the core of his understanding. Third is his choice to focus on the prayers of Abraham. Faith was a matter of

of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 135-44.

¹³⁵ This can be seen from the list of recipients of his writings, as well as their responses. On the prayer for Sodom, see for example the response of Don Miguel Asin Palacios, the Spanish Orientalist and fellow Islamicist, who expressed his admiration for Massignon's commitment to carry out the apostolic mission which priests such as themselves should be practicing in order to lead more people to God. See Massignon, *Les trois prières*, 151-52. See also the response of Georges Dumézil, a historical anthropologist, describing it as a profound spiritual meditation in *ibid.*, 165.

¹³⁶ On the names of recipients of his works, see *ibid.*, 149-50, 71-74. Two further responses were found in the archives, one from Cardinal von Faulhaber (n°41) from München, dated 7 October 1935, and another from Père Joseph Marechal (n°109).

¹³⁷ This can be seen in his interpretation of Sodom and the exile of Hagar and Ishmael. See Massignon, "P.Sodome," 34; Louis Massignon, "H.Ismaël," *ibid.*, 62.

¹³⁸ For example, in his attempt to be precise on where Abraham had actually prayed for Sodom, he used non-biblical sources to point to the location of Kafar Barucha (called the village of Beni-Naim from the 18th century onwards) nine kilometres from Hebron. When he engages in sociological analyses, such as in his discussion of uranism, he refers to examples from other cultures and societies, and brings modern research to shed further light on history. Louis Massignon, "P.Sodome," *ibid.*, 35.

central importance to his life and works, and through the lens of his Christian faith and understanding, he perceived the world and related to it. One should also note of the long gestational period of his writings, contrasted with the relative brevity of the outputs.¹³⁹ This could be owed to the spiritual nature of his reflections, and that Massignon could have continually been thinking on the theme, especially given the complexity and controversial nature of the subject matter itself.

Massignon adopted the Hallajian paradigm as his entry point to Islam. This paradigm is, nonetheless, not representative of the mainstream. This is where Massignon's weakness lies, in that he seemed to have forced a particular interpretation of Islam on the entire Muslim tradition. This also explains why Massignon faced resistance from both Christian and Muslim camps to some of his ideas. However, the import of some of his ideas remain useful, especially that of his overarching aim to provide for a differentiation of the three religions despite commonalities that bind them together. This means that although it is from Abraham's bosom that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, emanated, each subsequently fulfils different historical trajectories. Islam is interpreted with sufficient sympathy that would not compromise the supremacy of the Christian faith. In enunciating these positions, Massignon attempted to negotiate a novel way for Christians to view Islam, away from a deep heritage of distrust and polemics. Notwithstanding this more positive appraisal of Islam, he had also highlighted the differences between the three religions, some of which are

¹³⁹ The archives show that there were numerous drafts of the prayers, some handwritten, and others typed. Massignon, "Les trois prières d'Abraham." Daniel Massignon's summary of the different titles of these drafts is also particularly useful. See *Les trois prières*, 8-10.

fundamental, which the invocation of the term 'common origins' tends to otherwise obscure.¹⁴⁰ This differentiation that Massignon suggests is significant, as it undermines a strictly ecumenical interpretation of the concept as has often been argued. In particular, the exclusion of Ishmael, and thus, Islam, is particularly important for Massignon, because it is only in this confine that Islam finds its place in the Abrahamic scheme. As Patrick Laude, in his study of Massignon's thought, observes, "[t]he Hegira of Hagar and Ismaël is understood ... as indicative of an exclusion that is only partially compensated for by Muhammad's mission among Ismaël's spiritual progeny."¹⁴¹ It is critical to therefore note that in the *Les trois prières d'Abraham*, Islam is endorsed fully as Abrahamic although Massignon's interpretation "cannot be dissociated from this patriarchal heredity that marks both its nobility and its limits as the Prophet of exclusive transcendence."¹⁴² Thus, it was only after Massignon's acceptance of Islam as an Abrahamic religion that he could closely associate it with the Judeo-Christian religions under the banner of the 'Abrahamic religions'. Nonetheless, he seemed aware of the novelty of his Abrahamic thought and appeared uncertain of the wider reception to his ideas. As such, he remained ambivalent if his writings should ever be published for wider distribution.¹⁴³ It was the paradox in his views that made them controversial and that may have caused his

¹⁴⁰ This is especially in interreligious uses of the term.

¹⁴¹ Laude, *Pathways to an Inner Islam*, 76.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁴³ Louis Massignon's son, Daniel, recounts asking his father before the latter's death if he wanted his writings on the three prayers of Abraham to be published. According to Daniel, "Il me répondit par un geste vague." See Daniel Massignon's foreword in Massignon, *Les trois prières*, 15-16. In an earlier draft of the *Avant-propos*, Daniel writes: "Très embarrassé, il ne m'a pas répondu autrement que par un geste vague." "Les trois prières d'Abraham."

trepidation, i.e. that one could remain a Catholic and also believe in the authenticity of Islam and be sympathetic towards it.

Given the nuances in his interpretation as outlined above, a reading of Massignon's Abrahamic thought that is limited to its ecumenical aspect and import overlooks the defining nature of his writings and the epistemological framework that gave rise to his worldview and style. This framework is rooted in the sacred as an underlying principle in human life and transcends all its boundaries.¹⁴⁴ Yet, the limitations of Massignon's Abrahamic thought must also be recognised. In the final analysis, the notion of the 'Abrahamic religions' in Massignon's thought is a theologoumenon, whose emergence could be attributed to an amalgam of factors. It was an idea that traversed vast expanses of his career, as its evolution traced above has shown. The variegated meanings of the idea in Massignon's thought should also be noted, such as its ecumenical meaning, especially given that Massignon was undoubtedly a man of rapprochement, whose mission it was to truly understand the 'Other'. But even so, the ecumenical perspective as derived from Massignon's thought was not simply about focussing on commonalities between traditions. Further to this, although Massignon had used the concept to serve ecumenical needs, especially in the later part of his career, this does not mean that the concept could and should only be interpreted ecumenically.

¹⁴⁴ For example, he invited Martin Buber to join him and a group of scholars from different religions to speak on the importance of the 'sacred', noting that after the then recently deceased Judah Magnes, Buber was the most appropriate in Israel to speak on the subject. See "Letter to Martin Buber 5 June 1953," in *Martin Buber Archives* (National Library of Jerusalem, 1953).

3.8 CONCLUSION

Massignon's firm proclamation that the Muslim claim to Abraham is "theologically correct" in his preface to Youkim Moubarac's monograph on *Abraham dans le Coran*, as noted in the introduction of this chapter, did not arise from a moment of realisation but came after a lifelong reflection on the place and significance of Abraham in the history of humanity. His reconversion played an axial role in his life and provided the impetus for his quest for Abraham. His thought evolved from the moment he reflected on the importance of Abraham in his worldview many decades before. As this chapter has shown, there is an evolution to his Abrahamic thought that spanned his lifetime and that had eventually led to his conception of the 'Abrahamic religions'. This chapter traced the origins of his Abrahamic thought and its development leading to his conception of the 'Abrahamic religions'.

Massignon had related to Abraham from very early on in his life and the prayers of Abraham held a place of eminent importance in his worldview for large periods in his life. This, in turn, impacted upon the ways he understood the relationship of each religion to the figure of Abraham. Massignon's expressions of the idea clearly contained more than just ecumenical overtones and were much more than just a hope for reconciliation among the three religions born out of a shared heritage and origin. Thus, the 'Abrahamic religions' was invoked in a variety of contexts and expressed differently by Massignon. As his faith deepened with both his spiritual and intellectual encounters with mystical figures and ideas, he also began to view the world differently, both the past and the present. In this regard, he was heavily influenced by the likes of Huysmans

and Claudel. In this paradigm, Abraham no longer remains in the past. His significance and role endure in the present and permeate the future as the intercessory role continues to be fulfilled by selected individuals capable of performing it for the sake of humanity. It is in this context that 'Abraham' gradually evolves into the 'Abrahamic religions'. His exploration of these linkages between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which leads to his conception of the 'Abrahamic religions', takes place in his reflections on the three prayers of Abraham.

Against the notion that the 'Abrahamic religions' is essentially an ecumenical construct that belonged to a specific phase in his life, this chapter has shown an *evolution* of the idea as evinced by his various writings over a long period of time, and which points towards a multiplicity of contexts that underpin it. The concept must therefore be considered in all its richness, as informed by Massignon's spiritual, theological, historical, social, or political considerations. As the next chapter will discuss, the multi-faceted nature of his thought is recognised in discussions and contestations of it that ensued in the works of his students and commentators.

CHAPTER 4

INTELLECTUAL AND RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENTS OF THE 'ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS' POST-MASSIGNON

The 'Abrahamic religions' triggered diverse reactions from both religious and scholarly quarters. Some focussed on either the scholarly potential or pitfalls of the concept, whilst many others harnessed its ecumenical promise, especially with the continued socio-political struggles in the mid-twentieth century in the Arab world and beyond. In both the ensuing expansion and contestation of Massignon's idea, the various meanings, interpretations, and epistemic difficulties associated with the concept of the 'Abrahamic religions' can be discerned. Collectively, they present us with a resource from which a more constructive use of the concept could thereafter be developed. More importantly, by tracing such uses, the development of the 'Abrahamic religions' as a concept both in scholarly and religious circles can be discerned.

Guided by the methods of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriff* which explore the diverse ways, both culturally and linguistically, in which a concept is used, this chapter principally examines the evolution of the 'Abrahamic religions' post-Massignon and up until the contemporary period. This is done in three ways. First is to trace how the concept was developed soon after Massignon, in the works of scholars who discussed the idea, such as Youakim Moubarac, Michel Hayek and René Dagorn. These were written soon after the emergence of the concept, and each scholar wrote with Massignon's proposition in mind. As such, these writings provide us with key insights and perspectives on the meanings of the concept, as they understood it. Second is to examine how the concept was

used in the interreligious context, and this will aid in delineating its features and characteristics. Third is to examine the reception of the concept in modern studies on religion. In line with the rationale of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriff*, concepts may take on new meanings and significance in different contexts, and the aim here is to therefore to show how ideas evolve and the various trajectories they pursue as they are subjected to different influences and circumstances. It seeks to address the various trajectories of the concept since its inception, and argues that it has itself metamorphosed into different usages and taken on new meanings not entirely contingent upon that which Massignon proposed. It argues that this reinforces the notion that ideas evolve and therefore to view it within the confines of a particular historical evolution is to commit an epistemological error.

4.1 IS ISLAM AN 'ABRAHAMIC RELIGION'?

Massignon had an influential following amongst Maronite priests from Lebanon, who came to Paris to be his students. Some of them took up Massignon's ideas and developed them further. In relation to his conception of the 'Abrahamic religions', the most important work is that of his close disciple, the Lebanese Maronite priest Youakim Moubarac (1924-1995).¹ Born in a priestly Maronite family in Kfarsghab, Lebanon, in 1924, Moubarac came to Paris in 1945 and

¹ For a good summary of Moubarac's thought, see Antoine Fleyfel, *La théologie contextuelle arabe: Modèle libanais* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2011), 105-138. Moubarac's Abrahamic thought was discussed in two works: *Abraham dans le Coran* and *Pentalogie islamo-chrétienne: Le Coran et la critique occidentale*, 5 vols., vol. 2 (Beyrouth: Éditions du Cénacle Libanais, 1972-1973), esp. 3-40.

wrote his thesis on Abraham in the Qurʾān.² He later collaborated with Massignon to develop the *Opera Minora*, an extensive compilation of Massignon’s articles written over the course of his career. Moubarac taught classical Arabic at the Catholic Institute of Paris, and was involved in academic work at the Sorbonne, Catholic University of Louvain, Collège de France, and the Le Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS). He was also a participant in the Second Vatican Council as part of the Maronite delegation.³

Massignon wrote a brief preface to Moubarac’s *Abraham dans le Coran*, explaining its significance whilst lamenting the double standards in scholarly attitudes towards sources in the study of the historicity of Abraham. According to him, the reason for this is that if Jews and Christians assert the truthfulness of Islam’s Abrahamic claim, they would then need to also accept the truth of Islam.⁴ Massignon makes a powerful statement in this regard, that Islam’s proclamation of Abraham as the first Muslim is theologically sound.⁵ Massignon’s preface clearly sets the direction for Moubarac’s work, and is therefore a clear testimony of his influence over his students. This is not to say there is little that is new in Moubarac’s work. On the contrary, he offered new and refreshing insights, some of which even went so far as to counter some of Massignon’s assumptions.

² The thesis was later extended into his monograph, *Abraham dans le Coran*. Moubarac prepared the work as a study in the religious sciences within the Faculty of Theology at the l’Institut Catholique de Paris. The members of the doctoral jury were also figures involved in this relatively early period of Christian-Muslim studies, such as Mgr Blanchet (Rector of the Institute), Mgr Fougerat (Vice-Rector), Jean-M. ‘Abdel-Jalil, Jean Daniélou, and l’abbé Jean Starcky. See *Abraham dans le Coran*, fn. 1, 9.

³ Fleyfel, *La théologie contextuelle arabe*, 106.

⁴ See Louis Massignon’s *Liminaire* in Moubarac, *Abraham dans le Coran*, 5.

⁵ “Islam salue en Abraham le “premier des musulmans”, ce qui est vrai : théologiquement vrai.” See *ibid.* Massignon may be referring to the Qurʾān 22: 78. “It is the religion of your father Abraham. It is he who has named you ‘muslims’, both before and in this (Revelation) ...”

Hence, Moubarac's work provides us with a clear example of a development of the 'Abrahamic religions' in the period after Massignon.

Moubarac begins by offering a precise account of the Qur'anic prophetology (by which he means Qur'anic references to both biblical and extra-biblical facts, as well as historical figures whether found in Arab, Jewish, Christian, or other sources of legends). He then studies the Abrahamic narratives and compares them with the narratives of all other prophets. He identifies three principal types of prophetology that can be discerned in the Qur'an: eschatological, doctrinal, and historical prophetology. One of Moubarac's key arguments is that the evolution of the figure of Abraham has less to do with the political situation that Muḥammad found himself in than with an organic growth of his prophethood itself. Moubarac does not dispute that there is an evolution in the Qur'anic portrayal of Abraham,⁶ which, as Snouck Hurgronje first reasoned, was a reaction to the Jewish rejection of Muḥammad's message in Medina. In opposition to Hurgronje, Moubarac contends that this progression is natural and organic.⁸ For Moubarac, the Qur'an uses Abraham as a religious example from its inception until the end of the Meccan period. The Qur'an does not make a claim to Abraham in order to separate itself from Jews and Christians (as argued by many scholars before him), but rather because it had properly discovered in Abraham the perfect religious model which existed prior to the Judeo-Christian tradition which had disfigured Abraham.⁹ Moubarac thus contends that the

⁶ Ibid., 54.

⁸ "[C]ette progression s'accomplit tout naturellement comme une croissance, qu'elle est achevée pour l'essentiel à la fin de la prédication mekkoise, et qu'elle se fait sous l'impulsion d'une pensée religieuse." Moubarac, *Abraham dans le Coran*, 54.

⁹ Ibid., 54-55.

Qur'ānic use of Abraham places this religious priority above any political motifs. Although the Qur'ān's first description of Abraham as a *ḥanīf* took place only in a later period (i.e. in Medina), and this gave rise to the view that such a description was part of the prophet's political maneuvering, Moubarac argues that this late appearance could be attributed to a religious realization (*une appréhension religieuse*) of the prophet. If Muslims rejoiced at the parting of ways of their religion from their predecessors (i.e. Judaism and Christianity), this rejoice could be explained more as a consequence than the objective that Islam had set out to establish. It is the zeal of the Muslim faith and the discovery of Abraham's monotheistic belief, of which it sees itself as the guardian (contra Jewish and Christian corruptions of that belief) that had truly led to its disengagement from both communities.

Moubarac provides several evidences to support this claim. For example, the anti-idolatry context of surahs 6 and 16, and the parallel use of *ḥanīf* in surahs 30 and 10, show that the prophet was guided more by the natural development of his prophetic ideal and by his intransigent monotheism.¹⁰

Moubarac then moves on to argue against H. Lammens' view (identical to those of Wensinck and Hurgronje). In doing so, he responds to two key questions. Firstly, in what ways could he show that the Qur'ān does not ignore the question of the Abrahamic geneology of the Arabs in the Meccan period? Secondly, why is Abraham's parentage of Ishmael mentioned late (i.e. only in Medina) in the Qur'ān? To the first, Moubarac uses a philological consideration, using the views of Rhodokanakis and Lidzbarski, that the word "Ibrāhīm" is modelled after "Ismā'īl" in the Qur'ān. Secondly, Ismā'īl is mentioned in three Meccan surahs

¹⁰ Ibid., 59.

(Qurʾān 19:55, 38:48, 21:85) in ways which his association with Ibrāhīm could still be deduced.¹² Furthermore, the question of an unambiguous association between Ibrāhīm and Ismāʿīl taking place only in the later period in Medina arises if one does not consider Q. 14:38 a Meccan verse. To support his argument, Moubarac cites the views of Tor Andrae and Charles Torrey that the verse is Meccan. Moubarac also offers his own analysis, in that it would be difficult for the Qurʾān to impose on its audience a totally new and foreign fact unheard of in their tradition. Rather, it would have been in line with the general Qurʾānic style to present ideas already in circulation. Citing the views of Buhl, Muir, and F. Nau, Moubarac thus concludes that the Qurʾān could not have invented the legend of Abraham's founding of Ka'ba, but had instead most likely appropriated an old tradition that could have been in circulation in Mecca.¹³

In sum, Moubarac rejects the theory that the Prophet was unaware of his Abrahamic origins in Mecca. Instead, the Prophet had a choice to make and decided to emphasise his monotheistic belief first before providing it with historical and juridical roots.¹⁴ In this context, Moubarac refers to Torrey's idea that Muḥammad had already referred to Abraham in Mecca to establish his religious position with the support of tradition through his Jewish contacts there.¹⁵ However, Moubarac maintains that even this was a secondary goal and came much later. The discovery of Abraham as a religious model was to consolidate Muḥammad's religious position but not to found it. It was an

¹² Moubarac, *Abraham dans le Coran*, 66-67.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 74-76.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁵ Moubarac notes that Torrey's discussion took place in the context of discussing the term "Islām" and not treating the claim to Abraham as a separate subject. See *ibid.*, 72.

essentially positive gain for Muḥammad which he could then use to counter Meccan polytheism.¹⁶ Consequently, Moubarac does not find the Qur'ān's late recognition of its Abrahamic ancestry troublesome. For him, it is more important to properly understand the internal development of these ideas. He goes on to state that the Qur'ānic intention is clear with regards to protecting monotheism from the danger of contamination. For example, Muḥammad had already become aware as a youth of the purity and simplicity of the faith of Abraham, and as such, conceived the notion of God in Islam along the lines of Abraham's primitive faith. Moubarac also echoes Massignon's views on the Qur'ānic representation of Ishmael. He notes that the figure of Ishmael as used in the Qur'ān (i.e. his importance and positive portrayal) counters the Jewish depiction of the figure. Although exiled by Abraham, the positive depiction serves as a vengeance against those who viewed Ishmael and his descendants in negative light, namely the Jews. In spite of this, Muslims still form part of a vast community of believers in the God of Abraham. Ishmael is a biblical prophet but with a special tie to Muslims because his biblical character is associated in the Qur'ān with the illiterate and the separated (i.e. the Muslims). Thus, in this context, Muslims could still be considered a biblical community albeit without their own Bible until the Qur'ān was revealed.¹⁷ In essence, what the Muslim tradition seeks to achieve is the tracing of its roots to the primitive religion of Abraham. By doing so, the Qur'ān presents Islam as the religion of Abraham and that the God it worships is the God of the first monotheism.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 71.

¹⁸ Ibid., 107.

With the increasing interest in the discourse initiated by Massignon, another Lebanese priest, Father Michel Hayek, wrote his *Le mystère d'Ismaël* (thereafter referred to as *Le mystère*). Although of Lebanese origin, Hayek spent 52 years in Paris, and taught at the Catholic Institute of Paris, at the same time serving as a Maronite priest from 1952 to 2003.¹⁹ In this work, Hayek expresses his sympathy and understanding of why Massignon (and possibly others like him) would invoke Abraham as a figure of reconciliation.²⁰ Hayek acknowledges Massignon's role in this regard and in fact dedicates his work to the latter, noting that it was written as a continuation of an interrupted dialogue because of "a misunderstanding on the topic of Abraham."²¹ The prevailing Christian sentiment, which Hayek's work clearly reflects, was that the Muslim claim to Abraham was a challenge. He thus set out to investigate the claim. On the basis of archaeological and ethnological principles, Hayek aimed to show that Islam is a legitimate heir to Abraham, and that it pursues the sacred traditions of the patriarch. In addition, Hayek provides a theological viewpoint. In Hayek's reading, Muḥammad's mission was at equilibrium between its early emphasis on faith and its later emphasis on law around the years 620 and 624, and it is to that period that the most important Qur'ānic references to Abraham could be traced. The movement from one level of claim and argument to another must have therefore occurred in Medina between the said periods, in which the nascent

¹⁹ Fleyfel, *La théologie contextuelle arabe*, 68.

²⁰ "It appears that by harking back into time to the genetic moment of sacred history, one could find in Abraham a pacifier, an arbitrative destiny, the only which has the potential to reconcile, on a basis acceptable to all, those who are so divided on many points within the same monotheism." Michel Hayek, *Le mystère d'Ismaël* (Paris: Mame, 1964), 23.

²¹ Ibid. I have not found any formal exchange between Hayek and Massignon as alluded to here.

Muslim community's relations with the Jews were also taking shape.²² As is widely known, the Jewish community, as well as some Christians in Medina, was unable to accept Muḥammad's "syncretist" message that challenged the privileged election of Israel.²³ This steadily progressed into a complete rupture with the Jews and resulted in the change of the direction of prayer (*qibla*) from Jerusalem to Mecca. Hayek accepts the theory that it was through Muḥammad's contact with the Jews of Medina that he became aware of his descent from the exiled Ishmael. Thus, the discovery of his Abrahamic descent could have been a confirmation of the authenticity of his spiritual message.²⁴ Hayek's views are congruent with many Orientalists (as discussed before) and are only divergent from those of Moubarac. He does not offer anything new or critical in his evaluation of the Muslim claim to Abraham. Nonetheless, he disagrees with the invocation of the 'Abrahamic religions' as a unifying point, because he sees Abraham more as a source of division. As such, he is one of the earliest critiques of the concept on the basis of the assumption that it could serve an ecumenical function.

For Hayek, the problems in this respect are twofold. Firstly, divergences in the representations of Abraham in the three religions mean that there is no common Abraham.

By different ways and arguments, Jews, Christians and Muslims trace their religion and make their own specific claims to Abraham. They do not recognise him by the same characteristics, nor do they claim to inherit him in the same way. Although there are similarities in the biographical details of Abraham in their uses, the interpretation of those facts is

²² Ibid., 31.

²³ Ibid., 77.

²⁴ Ibid., 79.

marked by critical divergences, resulting in an Abraham with three dimensions.²⁵

Hayek also makes a very critical observation that Islam should be rightfully referred to Ishmael, because Islam revives the work of Ishmael who mobilised the excluded Muslim community in protest against the monopoly of God's promise. Accordingly, the Muslim community positions itself as the "middle path" away from both extremes, between polytheism and its indifferentialness (*l'indifférentisme*), and Judaism and its exclusivism. The second problem for Hayek is that Abraham seems more divisive than he is a unifier.

Because if one is right to accord Abraham with a decisive importance in the vision of religious history of the three monotheisms, one could be wrong in confusing the plans upon which Jews, Christians, and Muslims, relate to the abrahamic faith, hope and charity. In fact, between all the common biblical, gospel and Qur'ānic prophets, it is precisely Abraham who accentuates the rupture between the three religions.²⁶

Another discussion of the 'Abrahamic religions' followed Hayek's work, this time in the form of an onomastic study by the French scholar René Dagorn. Like Hayek, Dagorn sympathises with the ecumenical rationale for the idea of the 'Abrahamic religions' because the search for a common ideology based upon a common ancestral source in the context of the spiritual and historical proximities of the three communities would make sense, even if it is located in the shadow of history. For this reason too, they have all often been considered as three derivations with minimal differences from the same source.²⁷ Yet, Dagorn felt it necessary to investigate the Muslim claim scientifically, arguing that it would have been natural for the pre-Islamic Arabs to preserve their affiliation

²⁵ Ibid., 26.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Dagorn, *La geste d'Ismaël*, 2.

with the biblical patriarch Abraham if their Abrahamic descent was indeed true. In doing this, Dagorn was also investigating the prevalent notion of the Abrahamic ancestry of Muslims from a historical perspective, a view espoused not only by Massignon, but by many other Orientalists before him. If this could not be proven, Dagorn was interested to find out when and how such a claim surfaced, then developed, and finally affirmed.²⁸ In order to do this, Dagorn systematically analysed Arab onomastic sources and geneological books such as the *ṭabaqāt*. Dagorn's aim in the study was to show that the pre-Islamic use of the name "Ismā'īl" carried a mark of Judeo-Christian influence.

Surveying more than 105000 individual names among the Arabs and the Quraisy, Dagorn found no reference to the biblical names Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac before Islam, with the exception of one. This was the name Ibrāhīm ibn Ayyūb, an Arab Christian.²⁹ On this basis, Dagorn concluded that the Arabs (in pre-Islamic Arabia) were not in the know of such Abrahamic descent (whether geneologically or spiritually). Rather, this knowledge could only rest with Jewish and Christian communities, as well as some other marginal groups that had had contact with these two communities. It was therefore improbable that the Arabs believed themselves descendants of Ishmael before the emergence of Islam. According to Dagorn, it stands to reason that the Arabs would not have had any idea of their origins in Ishmael, if not for the information they gained from Jews and Christians. In the light of his findings, Dagorn therefore argued that the role of establishing the link between the Arabs and Abraham fell squarely on the prophet of Islam, and that Muḥammad accorded his supposed ancestor a non-

²⁸ Ibid., 3.

²⁹ Ibid., 100.

Arabic name. Muḥammad would go on to construct the link between, on the one hand, his monotheistic conception and the religious ideal, which would replace ancient paganism in Mecca, and on the other, the faith of the biblical patriarch.³⁰

As the works of Moubarac, Hayek, and Dagorn show, Massignon's 'Abrahamic religions' was an idea that was as intriguing as it was controversial. They wrote to discuss its worth, whether historically or ecumenically. Whilst Dagorn started off with a critique of its historical basis, Hayek pointed out the pitfalls of its ecumenical use. In these early reactions to Massignon's thought, the 'Abrahamic religions' was largely critiqued intellectually. These scholars were focussed on investigating its claims, and in the process, demonstrated that both a case could be made for and against it, based on the perspectives and interests that one has in approaching the concept. Yet, the concept began to trigger some serious theological considerations, especially in the context of determining interreligious relations, given the new thinking as proposed by Massignon.

4.2 'ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS' IN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

In the context of interreligious dialogue and relations, the 'Abrahamic religions' has undertaken an autonomous and more influential trajectory than its scholarly uses. The notion of common origins invoked in the context of rapprochement and reconciliation, as found in Massignon's later articulations of the 'Abrahamic religions', would expectedly be of great significance to those hoping to mend ties in a difficult socio-religious situation in the post-war period, especially given that

³⁰ Ibid., 377.

this concept brings together the three religions whose relationships have often been less than desirable. For the purposes of this thesis, the variegated uses of the 'Abrahamic religions', including interfaith, must be considered because of their implication on its epistemic worth. More specifically, by examining how and why it has been used in the context of ecumenism and interreligious relations, we could then distinguish it from any scholarly use. Accordingly, problems associated with the concept because of its ecumenical underpinnings can therefore be clearly identified and addressed.

4.2.1 SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

One of the most remarkable shifts in interreligious understanding took place in the modern period under the auspices of the Second Vatican Council, as is reflected in several of its conciliar documents which discuss the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and those who fall outside its authority. This could be attributed, in the early stages of this transformation, to the visionary leadership of Pope John XXIII (Angelo Giuseppe Cardinal Roncalli, former Archbishop and Patriarch of Venice). His successor, Paul VI (Giovanni Battista Montini), the former Archbishop of Milan, would also continue Pope John XXIII's legacy in this regard. The latter was presiding over a rapidly expanding Church in the developing world, and realised that its increasing reach and contact with communities of different backgrounds demand a more nuanced approach to the outside world.³¹ The new approach was therefore designed to

³¹ Pope John XXIII addressed the Second Vatican Council that "Nowadays, however, the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of

demonstrate more empathy and compassion towards those outside the Church. Paul VI convened the four sessions of the Second Vatican Council, in which both the *ad intra* and *ad extra* dimensions of the Church were revisited. It must be mentioned here that Paul VI was formerly Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini, a member of Massignon's *Badaliyya* group and an acquaintance of the latter.³² The Cardinal had already received Massignon's writing *Prière sur Sodome* in 1949 and thought favorably about it.³³ In the conciliar document *Lumen Gentium*, as in the document on religious freedom entitled *Dignitatis Humanae*, the paradigmatic shift which marked the Church's recognition of the presence of believers in God outside of it is clearly expressed.

Finally, those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God. In the first place we must recall the people to whom the testament and the promises were given and from whom Christ was born according to the flesh. On account of their fathers this people remains most dear to God, for God does not repent of the gifts He makes nor of the calls He issues.³⁴

severity. She considers that she meets the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of her teachings rather than by condemnations." See Walter M. Abbot (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder & Herder and Association Press, 1966), 716.

³² It is therefore not surprising that Massignon has been widely recognised to be instrumental, despite not being directly involved, in the proceedings of the Council. See Jacobus Waardenburg, "Massignon: Notes for Further Research," *The Muslim World* 56, no. 3 (1966): 168; Gude, *Louis Massignon*, 118; Waardenburg, "Louis Massignon (1883-1962) as a Student of Islam," 312, 18, 23; Julius Basetti-Sani, "For a Dialogue Between Christians and Muslims," *The Muslim World* 57, no. 2 (1967): 126-37; "For a Dialogue Between Christians and Muslims," *The Muslim World* 57, no. 3 (1967), 186-196. On a more recent assessment on the extent to which one could attribute to Massignon the change in the position of the Catholic Church towards Islam through the Second Vatican Council, see Christian S. Krokus, "Louis Massignon's Influence on the teaching of Vatican II on Muslims and Islam," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23, no. 3 (2012).

³³ Massignon, *Les trois prières*, 162.

³⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, chapter 2, #16. Second Vatican Council, "Lumen Gentium," (1964), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

With this overarching change in attitudes, the Second Vatican Council's relationship with Islam would also undergo a transformation. What concerns us more is the specific reference to Muslims in the context of the claim to Abraham.

The document declares:

But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind. Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and all things, and as Saviour wills that all men be saved.³⁵

The *Lumen Gentium* therefore acknowledges that there is the Muslim claim to the faith of Abraham. The conciliar document *Nostra Aetate* promulgated on 28 October 1965 would also restate the position:

The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all- powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God.³⁶

These official documents approved by the Second Vatican Council simply state what Muslims belief without issuing a judgment of its religious truth. However, given that Islam had always been viewed negatively by the Church, the use of more inclusive and charitable language, as well as the absence of polemics, attest to a more positive attitude on the part of the Church, and therefore constitutes a major leap on its part.

³⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, chapter 2, #16. Ibid.

³⁶ *Nostra Aetate*, #3. "Nostra Aetate," (1965), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

4.2.2 ISMĀ'ĪL AL-FĀRŪQĪ'S 'ARABISM'

In 1979, the Islamic Studies Committee of the American Academy of Religion brought about an initiative entitled the Inter-Religious Peace Colloquium: The "Trialogue of the Abrahamic Faiths". The trialogue, the first in which such a term was suggested, was convened by the Muslim-Jewish-Christian Conference (MJCC) of America. The MJCC, led by Msgr. Dr. Joseph Gremillion, former Director of the Vatican's Justice and Peace Commission, explained that the purpose was "rapprochement and mutual understanding between the three Abrahamic faiths".³⁷ In his keynote address to the meeting in New York in 1979, Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli from the Vatican expressed solidarity with Muslims for "their acceptance of the Abrahamic faith and in their considering it to be a source of inspiration and a guide for human life".³⁸ However, Ismail R. al-Fārūqī, a participant of the MJCC initiative, views this more from within the perspective of comparative religion. He considered the debates as reminiscent of those which took place in the early Middle Ages in the caliphal courts of Muslim empires, which he suggested gave birth to the discipline of comparative religion. The Palestinian-born Temple University comparativist, whose life was tragically shortened by his murder in 1986 in Pennsylvania, tells of the inherent tensions that some scholars faced when studying in tandem the Abrahamic traditions as a believer in one of those traditions. For such scholars, Abraham lies at the very heart of the tussle for the most authentic claim to, and representation of, the patriarch's faith, whilst maintaining the respect for, and good relations with the

³⁷ Al-Fārūqī, "Foreword", *Trialogue of the Abrahamic Faiths*, ed. Ismail Raji al Faruqi (Maryland: Amana Publications, 1995).

³⁸ Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli, "The Catholic Church and the Jewish and Muslim faiths: trialogue of the three Abrahamic faiths," in *Trialogue of the Abrahamic Faiths*, 1.

'Other'. Al-Fārūqī was such a scholar. Although his rich historical analysis of the 'Abrahamic' traditions has had profound repercussions on his perceptions of the 'Other', al-Fārūqī was always a keen believer and participant in inter-Abrahamic dialogue.³⁹ Intellectually rooted in both the East and West, he has been described as a reformist who was at peace with neither.⁴⁰ Matched with his passion and enthusiasm, al-Fārūqī's language was often sharp and candid.

Al-Fārūqī was committed to his Muslim faith, and worked within the parameters established by classical religious authority. Thus, the Qur'ān occupies the place of utmost authority in his use of sources.⁴¹ Although al-Fārūqī was prepared to criticize Muslim traditions and scholarship, he accepted the canonical sources (i.e. the Qur'ān and the *Sunna*) as an article of faith. Consequently, his self-image of Abraham and its theological implications did not differ significantly from that of classical Islam presented in the first chapter. However, al-Fārūqī did not reject western academic approaches which he found reconcilable with Islamic principles. He was a proponent of the

³⁹ See Ismā'īl Al-Fārūqī, "Islam and Christianity: Diatribe or Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 5 (1968). Like Massignon, al-Fārūqī's scholarly life was preceded by intense and unfortunate political developments which had profoundly affected him, triggering not only his involvement in armed resistance, but also influencing his scholarly life and works. On a brief biography of al-Fārūqī, see Muhammad Shafiq, *Growth of Islamic Thought in North America: Focus on Isma'il Raji al Faruqi* (Maryland: Amana Publications, 1994).

⁴⁰ Ismā'īl Al-Fārūqī, *On Arabism: 'Urubah and Religion* (Amsterdam: Djambatan, 1962), v; Shafiq, *Growth of Islamic Thought in North America*, 9. Al-Fārūqī acknowledged the benefits of both western sciences (i.e. the phenomenology of religion) and the works of Muslim scholars on Islam, but criticized them both sharply for their inadequacies. See Ismā'īl Al-Fārūqī and Lamyla L. Al-Fārūqī, *The Cultural Atlas of Islam* (New York: Macmillan, 1996), xii-xiii; Ismā'īl Al-Fārūqī, *Christian Ethics: A Historical and Systematic Analysis of Its Dominant Ideas* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1967), 3-11.

⁴¹ Al-Fārūqī, "The Role of Islam in Global Inter-Religious Dependence," in *Towards a Global Congress of the World's Religions*, ed. Warren Lewis (New York: Unification Theological Seminary, 1980; reprint, *Islam and Other Faiths*, edited by Ataullah Siddiqui, 71-108. Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1998.), 73; Al-Faruqi, *On Arabism*, 3.

phenomenological method in the study of religions, which he readily employed in his study of Islam. Nonetheless, al-Fārūqī's use of phenomenology as a modern western science can be attributed either to the fact that he had been able to trace its epistemological roots to the Muslim scholar Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī (d. 1048) in the latter's extensive studies on the religions of India, or that he had wanted his works to be accepted by the western audience by using their own methods. In the field of religious history, he had found in western scientific inquiry and historical criticism an indispensable aid, which he applied in his study of Christianity in his *Christian Ethics*, and to some extent, Judaism.⁴²

Al-Fārūqī's interest in Abraham and his history is linked to a key thesis which he had promulgated early on in his academic career, that on 'urūba or Arabism. In line with his theory of Arabism, in which Arabia is the "crucible" or source, Abraham was identified as a Mesopotamian Amorite from Ur, from the tribe of Amurru which had left Arabia for Mesopotamia.⁴³ The Amorrites became nomads in the northern part of the deserts of Arabia but refused assimilation with those whom they encountered. Al-Fārūqī sought to understand this movement, especially one that involved Abraham and his non-assimilation and emigration from his homeland. There were already theological explanations to this movement, which interpreted his emigration as a precursor to the rising of the chosen ones among Abraham's descendants. To Christians, this move

⁴² In his scathing refutation of Judaism's ethnocentrism, which al-Fārūqī linked to the 'racism of Jahiliyyah', al-Fārūqī used textual and source criticism to reaffirm the Qur'ānic position on the veracity of the Torahic texts, in which he asserted that there are two Torahic traditions, the earlier 'universalist' and the later 'ethnocentrist', and that Islam recognises only the first as authentic. See Al-Fārūqī, *Islam and the Problem of Israel* (London: Islamic Council of Europe, 1980); Al-Fārūqī, *Tawhid: Its Implications for Thought and Life* (The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1982).

⁴³ Al-Fārūqī and Al-Fārūqī, *The Cultural Atlas of Islam*, 50.

signified the imminent incarnation of God in Jesus. Not surprisingly, al-Fārūqī finds this explanation grossly inadequate. He preferred the Qur’ānic account, which to him provides a historical, and therefore, more legitimate explanation for Abraham’s movement. In this account, Abraham’s emigration away from Ur arose because of the religious culture which he found repugnant due to his monotheism. Abraham rejected the gods of Ur, such as Marduk, Shamash, the sun god, Enlil, the storm god, and Inanna, the moon goddess, reasoning that a true god would not need helpers. To Abraham, they were but “figments of imagination”.⁴⁴ To support this historical reason further, al-Fārūqī pointed out that this explanation had been widely circulated among Jews living amidst Muslims in the medieval period, as found in the *Midrash Ha-gadol* discovered in Yemen in the eighteenth century.⁴⁵

Abraham’s monotheism meant he was tasked with a universal mission to call others to God. Because he was rejected in Ur, he then brought his second wife, Hagar, and his eldest son, Ishmael, to West Arabia, having impressed upon them a monotheistic belief in God and an ethical and universal vision of humanity. For al-Fārūqī, this belief and vision formed the *ḥanīfism*, which represents the cornerstone and essence of the Abrahamic faith. Al-Fārūqī had also invoked another important concept, the *dīn al-ḥiṭra*, something he referred to as the ‘*religio naturalis*’ or the ‘*Ur-Religion*’ innate in every human being.⁴⁶ It is

⁴⁴ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁵ See also Shari L. Lowin, *The Making of a Forefather : Abraham in Islamic and Jewish Exegetical Narratives* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 116-18.

⁴⁶ Ismā‘īl Al-Fārūqī, "Islam and Other Faiths," in *The Challenge of Islam*, ed. A. Gauhar (London: Islamic Council of Europe, 1978; reprint, *Islam and Other Faiths*, edited by Atallah Siddiqui, 129-160. Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1998), 138-39.

not clear if he meant to equate *dīn al-fiṭra* with *ḥanīfism*, although it is more probable that he had understood it differently; the fact is that the former is associated with a divine inspiration in every human being whilst the latter is associated more with monotheistic belief as made distinct from polytheism. Within his paradigm of *'urūba*, Abraham was a starting point for Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which were moments in this 'Arab stream of being'. Prophets were sent to proclaim and evangelise the core and essence of Abraham's teachings, but also to 'reform and purge' the preceding traditions whenever they steered away from the *milla* of Abraham.⁴⁷ Thus, although the Hebrews had accepted and upheld 'transcendent monotheism' that Abraham bequeathed them, their obsession with superiority later translated into 'physical separatism' or 'ethnocentrism', which contradicted the universalism of the Abrahamic faith. This 'extremist' doctrine led to the monotheism of the Jews degenerating into 'monolatry'.⁴⁸ As the situation persisted, a reform was called for, warranting the arrival of Jesus. Jesus' message was a cure for the ills that had beset both the Jews and the Gentiles. It sought to restore the universalism of the Abrahamic tradition, by decrying Jewish 'ethnocentric particularism' and the materialism and cynicism of the Romans. After Jesus, Christianity had suffered from the theological 'corruptions' of St. Paul and others, which warranted another reform, in the form of Islam brought by Muḥammad.

Al-Fārūqī's perception of each of the Abrahamic traditions occurs within a complex web of historical interlinkages. Thus, his views on Islam were shaped

⁴⁷ Al-Fārūqī, *On Arabism*.

⁴⁸ "A Comparison of the Islamic and Christian Approaches to Hebrew Scripture," *The Journal of Bible and Religion* 31, no. 4 (1963): 111.

by, and at the same time, shaped the way he understood the 'Other'. Islam did not appear as a religion *ex nihilo*, but rather reaffirmed the truth brought forth by the prophets of Judaism and Christianity.⁴⁹ Islam explicitly acknowledges the 'religious truth' of both Judaism and Christianity, and that they stand *de jure* as divinely revealed religions.⁵⁰ In denying the notion that Islam 'borrowed' from Judaism and Christianity, al-Fārūqī's assertion that Islam's claim to both authenticity in teachings and superiority in origin can be gleaned in two ways. First is that Islam is the oldest religion and the religion of Abraham and his descendants, and therefore, predates both Judaism and Christianity. Second is that the Semites themselves originated from the Arabs of the Peninsula, and that the Abrahamic message had transformed the Mesopotamian religious tradition. Seen in this light, Islam has a strong claim on the religious legacy of Mesopotamia, thus, its originality could be established.

In al-Fārūqī's account, there was clearly a pre-Islamic monotheistic tradition, the *ḥanīfiyya*, which was practised by Arabs living in the desert as well as by Jewish and Christian immigrants. The *ḥanīf*s refrained from any form of polytheistic practice, and had "maintained a life of ethical purity above reproach."⁵¹ They were well-known, as they existed in all the Arab tribes. As the purest form of monotheistic belief, Muḥammad associated Islam with it, reportedly saying that "Islam is identical with *ḥanīfiyya*" and the Qur'ān calls Abraham a *ḥanīf*. Al-Fārūqī points out that the *ḥanīf*s were known in Aramaic as

⁴⁹ "The Role of Islam in Global Inter-Religious Dependence," 75.

⁵⁰ Al-Fārūqī and Al-Fārūqī, *The Cultural Atlas of Islam*, 191; Al-Fārūqī, "The Role of Islam in Global Inter-Religious Dependence," 74.

⁵¹ Al-Fārūqī and Al-Fārūqī, *The Cultural Atlas of Islam*, 61.

hanepai, meaning “separated”, a term used pejoratively to mean the distantiation of those who held on to the Abrahamic faith from the institutions of Judaism and Christianity. The Aramaic pejorative sense of the word gave way to the positive Arabic meaning of purity, as after having separated from Judaism and Christianity, the *ḥanīfs* found Islam, which offered them the pure faith they were in search of. By way of such analysis, al-Fārūqī sought to defend Islam’s claim to the religion of Abraham as more justifiable, compared to that of Judaism and Christianity.

As noted above, al-Fārūqī’s concept of Arabism or the ‘Arab stream of being’ helped him cohere the relationship between the Abrahamic religions. This concept was also a reaction against the idea of ‘Semitism’, which he claimed was a new invention of biblical scholars barely a century old. The ‘Arab stream of being’ instead, al-Fārūqī argued, had already existed in the ancient world, even for the Greek philosophers and Hammurabi.⁵² The stream of Arabism evolved from the religions of ancient Assyria and Babylonia, and from it came Judaism, Christianity and finally Islam. Like anything that develops over time, the later religions became more developed and complex. It also meant that Islam had the final say. Al-Fārūqī had also used his theory of Arabism to counter Arab nationalists who had resorted to western-style nationalism. In doing so, al-Fārūqī declared his distaste for western political ideals and theory, offering in its place an Islamo-Arabic concept. Both Islam and Arab were intimately intertwined in al-Fārūqī’s thought.

⁵² Al-Fārūqī, *On Arabism*, 3-11.

Rooting his thesis within an evolutionary concept that originated from the same source, i.e. Abraham, al-Fārūqī was then able to offer a critique of religions that came before Islam. Here, al-Fārūqī articulated his perceptions of the ‘Other’ in often triumphalist and paternalist ways. In his critique of Christianity, he concluded that modern forms of Christianity, arising from the works of key Christian figures such as St Paul, St Augustine and the Reformers such as Luther, Calvin and Barth, were distortions of Jesus’ message.⁵³ To be sure, al-Fārūqī’s assertion was not entirely novel. That Jesus’ message was distorted by some of the Church fathers was already a view widely held by Judeo-Christian sects in early Christianity,⁵⁴ long before an onslaught of rationalistic critiques, particularly on the divinity of Jesus, by the likes of Renan and Strauss in the modern period. However, al-Fārūqī introduced new terms such as “Christianism” and “Christianists” to replace “Christianity” and “Christians”, the latter being reserved for believers before St Paul. Creative as it was, al-Fārūqī’s ambivalence was probably a result of him being a Muslim, who still felt obliged not to utterly reject the ‘Other’, despite his criticisms of them. Furthermore, al-Fārūqī was not an avid fan of Enlightenment thought, rejecting the political philosophy of Hobbes and Locke in his refutation of the views of ‘Abd al-Rāziq.⁵⁵

Not surprisingly, al-Fārūqī’s firm belief in the finality of Islam and its completeness within the Arab stream of being came at the price of negative perceptions of present day Jews and Christians. Nonetheless, al-Fārūqī still recognises the place of Judaism and Christianity, and thus seeks a way to engage

⁵³ *Christian Ethics*.

⁵⁴ See also Novo and Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, 190-93; *ibid*.

⁵⁵ Al-Fārūqī, *On Arabism*, 153-58.

them in a manner that does not compromise his core belief. Unable to arrive at a favourable perception of the 'Other' from both historical and theological viewpoints, but aware of the urgent need to have good relations with them, al-Fārūqī then resorted to a theology-free metareligion, which could transcend the institutionalised religions of Abraham, and open the way for a sorely needed dialogue and cooperation. His concept of metareligion sought to carve out a common space of shared ethical teachings of each religion, one that is free of theological differences that he found irreconcilable. Indirectly, this also meant that al-Fārūqī remained committed to a worldview that informed his perceptions of the 'Other'.

4.2.3 KARL-JOSEF KUSCHEL'S ABRAHAMIC THEOLOGOUMENON

The German theologian Karl-Josef Kuschel revived the Abrahamic concept in the early 1990s for the purposes of ecumenism and reconciliation. In his work *Streit um Abraham, Was Juden, Christen und Muslime trennt – und was sie eint* (translated as *Abraham: A Symbol of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims*), Kuschel's ardent faith in the potency of the Abrahamic theme to heal religious wounds is very apparent. He makes a passionate plea for the three 'Abrahamic religions' to critically re-examine themselves after generations of exclusivist appropriations of Abraham that have led to hostility and enmity. In essence, Kuschel calls for the followers of Abraham to excavate the figure from the ruins of exegesis and interpretations. Only by returning to the Abraham of Genesis can there be hope for the three religions to reconcile. Kuschel nonetheless admits from early on the ahistorical nature of the Abrahamic concept, and thus, speaks of the concept from the outset through the perspective of what he calls

“proclamation”.⁵⁶ According to Kuschel, the “Abrahamic ecumene” cannot be founded on historical claims, nor can be it placed within a historical framework proper. It is a theological construct and therefore, lies outside the realm of history.

Kuschel’s main critique of the three religions is that they have acquired a rigidity and exclusivism because of their ideological aims despite having a common and inclusive figure between them. As he points out:

Recollection of the stories of Abraham has always been part of theology for a specific community of faith; it has been a creative theological reaction to ever new historical demands which the people of Israel was not spared in its tremendous history. Christianity and Islam were simply to continue to write creative Abraham theology on their own account.”⁵⁷

As Kuschel plainly points out, the figure of Abraham has been appropriated in line with the historical and ideological visions of each.

... [A]t the beginning of all three religions lies a source of peace which time and again has been and still is obscured on all sides by fanaticism and exclusiveness. This source is called Abraham. It is called Abraham, Hagar and Sarah, the progenitors of three religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.⁵⁸

Kuschel’s ecumenical proposition would find an updated presentation in the works of the Christian theologian Hans Küng. He identifies common historical themes between the three religions which could, in his mind, make the ecumene a compelling possibility had they not been cast aside in favour of exclusivist tendencies.⁵⁹ Hans Küng illustrates this with the way Ishmael is positively

⁵⁶ Kuschel, *Abraham: A Symbol of Hope for Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, 5.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., xiv.

⁵⁹ Hans Küng, *Islam: Past, Present and Future*, trans. John Bowden (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 45-54.

portrayed in Genesis, and only later Jewish and Christian traditions would firmly establish Isaac's special status over his older brother. Like Kuschel, Hans Küng also probes beyond the overlays of exclusivist interpretations in search of the most basic yet unifying message vested by scripture in the figure of Abraham. He identifies this basic message as Abraham's "trust in God",⁶⁰ which is also the thread that binds the theology of the three religions.⁶¹ No doubt there are obstacles that stand in the way of such ecumenism as Küng acknowledges. As such, he suggests that each religious tradition should look at elements that connect it to the other, whether in prayer (in the case of Judaism and Christianity), spiritual ancestorship, and historical ethnography (in the case of Judaism and Islam). Küng opines that what unites these three is "a largely similar basic understanding of God, human beings, the world and world history."⁶²

The theologian David Burrell sees much potential in deepening further interreligious understanding in the context of the Abrahamic faiths by way of a comparative study of the development of their respective theologies.⁶³ He proposes a triadic comparison, which he admits is more challenging than comparing just two religions. For Burrell, the third tradition occupies a useful mediating role. Burrell explains that his methodology "will proceed more diachronically to show how each tradition, as it develops, displays features cognate to the other, usually with little actual contact." He is thus proposing a

⁶⁰ Ibid., 48.

⁶¹ Ibid., 49.

⁶² Ibid., 54.

⁶³ Burrell cites as a motivation for his work the increase in interfaith initiatives by Christians and Muslims in the wake of Pope Benedict's Regensburg Lecture in 2006, which was widely misconstrued by many Muslim communities. See David Burrell, *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology* (Malden, M.A.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), ix.

new form of hermeneutical exercise, one he calls “creative hermeneutics”, which seeks to retrospectively discover commonalities between the religions in the context of “a completely different interfaith milieu.”⁶⁴ Burrell conceives of a comparative approach that juxtaposes themes (mostly theological and philosophical) addressed independently in each religion, but that could enlighten our own understanding of the common questions and challenges that each faced.⁶⁵ The objective that Burrell hopes to achieve is the deepening of the faith of each through understanding. His work is avowedly set in an interreligious context but one that seeks to blend new approaches in comparative religion.

In the modern period, spiritual readings have been offered by several other thinkers after Massignon. An advocate of such an approach is the Spanish thinker Frithjof Schuon.⁶⁶ Schuon sees the relationship between Islam and previous monotheisms as transpiring in its most fundamental precepts, i.e. that of *al-imān*, *al-islām*, and *al-ihsān*. As he explains,

‘Faith’ [*al-imān*] corresponds to the first of the three monotheisms, that of Abraham; ‘Law’ [*al-islām*] to the second, that of Moses; and ‘Way’ [*al-ihsān*] to the third, that of Jesus and Mary ... Islam for its part contains these three elements side by side, and thus in perfect equilibrium ...⁶⁷

Schuon admits that such translations of Muslim precepts are adequate, but such an interpretation of their meanings could only arise from a spiritual hermeneutic that presupposes the Muslim desire to incorporate previous traditions, as opposed to reacting against them. For example, interpretations of these precepts

⁶⁴ Ibid., xi.

⁶⁵ “[C]onceptual patterns, often developed separately, can illuminate one another once we see them as executing cognate explorations.” Ibid., xii.

⁶⁶ On Schuon’s thought on Islam and its Abrahamic origins, see Frithjof Schuon, *Dimensions of Islam*, trans. P. N. Townsend (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1970), 68-70.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 70.

internal to the Muslim tradition do not generally view each of these as corresponding to the message of a particular past prophet, and by extension, to that of another tradition, but rather cast the concept taken as a whole as a *sui generis* Muslim idea.⁶⁸

A keen advocate of Schuon's spiritual interpretation is Samuel Zinner, who speaks of an Abrahamic archetype between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Zinner suggests that "a *pia interpretatio*" together with dialectical reasoning will show the deeper relationship between the three religions.⁶⁹ For example, he opines that "[t]he two-millennia-long conflict between Judaism and Christianity can be seen essentially as an internecine familial affair involving two different formal branches emanating from a single Abrahamic religious archetype."⁷⁰ Zinner, although following closely the spiritual approaches of Frithjof Schuon and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, is closer here to Karl-Josef Kuschel.

The task of comparing three traditions, from a serious scholarly perspective, is somewhat gargantuan, as many have pointed to. Nonetheless, there has been a lot of interest in focussing on comparing two traditions, in which many writers have reflected on the common origins but different trajectories approach. Although these may not necessarily fall under Abrahamic

⁶⁸ Thus, even in his article that discusses the relationship between Islam and Judaism and Christianity, Seyyed Hossein Nasr explains the three precepts of Islam as understood from the Muslim perspective without any reference to concepts inherited from previous traditions. In particular, the Muslim tradition builds its understanding of these from a hadith which explains their meanings and significance. As Nasr concludes, "[t]he teachings of Islam have levels of meaning, and the religion consists of a hierarchy that, destined to become a religion of whole humanity, had to cater to the spiritual and intellectual needs of the simplest peasant and the most astute philosopher, the warrior and the lover, the jurist and the mystic." See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islam," in *Our Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 471-72.

⁶⁹ Samuel Zinner, *The Abrahamic Archetype : Conceptual and Historical Relationships Between Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Bartlow: Matheson Trust, 2011), viii.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

studies as such, because it leaves out one of the three 'Abrahamic' partners, they nonetheless constitute a ready resource within the broader Abrahamic studies. Several Muslim scholars have thus far provided useful ideas on the subject. The currently Harvard-based scholar Mahmoud Ayoub, whose focus has largely been comparative scriptural studies in Christianity and Islam, is a pioneer in this regard. His studies on scriptural hermeneutics, especially on the subject of Jesus and its biblical reception in Islam, are noteworthy. In several of his writings, Ayoub speaks of an 'Islamic Christology'.⁷¹ Given the state and relevance of Christian-Muslim relations, the subject still needs new and fresh treatments, such as shown in the very recent and insightful monograph by the Muslim theologian Mona Siddiqui.⁷² Her *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus*, offers a deeply personal but also scholarly reflection on comparing Muslim and Christian theologies, especially on conventionally thorny issues such as trinity. Siddiqui takes on such sensitive and theologically provocative questions, but offers an honest engagement with the texts and traditions of both Christianity and Islam, showing both possible convergences and divergences between the self-conceptions of each community.

The 'Abrahamic religions' has also become part of *vulgarisation scientifique*, and some works in this regard have become bestsellers and captured the imagination of the wider public on the topic of religious reconciliation. These include Bruce Feiler's *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of*

⁷¹ See a collection of his essays in Irfan Omar, ed. *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2007).

⁷² Mona Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

Three Faiths,⁷³ and to a lesser degree, David Klinghoffer's *The Discovery of God: Abraham and the Birth of Monotheism*. The concept has even been translated into a spiritual vacation itinerary named the 'Abrahamic Path Initiative', a walking trail programme in the Middle East that seeks to retrace "the cultural memory of the journey of Abraham and his family and celebrates its story of hospitality and kindness to strangers." The basis for the programme echoes the rationale of the Abrahamic ecumene mentioned above, i.e. that of Abraham's parentage of the three religions and that both the similarities and differences in the stories of Abraham are valued. It also aims to celebrate and enlarge the common space between the three religions.⁷⁴

An attempt to synthesise interfaith dialogue with scholarly approaches is Hartford Seminary's 'Building Abrahamic Partnerships'. Although designed as an induction to an interfaith ministry, the programme seeks to expose participants (mostly international) to various aspects of a lived Abrahamic heritage and encourages an exchange of ideas and experiences (as well as an exposure to some element of shared worship) between participants from the three religious communities.⁷⁵ Yehezkel Landau, Director of the programme, situates it within the recent need to construct "new theologies of inclusiveness" which recognises the multiple ways in which God is served.⁷⁶ Another example of this is the

⁷³ In this journalistic work, Feiler appeals to the figure of Abraham as holding the key to unity among the three religions, although he had often been appropriated by each to divide them. Feiler's work became a New York Times bestseller. For a critique of Feiler's work, see Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 174-76.

⁷⁴ <http://www.abrahampath.org/connect/about-us/>. Accessed on 26 September 2013.

⁷⁵ Yehezkel Landau, "Lessons from the *Building Abrahamic Partnerships* Program at Hartford Seminary," in *Meeting of Civilizations*, ed. Moshe Ma'oz (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2009).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 196.

scriptural reasoning initiative of the Children of Abraham Institute, which gathers Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars and activists to discuss their respective scriptures under the “Tent of Abraham” as a resource for conflict resolution.⁷⁷

The various interreligious uses of the ‘Abrahamic religions’ exhibit several features. Firstly is that the concept is often advocated in the context of a less than ideal relationship between the different Abrahamic communities, with the objective of enhancing interreligious understanding between them. Another closely linked feature is the recognition that there are similarities and differences between the religions, but the emphasis is on what unites more than what divides.⁷⁸ Because of the imperative of pursuing commonality, difficulties inherent in the propositions themselves are often glossed over. For example, Hans Küng’s proposition does not address competing elements between the religions, such as in Islam’s rejection of both Jewish and Christian claims to Abraham. The contrasting theologies of these religions are also not accounted for. One needs no reminding here that each religion differs in its idea of God and the nature of its salvation, despite the misleading notion of monotheistic belief that has been applied to all three.⁷⁹ The third feature of an ecumenical use of the concept is the element of engagement and activism that accompanies it. One

⁷⁷ Peter Ochs, “Abrahamic Theo-politics: A Jewish View”, in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh ed.s, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 519-534.

⁷⁸ After listing down the major similarities between the three religions, Leonard Swidler remarks that “the list of commonalities ... will provide us with an initial set of fundamental reasons why it was eventually perceived as imperative for Jews, Christians and Muslims to engage in serious, ongoing dialogue.” See Leonard Swidler, “The Evolution of a Dialogue,” in *Muslims in Dialogue: The Evolution of a Dialogue*, ed. Leonard Swidler (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), viii.

⁷⁹ Brill, *Judaism and World Religions*, 15; Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*.

thus finds the involvement of groups or individuals representing each faith community who meet and exchange views and experiences. These characteristics feature prominently in the examples discussed earlier, and aid our exploration of how a scholarly employment of the concept could differ from its ecumenical uses. The 'Abrahamic religions' thus sits right at the crossroads of a scholarly discipline that seeks to remain objective, scientific and positivistic, and a faith-based inquiry that seeks meaning given an inherited history and contemporary realities.

4.3 CONCEPTUAL CRITIQUES

In what follows, I discuss some of the main objections to the academic use of 'Abrahamic religions'. A major contention relates to its etymology and its historical implications. Critics argue that the concept assumes that a religion termed as 'Abrahamic' must be affiliated in a true historical sense to Abraham, the biblical patriarch. In this context, they raise two related questions. Firstly, could Abraham be ascertained to be a historical figure? Consequently, if used within a scholarly context, the 'Abrahamic' must therefore convey this historical sense or else lose its legitimacy. Secondly, granted Abraham's historical existence, do the different religions speak of the same Abraham? This problem arises because of the different understanding of what constitutes authoritative scripture in the three religions. In the case of Judaism and Christianity, the agreement on the Pentateuch as authoritative in both religions lessens the divide on how to understand Abraham. But Islam's stance of the Qur'ān as a supersessionary revelation presents an intractable obstacle in this regard. Not

only does the Qur'ān reject the biblical narratives, it also provides its own accounts and proclamations on Abraham. One needs to go no further than the Qur'ānic claim that "Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a strict monotheist (*hanīf*), a muslim."⁸⁰ As I discuss next, these objections stem from conceptual concerns in three main areas: epistemic issues that relate to the study of comparative religion, inter-scriptural hermeneutical issues, and the science of the study of religion.

4.3.1 EPISTEMIC PROBLEMS IN COMPARATIVE RELIGION

The contemporary French religious philosopher Rémi Brague problematises the use of several concepts used to collectively refer to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, including 'Abrahamic religions', 'monotheisms', 'religions of the book', and 'the three religions'. Brague notes that the three religions have been associated together from the Middle Ages, originating (albeit negatively) from the notion of 'the three impostors'. He seeks to show that such terms are at once factually untenable and misleading, by mainly arguing that each of these terms has differentiated meanings that are external to the religion's own use (such as the idea of monotheism which can be philosophical and not religious),⁸¹ and therefore could easily be extended to other traditions, beyond the three. In this sense, restricting the term to the three religions is misleading. Secondly, the term may also denote a significance internal to the religion that underscores its

⁸⁰ Qur'ān 3:67.

⁸¹ See also Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 5-6.

specificity. It follows from this that extending it to other traditions that interpret the term differently is unacceptable (as is the case with 'Abrahamic').

More specifically, Brague argues that different Abrahams can be discerned with reference to the different religious traditions. The Jewish and Christian views would necessarily negate Islam's Abrahamic claim, because there is continuity between the Jewish and Christian conceptions of Abraham. This idea is however, not applicable to Islam, which does not recognise the 'Abrahamic religion' except for itself. On top of this, the Abrahamic narratives are essentially of a different character, and vary in fundamental ways, especially in the Islamic case (such as in the narrative of Abraham building the Ka'ba in Mecca). Brague's states his conclusion unapologetically:

Thus, the Abraham that the three religions would have in common is a vague abstraction. This very small common denominator (between them) does not coincide with any of the concrete figures that they respect and to which they identify themselves. To accept this (common) Abraham is to denounce a dimension of the faith of each of them.⁸²

Brague finds the concept misleading, as it imposes a meaning that each individual religion does not identify with. The problem is therefore both historical and etymological (i.e. related to what and who is meant by "Abraham") and its discordance with the histories and self-conceptions of the respective religions.

Another objection to the concept with concerns similar to Bragues', but one that arises from an Islamic worldview is that advanced by Shabbir Akhtar.⁸³ His critique takes place in the context of his broader argument for the Qur'ān as a

⁸² Brague, *Du Dieu de chrétiens et d'un ou deux autres*, 33.

⁸³ Akhtar, *The Quran and the Secular Mind*.

sui generis text whose roots do not hark back to the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Accordingly, Akhtar views the Qur'ānic claims on Abraham as the only authoritative information there is on the figure and dismisses any competing claims or historical examination of possible linkages between Islam and its predecessors. Although claims to Abraham are made in the Qur'ān, this “does not make Islam part of the Abrahamic family. This family, if it exists, is, like most families, dysfunctional and artificial.”⁸⁴

In view of the tainted nature of both Judaism and Christianity, a disassociation of Islam from these religions therefore needs to be made. For Akhtar, Islam, together with its rituals and institutions, and like its foundational text, are *sui generis*. The only bond that ties the religion to its past is its monotheism.⁸⁵ One finds echoes of Renan's voice in this matter, although Akhtar seems to detach himself from any scholarly opinion that originated from Orientalists. For example, he completely disregards studies on the comparabilities between the three religions in some of its rituals and doctrines that make a compelling case for some sort of continuity between them. Most ironically, Akhtar finds odd the Qur'ānic address of Abraham as the father of Muslims, since “Muhammadan Islam does not inherit any institution of ‘Abrahamic Islam’.” Akhtar's arguments, on the whole, are reminiscent of polemical constructions of uses of Abraham in the early histories of the three religions and demonstrate the point by Brague earlier that a common Abraham could not theoretically exist if one considers faith-based conceptions.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 27

⁸⁵ Ibid., 28

For Alon Goshen-Gottstein, the 'Abrahamic religions' is essentially an ecumenical construct serving an interreligious ideology. To him, "the designation 'Abrahamic' emerges carrying within it the suggestion not only of a shared story, but also of an ideal harmonious relationship that should characterize adherents of the three faiths, emanating, as it were, from a common branch."⁸⁶ It is thus not a scientific category, but theologically derived, albeit in a way prejudiced to Christian sentiments. It is pertinent to note though that Goshen-Gottstein admits of his uncertainty on the specific origins of the term and surmises that it was driven by the desire to recognise the existence of other monotheistic religions (hence no longer using the term solely for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and to point towards the greater commonalities between the three religions. In particular, the "[r]eference to the three religions as 'Abrahamic' provides a sense of common history, or at least common story, and a common spiritual paternity."⁸⁷ In view of the problems he associates with the term and the ambiguities that surround it, Goshen-Gottstein proposes that at the very least, a definition of the 'Abrahamic' is in order.⁸⁸ Goshen-Gottstein's conjectural interpretation of the origins and meanings of the concept therefore seems to be his biggest flaw, and arising from it, the problematization of the concept that ensued.

⁸⁶ Goshen-Gottstein, "Abraham and 'Abrahamic Religions' in Contemporary Interreligious Discourse : Reflections of an Implicated Jewish Bystander," 166.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 167.

4.3.2 HERMENEUTICAL ISSUES

Jon D. Levenson offers a more recent critique of the concept of the 'Abrahamic religions' presented as a part of his hermeneutical re-reading.⁸⁹ To be sure, Levenson does not oppose the concept outright, for he recognises ways (however minimal) in which the concept can be accepted.⁹⁰ Like Brague, Levenson opines that the major flaw with the concept is that it signifies a common Abraham that is non-existent in the context of the various conceptions of the respective religions. For Levenson, one would not be able to find an Abraham that stands above and beyond the religions that have appropriated him, making the idea of three equally Abrahamic religions untenable in his measure. As the hermeneutical tradition of each religion shows, Abraham was reimagined and appropriated in "mutually exclusive ways". Each therefore speaks of a different Abraham, and to call them 'Abrahamic religions' implies a common Abraham who simply is not there.⁹¹

Levenson develops his critique further along two lines of investigation, which have yielded some important conclusions. First is historical, in which he

⁸⁹ Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*; See also a summary of this work in Jon D. Levenson, "The Conversion of Abraham to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*, ed. Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

⁹⁰ "To the extent that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are focused on a belief in that God and a proclamation of him to the world, we can indeed speak of them as Abrahamic religions, a confraternity of three communities devoted to the one God whose character was discovered and taught by their common revered antecedent. And to that extent, too, the appeal to Abraham as a source of commonality and kinship among these three groups makes eminent sense and can help defeat the widespread notion that strong religious commitments can be a source only of division and discord." "The Idea of the Abrahamic Religions: A Qualified Dissent," *Jewish Review of Books*, 2010.

⁹¹ "The profoundly antitraditional idea that the "real" Abraham is the original Abraham undercuts all three traditions and, effectively, leaves us with no Abraham at all." *Inheriting Abraham*, 14.

asks if the 'Abrahamic religions' can be a historical designate at all. In this regard, he concludes that it is a futile pursuit, not least because of the problems associated with determining the authoritative source on the life of Abraham. This is especially in view of the fact that Islam does not recognise the authority of the Bible as scripture as it does the Qur'ān, which then undermines any attempt to adopt the Abraham of Genesis as the authoritative source. Nonetheless, the historical pursuit offers a positive takeaway, in that it critically underscores the imaginative and self-reflective nature of the conceptions of Abraham. A particular reason for this, Levenson suggests, is that the presentation of Abraham in the Hebrew Bible is "so elusive, so enigmatic, so suggestive, and so non-didactic, that it calls out, *דרשני* – "Interpret me!" as the Talmudic rabbis would say."⁹² Second is the use of the concept as an interfaith and ecumenical designate. Here, Levenson reacts most aggressively towards initiatives that appropriate the concept for ecumenical purposes, such as those by Bruce Feiler and Karl Josef-Kuschel. He forcefully concludes, "[t]he quest for the neutral Abraham has failed. The patriarch is too embedded in the Torah, the New Testament, and the Qur'ān ... to be extracted and set in judgment upon the traditions that claim him."⁹³

Levenson's critique however leaves us with some useful considerations, as does his impressive marshalling of talmudic material on the interpretations on Abraham.⁹⁴ His extensive analysis of the hermeneutical traditions of each

⁹² Ibid., 39.

⁹³ Levenson, "The Conversion of Abraham", 37.

⁹⁴ See also his *Abraham Between Torah and Gospel* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2011).

religion show that there are “complex patterns of dependence and mutual influence in traditions that change over time.”⁹⁵ The notion of the ‘Abrahamic’ with reference to all three religions is still problematic for Levenson but the purpose it seeks to achieve in a scholarly context is still worthy. He proposes that “[r]ather than inventing a neutral Abraham to whom these three ancient communities must now hold themselves accountable, we would be better served by appreciating better both the profound commonalities and equally profound differences among them and why the commonalities and the differences alike have endured and show every sign of continuing to do so.”⁹⁶ As shall be discussed below, the use of ‘Abrahamic religions’ as an analytical category places this objective as one of its features.

4.3.3 THE STUDY OF RELIGION AS A SCIENCE

The most comprehensive discussion of the use of ‘Abrahamic religions’ as a category in the study of religion that has thus far emerged is Aaron W. Hughes’ *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History*.⁹⁷ Hughes’ work differs from many others above as it specifically focusses on the “epistemic dangers” of the concept as a category in religious studies. This specific study follows his similar questioning of even larger categories such as Judaism and Islam.⁹⁸ For Hughes, what are more important are the particularities of interfaces, influences

⁹⁵ Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 10.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁹⁷ Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions*, 2.

⁹⁸ On Judaism, see Aaron W. Hughes, "Introduction: Judaism, Judaisms, Jewish: Toward Redefining Traditional *Taxa*," in *Defining Judaism: A Reader*, ed. Aaron W. Hughes (London: Equinox, 2012). On Islam, see *Situating Islam : The Past and Future of an Academic Discipline* (London: Equinox, 2008).

(both inter and intra), local experiences, as well as the instabilities of human interactions (*viz.* stability that definitions imply). Hughes' overarching argument is that general categories (of which the 'Abrahamic religions' is one) fail to manifest critical nuances, as well as particularities, in the relationships between entities such as religious communities.⁹⁹ Categorising and defining, whilst often necessary, is full of pitfalls and risks (especially those that relate to essentialising and reifying when there is in actual fact no single essence to be had) to which many have fallen victim. These epistemic traps therefore warrant transparency, self-consciousness and self-reflection on the part of the scholar.

The terms we use, the cognitive categories we manufacture, and the various issues that we deem important are never completely innocent and are often implicated in all sorts of ideological, xenophobic, and racist ideologies. These genealogies have contributed to the manifold ways that we continue to describe, interpret, and explain the various beliefs, institutions, and customs that are regarded as constituent elements of something lazily dubbed as "religion" or "religious."¹⁰⁰

Hughes' argument here is, of course, not unheard of, and reminds us of Jonathan Z. Smith, and after him, Bruce Lincoln, with regards to the need to critically examine categories. Prior to this critique, he has pursued the same method and argument in his study of "Islam" within academia.

With specific reference to the 'Abrahamic religions', Hughes' critique is rooted in two problems associated with the term that he deems as insurmountable for the scholarly employment of the term: its ahistoricity and its ecumenical origins and use. Hughes points out that the category is ahistorical

⁹⁹ According to him, it is "[a] common and omnibus rubric ...[that] threatens local traditions, putting at risk all those many particularities that do not neatly fit a hermeneutic that has been created for other purposes." Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions*, 7, 9.

¹⁰⁰ "Introduction: Judaism, Judaisms, Jewish: Toward Redefining Traditional *Taxa*," 4.

and that Abraham is clearly a mythical figure. This immediately implies that the use of the 'Abrahamic religions' as a historical concept cannot be admitted.

Our employment of "Abrahamic religions" is not simply a terminological mistake, but primarily a categorical one. Rethinking both the term and category 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".¹⁰¹

According to Hughes, "[t]heir resemblances or commonalities have nothing to do with a shared essence or with a religious patrimony. Rather, many of the similarities that we perceive in these three religions are the result of real historical interactions." Instead, each religion's appropriation of Abraham must be understood as ideological, "to legitimate the new in light of the old."¹⁰² And the 'Abrahamic religions' obscures such an examination because "a perceived common or shared origin may result in overlooking the particulars of historical interactions because we have already convinced ourselves that we can reduce such complex interactions to a common source, that is, to Abraham."¹⁰³ As to its ecumenical appropriations, Hughes contends that neither Abraham nor the "Abrahamic" was used before modernity to refer to a commonality or for interfaith relations.¹⁰⁴ The individual claims to Abraham were themselves made

¹⁰¹ *Abrahamic Religions*, 3.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰⁴ If one takes into account that the three religions have been considered from a reconciliatory perspective, the parable of the three rings can be thought of as a manifestation of that. Yet, Hughes does not make reference to such developments at all. It would therefore be spurious to argue that the three religions were never thought of as a collective.

“in an environment of rival and competing claims of religious superiority.”¹⁰⁵

Hughes interprets Massignon’s appeal to Abraham as part of Massignon’s interfaith agenda to bring Muslims and Christians together.¹⁰⁶ In this regard, Abraham provided a key solution to the “spiritual malaise of Europe” and to heal its divisions.¹⁰⁷

In view of the dangers above, Hughes argues that the concept has no place in a scholarly study of religion, and the problem is therefore “the invocation of Abrahamic” as a heuristic principle that claims to do analytical work when it comes to understanding phenomena constructed as “religious” within the academy.”¹⁰⁸ In addition, the concept is nebulous, vague, amorphous, and generic, and also politically motivated. It distorts our understanding as it “prevents us from understanding the complex nature of contact and cross-pollination.”¹⁰⁹ Rather than using such amorphous concepts, Hughes suggests examining “the shared and often liquid borders between various subcultures that exist within each “religion.” How do they go about perceiving themselves (and others), and defining themselves (and others) in the process, in the creation of various overlapping identities?”¹¹⁰ Thus, “[r]ather than use categories developed in theological circles, we must develop and sharpen our own that emerge from witnessing the particulars of historical exchanges and

¹⁰⁵ Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions*, 11.

¹⁰⁶ Hughes surmises that “the term has always been invoked with a theological agenda. Despite this, we continue to use the term as if it denotes some sort of historical referent.” *Ibid.*, 12, 60.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

interchanges.”¹¹¹ Using a fictional example of two individuals who would otherwise drown imperceptibly within the idea of the ‘Abrahamic religions’, Hughes suggests that one studies “thickly” these individuals “in their immediate historical, social, cultural, religious, and intellectual contexts.”¹¹²

Hughes critique is useful, insofar as it highlights some of the potential epistemic problems associated with the use of a concept that (1) emerged within specific contexts and with some ideological underpinnings, and (2) has been used in various other ways, especially in non-academic contexts (such as interfaith and ecumenism). Nonetheless, critiques like Hughes’ are not unproblematic in themselves, especially in their rather hasty dismissal of the category without carefully taking into account its analytical potential. Furthermore, as their arguments have shown, the origins of the concept have not been adequately examined but rather perceived in a conjectural way.

4.4 ‘ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS’ IN ACADEMIC USES

Contrary to the above arguments of critics against the use of the ‘Abrahamic religions’ for academic reasons, some scholars have offered viable suggestions on how the concept could be employed as an instructive analytical category that will profit comparative studies. The following offers three examples that not only employ the concept in a scholarly context but also provide clarification on how and why the concept is heuristically useful. The first example of such a use focusses on the concept as a framework for comparing three religions that

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., 5.

exhibit similarities and differences. The second example examines the interconnectedness of the histories and doctrines of the three religions using the concept of 'braided histories'. The third example explores historical questions relating to the existence of the religion of Abraham and the dialogues concerning this in late antiquity.

4.4.1 'ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS' AS A COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK

The contemporary Islamicist F. E. Peters, offers an extensive comparative work of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, by way of discussing various comparative themes that are common yet approached differently in each religion.¹¹³ Peters addresses the etymological issues with regards to the locution 'Abrahamic religions' and finds the use of "Abrahamic" for each of the three religions justifiable.

[A]ll three may be called "Abrahamic" in the sense that (1) there is an Abraham story at the heart of their long-term memory (the Christians' long term memory is actually the same as the Jews'-it is the Bible, though in somewhat different form); (2) that story has to do with a promise, a covenant, a contract; and (3) each thinks it is the unique beneficiary of that promise, the sole genuine heir among Abraham's children.¹¹⁴

For Peters, the sacred history which can be found in what each religion believes to have happened is as important as the historical quest itself. As such, "[a]t stake here is not what *really* happened, even if that were possible to ascertain, but

¹¹³ F. E. Peters, *Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: The Classical Texts and Their Interpretation*, 3 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). An abridged version is his *The Children of Abraham*.

¹¹⁴ F. E. Peters, *The Monotheists: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conflict and Competition*, 3 vols., vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 377.

rather what Jews, Christians, and Muslims *believe* happened.”¹¹⁵ Further to this, Peters also views the historical aspect of the ‘Abrahamic religions’ differently. As opposed to understanding it as a claim to the historical Abraham, the ‘historical worth’ of the concept, as such, can be discerned from the evolution of the theological claims of each religion to Abraham. Insofar as understanding how each religion relates to Abraham, the concept can therefore be a useful reference. Noting that there are both similarities and differences in the origins of the Abrahamic claim, the task is therefore “to lay out their common roots, their evolution over time, and what I see as their striking resemblances and their equally striking differences.” Nonetheless, Peters cautions of the various landmines in any comparative endeavour. As he explains,

Comparisons can of course be read as invidious; certain resemblances can be parsed as reductive, or relativizing, particularly among believers who are characterized by their conviction of their own unique destiny, as these three certainly are. It is a little like experiencing one’s own personality in one’s offspring, where traits may appear far less endearing and charming than we imagine them in ourselves. It is one of the more salutary effects of forcing these three particular siblings to pose, however briefly, for a family portrait.¹¹⁶

Peters can therefore be said to have laid down the foundations of a framework to study the three religions comparatively, by focussing on themes that are in common between them. This is far from suggesting that differences are to be glossed over, or worse, ignored. As he explains, the framework “will be used principally to elicit the similarities and differences among the three faiths and so render their comparison intelligible, not, in the manner of the critical historian,

¹¹⁵ Ibid., xxiv.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., xviii.

to weigh and verify or discard.”¹¹⁷ Peters’ proposition is easier to assess, because he also provides a model of how this could be done in his three-volume work. In fact, Peters’ work suggests the intractable nature of the relationship between the three religions at various levels: doctrinal, historical, and phenomenological. Nonetheless, Peters’ proposition and project provide an excellent resource for constructing the ‘Abrahamic religions’ as an analytical category.

4.4.2 THE BRAIDED HISTORIES OF THE ‘ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS’

A slightly different and perhaps more contentious suggestion is put forth by Charles Cohen.¹¹⁸ Cohen suggests treating religions as ‘diachronic systems’ that must be set in their specific historical contexts, and one that takes into account interactions and interconnections with the outside, as opposed to ‘synchronic structures’. He proposes the “braided histories” approach, in which the formation of religious traditions is seen as an outcome of its interface and interrelations. As he observes, “Judaism, Christianity and Islam comprise a family of religious traditions with interlocked histories.”¹¹⁹ Cohen suggests that the evidence of this interconnectedness in their history, culture and theological developments can already be seen in locutions such as “Peoples of the Book” and “the monotheistic faiths”. To be sure, Cohen is more than aware of the

¹¹⁷ Ibid., xxiv.

¹¹⁸ Charles Cohen is Director of the Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions, University of Wisconsin-Madison, one of the few university-based institutes recently set up for the study of the Abrahamic religions. See Charles Cohen, “Teaching the Braided Histories of Judaism, Christianity and Islam,” in *The Tenth Annual Conference of the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue* (Doha).

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 6.

contestations and divisiveness which abound. Nonetheless, all these do not diminish the point of convergence, insofar as “cherishing a common revelation centered in their shared veneration for Abraham, discoverer of the One God” is concerned.¹²⁰ Against the structural approach, Cohen opines that the braided historical method’s “primal inclination to contextualize any subject within contingent circumstances grounds an approach to covering multiple religions that is comparative processually rather than formally, and that invites a treatment of the Abrahamic religions which places them in historical contact.”¹²¹

Adopting Cohen’s braided history, it can be said by implication that the ‘Abrahamic religions’ captures in essence a recognition of the historical interconnectedness in the relationships between its constituent members. Further to this, the study of this interconnectedness is not only possible academically, but as he argues, necessary, because it prevents the error of essentialising, or in his own words, “atomizing” these religions. Understood this way, the concept automatically creates a cognitive shift that forces the researcher to look for externalities that may have played a role in analysing a particular development within a single religion. In this sense, Cohen stands on the opposite end of the spectrum relative to Hughes. Where Hughes sees the concept of ‘Abrahamic religions’ as diminishing the possibility of tracing these particular interactivities, Cohen sees the concept as aiding it. In Cohen’s view, the ‘Abrahamic religions’ has an analytical potential which could be harnessed if defined appropriately. However, Cohen’s proposal may invite controversy

¹²⁰ Ibid. Here, one needs to note Levenson’s caution that even the notion of Abraham as a monotheist is not derived from Genesis. It only arose in rabbinic Judaism and is a very clear theme of the Qur’ān. Thus, it is not as prominent an idea in Christianity.

¹²¹ Ibid., 4.

because the “braided history” approach is employed with an ecumenical aim in mind, i.e towards making interfaith understanding a possible outcome of an academic study of the ‘Abrahamic religions’. In other words, Cohen finds a legitimate space for an academic study of the ‘Abrahamic religions’ as used in an interfaith context.¹²² It is however worth remembering that the substance of Cohen's approach remains very much grounded in historical research whilst its fruits may serve interreligious needs.

4.4.3 THE RELIGION OF ABRAHAM IN THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

Both Cohen and Peters discuss the ‘Abrahamic religions’ as a concept regarded as useful to comparatively study the three religions. A third and more nuanced proposition from a historical sense is that advanced by the former Chair of Abrahamic Religions at the University of Oxford, Guy G. Stroumsa.¹²³ Stroumsa recognises that the emergence of the concept in the twentieth-century has a lot to do with the modern political situation in the West as part of its inclusionary move towards the presence of Muslims in its midst. The relatively late emergence of the ‘Abrahamic religions’ therefore has to do with the policy of the inclusion of Muslims in Europe as “part of the cultural fabric of societies which had until recently insisted upon their Christian identity.”¹²⁴ This is akin to the

¹²² See Stroumsa’s disagreement with the merit of an inter-faith like discourse in academia, in Stroumsa, "From Abraham’s Religion to the Abrahamic Religions," 21.

¹²³ "Athens, Jerusalem and Mecca."

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 158. Contrast this with the attempts of German-Jewish scholars of the nineteenth century, as discussed in chapter one. They initiated the research and advanced such arguments. Contrary to this, Muslim scholars of the modern period, especially those resident in the West, rarely made the case for their faith to be as equally Abrahamic as Judaism or Christianity. As such, this argument is at best conjectural.

emergence of the 'Judeo-Christian tradition' earlier in western history.¹²⁵

Although, given the socio-political context of its emergence, as presented in chapter three, this is a factor amongst several in what I have argued to be a more complex evolution. As the case of Massignon amply illustrates, both an intellectual and spiritual rethink of Islam in relation to Christianity went hand in hand, and this would have predated any political motivations or interests on his part, as well as have a major role to play in the formation of the concept. Moreover, those who contributed in developing the idea, such as Moubarac and Hayek, seemed genuinely curious to explore further Muslim claims, in an intellectual environment that is more conducive to permitting credence to the views of other religious communities.

Stroumsa cautions that "[t]he Abrahamic moment did less to promote ecumenism than to enhance the rise of heretical movements, each claiming that its own vision was the only correct one." As such, "[o]ne could perhaps conceive Rabbinic Judaism, Patristic Christianity and Early Islam as three different prosopa, or, perhaps, haireseis, 'parties' (in the original sense of the word) of the Abrahamic movement."¹²⁶ What Stroumsa does here is to critically point out how ecumenical appropriations differ from scholarly utilisation of such concepts; that the former tends to disregard historical evidence in the eagerness to achieve a certain set objective, in this case, that of reconciliation and building of interreligious relations.

Apart from recounting the possible motivations for its formation, Stroumsa calls for a deeper exploration of the interlocking webs of influence in

¹²⁵ Stroumsa, "From Abraham's Religion to the Abrahamic Religions," 19-20.

¹²⁶ Stroumsa, "Athens, Jerusalem and Mecca," 168.

late antiquity that also considers the emergence of Islam. Within such an examination, the idea of 'Abrahamic religions' becomes pertinent to explain the Abrahamic phase in the history of the three religions.¹²⁷ There are two particular ways in which Stroumsa sees this relevance. First is that the origins of the Abrahamic claims of Islam can be traced to both Patristic and Rabbinic *Midrashim* thought, as well as in their attitudes towards the 'Other'. All these form part of the competing tendencies to Abraham's inheritance, which necessarily begins with Christianity as the first to wrestle the claim away from Judaism.¹²⁸ These early sources of influence have therefore provided what Stroumsa terms as "*a praeparatio islamica*", and a model upon which the Qur'ān would map itself in making its claim to Abraham.¹²⁹ The Qur'ānic claim therefore was not to be unexpected, nor was it entirely novel, given the Christian-Jewish polemical precedent.

Second, a more challenging but nonetheless no less worthy proposition concerns the use of the term in a historical context. In other words, was there a 'religion of Abraham' which predated and survived Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in late antiquity? This theory, if proven true, will have paradigmatic scholarly repercussions, given the current propensity to dismiss both the historical content and worth of the 'Abrahamic religions'. Stroumsa draws on

¹²⁷ "Traditional historiography usually deals with polemics against Jews, Gnostics, Manicheans and pagans in so many different frameworks, while the emergence of Islam, at the very end of the Patristic period, is often simply ignored. Hence, in order to fully understand the contribution of Patristic literature to the history of religions in late antiquity, one must study *together* the challenges offered by heretics, Jews and pagans. It is here, I submit, that the idea of the Abrahamic religions may prove useful from a heuristic point of view." Ibid., 158.

¹²⁸ Such as the case with Justin Martyr and the Patristic tradition after him. See *ibid.*, 162.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 156, 59.

several recent studies that are moving closer towards ascertaining the historical Abrahamic moment, as can be discerned from the plausible existence of an Abrahamic cult that predated Islam.¹³⁰ Late antique historians such as Sozomen, who speaks of an “Abrahamic ‘ecumenical’ festival” prior to Constantine’s strict exclusionary policies, or John of Damascus’s portrayal of Islam as a Christian heresy, are instructive in this regard. For Stroumsa, one needs to therefore ‘seek to identify the proximate channels through which such ideas reached the Qur’ān and that these could very well be found in Jewish-Christians or “Abrahamists”’¹³¹

The ‘Abrahamic religions’ for Stroumsa therefore can constitute a legitimate framework for analysis. It guides the comparative study of religion, in this case to take place through a “trinitarian approach” that demands the “[s]tudying *together* different phenomena, seeking to better understand each of them precisely through comparison” and in their proper context, especially in the ‘pagan’ contexts of these religions.¹³² It is therefore in essence a historical study of “the intersection and crosspollination between cultures.”¹³³ Note here again, that like both Cohen and Peters, Stroumsa conceives of the ‘Abrahamic

¹³⁰ As to the suggestion that the ‘religion of Abraham’ is a cult that practices circumcision and sacrifice, see Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 12-13. See also Abrahamism as a monotheistic movement prior to Islam in Novo and Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, 186-90.

¹³¹ Stroumsa, "Athens, Jerusalem and Mecca," 166.

¹³² Stroumsa, "From Abraham’s Religion to the Abrahamic Religions," 21.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 22. See also Stroumsa’s recent article in "Jewish Christianity and Islamic Origins," in *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone*, ed. Behnam Sadeghi, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2015). The plausible origins of Islam are explored in this article, of which the ‘religion of Abraham’ and Jewish Christianity serve as useful heuristic tools, although Stroumsa concludes that given the current evidence, the question of origins of a religion, in this case Islam, remains an elusive one.

religions' as a potent analytical construct on similar themes which Hughes finds problematic, if carried out under the same banner.

4.5 TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY OF THE 'ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS'

In view of the varied uses and meanings assigned to the 'Abrahamic religions' as discussed above, it is imperative to consider if the the concept itself could be typologised into its various types, as informed by the contexts in which it was conceived and used, as well as the functions it serves. A useful typology that may serve as a starting point in this regard is one that is suggested by Michael L. Satlow. Categories are, as Satlow observes, "mental ... formulations created by scholars in order to make useful comparisons [and] can be used as entirely utilitarian, functional, constructs."¹³⁴ According to Satlow, there are three types of categories: (1) first-order categories which are local and contextual such as "religion" and "god", (2) descriptors of human phenomena, and (3) utilitarian, second-order constructs.¹³⁵ In what follows, I suggest a further refinement of Satlow's typology in analysing the various meanings of the 'Abrahamic religions', as discerned from Massignon's thought, as well as recent academic uses of the concept.

¹³⁴ Michael L. Satlow, "Disappearing Categories: Using Categories in the Study of Religion," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 17, no. 4 (2005): 293.

¹³⁵ Ibid. On first-order categories in relation to "religion", see Willi Braun, "Religion," in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 2000).

4.5.1 THEOLOGICAL CATEGORY

Satlow's first-order categories could also be referred to as 'theological categories', which are constructed in order to serve functions that are religiously inspired, i.e. those that are derived from, or motivated by, one's own religious belief. These may include polemical, triumphalist, apologetical, missionising, as well as reconciliatory (or ecumenical) reasons and attitudes. Examples of these in the earliest categorisations include 'true', 'false', and 'pagan' religions. More recent examples include those that have been used for interreligious ends, such as the 'world religions' as used by the Chicago's World Parliament of Religions. Likewise, the 'Abrahamic religions' as used in an interreligious context could also be considered as a theological category.¹³⁸ Historically, one could consider the 'Abrahamic religions' as a theological category that emerged in the thought of Massignon, as his conception arose from theological assumptions and interpretations of the histories and scriptures of the three religions, as discussed extensively in the earlier chapters of this thesis.

4.5.2 ANALYTICAL CATEGORY

Satlow's utilitarian and second-order constructs could also be interpreted as analytical categories. These are scholarly constructions that aid the scholar in his or her comparative work, by providing a theoretical basis upon which similar or comparable entities can be observed. In addition, the concept used as a heuristic tool to identify the interrelationships between the theologies, doctrines, and

¹³⁸ This would also include Massignon's use of the 'Abrahamic religions' for the purposes of rapprochement.

sacred histories of the three religions, would also qualify as an analytical category. As such, the recent academic uses of the 'Abrahamic religions' as presented earlier in this chapter are examples of this type.

Here, the 'Abrahamic religions' functions in a philosophical sense, in that it groups together three religions that emerged in relatively similar, and at times, intertwined, environments, giving rise to a body of commonalities and shared notions, such as a monotheistic idea of God, revelation, scripture, and rituals. In this regard, the 'Abrahamic religions' sets itself apart from other groupings in the comparative study of religion, such as 'Eastern religions' which include Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, and several other minor Asian and Pacific traditions.¹³⁹ The utility of this has been recognised by several workings comparing the various aspects of the 'Abrahamic religions', by leveraging the concept to principally highlight the intertwined nature of these religions and their concomitant religious ideas and concepts. Even historically, works by orientalist scholars in the modern period prior to the emergence of the category, as presented in the first chapter, accentuate the unique relationships between the 'Abrahamic religions' that distinguish them from various other possible categories of religions.

In the previous chapter, the uses of the 'Abrahamic religions' have shown how, in recent times, the term helpfully focus comparative studies on the three religions as they exhibit critical historical comparabilities. Several other works support such a use. For example, Victoria Harrison groups the three religions

¹³⁹ In a similar parlance to speaking of the 'Abrahamic religions' as a family, Willard G. Oxtoby considers the question of whether the 'Eastern religions' could be thought of "as a cohesive family", and looks to history and geography as markers for this. See Willard G. Oxtoby, ed., *World Religions: Eastern Traditions* (Ontario: Oxford University Press, 1996), 6.

under the rubric “the three Abrahamic faiths” in recognition of their unique characteristics in responding to the challenges of modernity, and how they continue to evolve in light of these challenges.¹⁴⁰ In examining the evolution of philosophical ideas, some have also observed a shared Abrahamic tradition, noting that “the intellectual worlds of the three Abrahamic religious traditions have interacted for centuries, and by doing so have created similar shared patterns of thought in dealing with crucial religious concepts such as the divine itself, creation, providence, laws both natural and revealed ...”¹⁴¹ Recognising the tight relationships between the three religions, both in terms of geographical and cultural proximities, that had led to a significant amount of cross-pollination of ideas in medieval times, Jacob Lassner identifies them as the three Abrahamic faiths in his *Jews, Christians, and the Abode of Islam*.¹⁴² Increasingly, scholars are turning to the category of the ‘Abrahamic religions’ to compare various aspects of the three religions.¹⁴³

Taken together, the above shows the philosophical utility of the category for the purposes of comparative religion. In the light of this, I argue against Brague and Hughes that the concept lacks any heuristic purpose in the study of religion.¹⁴⁴ The nuances of the ‘Abrahamic religions’ that could be conveyed through such a typology would also problematise singular conceptions of its

¹⁴⁰ Victoria S. Harrison, *Religion and Modern Thought* (London: SCM Press, 2007), esp. 41-80.

¹⁴¹ Torrance Kirby, Rahim Acar and Bilal Baş ed.s, *Philosophy and the Abrahamic Religions: Scriptural Hermeneutics and Epistemology* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), xvii.

¹⁴² Lassner, *Jews, Christians, and the Abode of Islam*.

¹⁴³ For example, see Adam Silverstein, Guy G. Stroumsa (in press), *Oxford Handbook of the Abrahamic Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁴⁴ For the arguments of Brague and Hughes, see sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.3 above.

meaning as assumed in critiques of the concept explained earlier. Although critics have raised valid epistemological questions regarding the use(s) of the concept, they nonetheless have not considered the possibility of its varied meanings, and how such different uses can profit the academic study of religion.

4.6 CONCLUSION

'Abrahamic religions' is a nascent category in the study of religions with a contested nature that has traversed both scholarly and ecumenical dimensions. Soon after its inception in the thought of Massignon, scholars working on the place of Islam vis-à-vis both Judaism and Christianity began interrogating its historical and epistemic worth, and remain, until this day, divided as to where it should be situated. On the one hand, its interreligious use remains poignant, driven by the perennial socio-political circumstances that warrant a hope, however limited, for reconciliation, in the name of Abraham, amongst his descendants and followers. On the other hand, critics have pointed out its epistemic ambiguities and shortcomings, such that the concept is, at best, nebulous and can do very little to contribute to scholarly investigations of the history of the three religions and their respective communities.

At the same time, there have been various suggestions on how the concept could be fruitfully used in comparative studies, as the works of Peters, Cohen, and Stroumsa show. The ways in which these scholars interpret the concept can therefore lead to its academic utilisation. Taking their lead, the next chapter will examine other ways in which the concept could become a useful tool in the comparative study of religion.

CHAPTER 5

BEYOND ECUMENISM – THE PLACE OF THE 'ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS' IN THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

The genealogy of the 'Abrahamic religions' as presented in the preceding chapters reveals a complex past that comprises of a web of factors and contains a variety of meanings as the concept evolved in various intellectual and religio-cultural contexts over roughly half a century from its inception in the thought of Louis Massignon. As pointed to in the introductory chapter, a proper understanding of the history of a concept has profound implications on the ways we interpret it. For example, if viewed solely from an ecumenical perspective, the concept becomes ineffective in the study of religion. Yet, as this study has argued, such views have often been based on a parochial view of the concept's origins. Given its rich history and diverse trajectories as presented in this study, how then does one proceed in assessing the 'Abrahamic religions' in the context of the comparative study of religions? The same question could also be stated in the reverse: what would be amiss if we misinterpret its genealogy and origins? In particular, in what ways does our understanding of the discipline of comparative religion become impacted by an inadequate understanding of how one of its taxonomical categories came into being?

These questions become all the more pertinent, as more interest and attention are given to the study of the 'Abrahamic religions' in recent times, as seen in the setting up of Abrahamic studies in university departments and the

appointment of professors in this specific area of comparative religion.¹

Likewise, the increasing attention given to critical reflections on the use of the concept attests to the will of the academia in being self-critical, as well as in rethinking taxonomical issues in religious studies. Whilst these developments bode well for the discipline in general, they need to be matched by proper and adequate research that permits insightful assessments of its categories. In view of these observations, this chapter attempts to critically examine the current state of understanding of the study of the three religions, with respect to what we have now understood of the origins of the concept 'Abrahamic religions'. More broadly, this chapter is a reflection on how an understanding of the evolution of the concept can enrich our new inquiries on comparing the three religions as we chart the way forward for such comparative studies. More specifically, I reflect on the place of the 'Abrahamic religions' in modern comparative religious thought, and explore its heuristic potential in the comparative study of the monotheistic religions.

To be sure, comparative works on interconnected aspects in these traditions are not new. The practice has, thus far, been an examination of two traditions in comparison, and such comparisons are understandably not done with reference to the term of the 'Abrahamic religions', as they leave out one of its three traditions.² Some have ventured even further to undertake a triadic

¹ Examples of academic programmes include the M.A. Abrahamic Religions at Kings College, London; M.A. Abrahamic Religions at Heythrop College, London; research at the Woolf Institute, University of Cambridge; Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Professorships on Abrahamic studies include those at the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge.

² There is now a voluminous number of studies comparing Christianity with Islam, Judaism with Islam, and Christianity with Judaism. On Christianity and Islam, see a compilation of essays in Mona Siddiqui ed., *The Routledge Reader in Christian-Muslim*

approach to comparison. In such works, writers explore the three traditions in tandem, with respect to specific shared aspects, but these comparisons have been drawn out without the use of the referent 'Abrahamic religions'. For example, in the historical explorations of the relationships between Christians, Muslims, and Jews in the medieval period, scholars such as Roger Arnaldez and Bernard Lewis do not use the notion of the 'Abrahamic religions', but either name the communities independently (in the case of Lewis) or call them 'the three monotheisms' (in the case of Arnaldez).³ At the same time, there are many other works that compare the three traditions within the framework of the 'Abrahamic religions'. In this case, the category 'Abrahamic religions' has a philosophical function to mark out its constituent religions as a collective, as pointed to earlier.⁴ In the context of such works, the case has been made for the use of this category in the philosophical sense. The question here is thus to consider if there is any heuristic role of the designate 'Abrahamic' in the study of the three religions.

Accordingly, this chapter explores two aspects of the 'Abrahamic religions' that arise from a reconsideration of the utility of the concept in the comparative study of religions. The first aspect concerns meanings of the

Relations (London: Routledge, 2013). On a comparison of common Jewish and Muslim themes such as rituals, family and social institutions, see Jacob Neusner, Tamara Sonn and Jonathan E. Brockopp, *Judaism and Islam in Practice: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2000).

³ See Bernard Lewis, *Cultures in Conflict: Christians, Muslims, and Jews in the Age of Discovery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Roger Arnaldez, *A la croisée des trois monothéismes: Une communauté de pensée au Moyen-Age* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993). For a collection of essays exploring the dynamic environment of exchanges between the three communities in Spain, see Mark D. Meyerson and Edward D. English, ed.s, *Christians, Muslims, and Jews in Medieval and Early Modern Spain: Interaction and Cultural Change* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000).

⁴ See section 4.5.2 of chapter four above.

category, as envisioned by Massignon and beyond. Arising from the differentiation of the Abrahamic inheritance between the three religions, could we then understand the appropriations of Abraham in each tradition differently? In this regard, I suggest that there is a process of 'Abrahamization' of each faith which reflects both the desire to claim Abraham as one's own and the ambivalence that each religion displays in relating to the claims of others to Abraham. In the process, ideas are swiftly and seamlessly adopted and adapted, and borders become permeable, leading to what some have suggested as a cross-pollination of ideas. Here, the notion of the 'Abrahamic' thus becomes symbolic of both exclusive and ambivalent attitudes that speak of such historical episodes. The second aspect relates to the history of the discipline of study of religion itself. Here, I discuss the epistemic nature of the 'Abrahamic religions' and seek to show how the intellectual and cultural history of the concept provides us with a new way of understanding the contested nature of comparative religion in the twentieth century.

5.1 SCRIPTURAL HERMENEUTICS

As my earlier chapters have shown, Massignon's conception of the 'Abrahamic religions' centers on the relationships between the three religions as manifested in two primary ways. The first concerns the relationship between each religious tradition and Abraham, whilst the second addresses the interrelationships between them, especially in relation to the ways which each perceives its inheritance of the Abrahamic promise and covenant. To be sure, Massignon's epistemology is mainly based on a spiritual interpretation with an emphasis on

the faith of Abraham, interpreted by him as archetypal and transformative. This transformation of the religious communities, as Massignon understood it, took two important forms. On the one hand, the faith of Abraham led to a differentiation between them. On the other, it bestows upon them commonalities that bind them together in specific ways. Massignon's reading of the *historia sacra* of the three religions offers a preliminary insight into the differentiated uses of Abraham, which nonetheless bind the three religions together. Thus, as opposed to most studies on the uses of Abraham that focus on exclusive appropriations of the figure in the respective traditions, which end up rejecting the idea that there could be a common Abraham at the core of each of these religions,⁵ Massignon's reading suggests that one pauses and reflects on the other quality of Abraham in the uses of these traditions, i.e. its binding power. The propensity to focus on the polemics of interreligious relationships would also inevitably perpetuate the notion of discord and dissonance between these religions, and thus result in a blind spot that forever makes invisible other ways in which the relationships between the three religions had existed.

In what follows, I expand on Massignon's reading, by suggesting three ways in which we could deepen our understanding of how religious communities had constructed their identities in light of rival claims to legitimacy, manifested in this instance in the claim to the common figure of Abraham. The aim here is to show how the designate 'Abrahamic' could illuminate a historical interrelationship and facilitate the comparative study of the historical formations of these religions by taking their associations with the figure of

⁵ See critiques of the 'Abrahamic religions' using this argument in chapter four of this dissertation.

Abraham as a hermeneutical key. The first way is to explore the differentiatial means through which the relationships around Abraham have been structured in these religions. Massignon's comparative schema could then be expanded, through a process which I suggest calling the 'Abrahamization' of each of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in their respective scriptures and exegetical traditions.⁶ Second is to explore the ambivalent aspects in how each religion states its relationship vis-à-vis its 'Other', which, in turn, speaks of the various religio-cultural contexts that gave rise to the process in the first place. Subsequently, it is hard to argue that one could speak of a monolithic attitude, in that each religion was solely 'exclusivist' and did not permit any external claims to Abraham.⁷ Third is to explore how these claims were formed, by interrogating the possibility of a cross-pollination of ideas between the communities.

5.1.1 'ABRAHAMIZATION' IN SCRIPTURE

Recent scholarship has discussed the ways in which Abraham has been appropriated in each of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and demonstrated two things. First is that a common Abraham in all traditions could be extracted from the deep overlays of such appropriations (which took place mostly in exegetical literature), and this commonality could therefore serve an ecumenical function.

On the contrary, there are fundamentally different Abrahams in each tradition,

⁶ Jon D. Levenson refers to a similar process but calls it the "conversion" of Abraham to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. See his "The Conversion of Abraham to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam."

⁷ Here, I extend the meaning of the word 'exclusivist' in the context of a religious doctrine or belief that "one claims a monopoly of truth" to that of a tradition which claims a monopoly on the inheritance of Abraham to the complete exclusion of all other claims.

such that speaking of a common Abraham is simply a conceptual fallacy. The aims of these approaches are therefore to either use or dispel Abraham as a source of reconciliation. Given such focus in these works, the full extent of how and why each tradition relates to Abraham, and more importantly, the importance of this to our understanding of how religious communities form their identities and self-understandings, have not been adequately explored.

The gaps in the approaches above suggest a need to look at these formulations from the perspective of its religio-cultural contexts and functions. To the extent that the figure of Abraham is made to feature in each religion (whether as embedded scripturally or expounded upon exegetically) in its soteriology, and/or in some of its dogmas or doctrines, we could speak of an 'Abrahamization' of each of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This 'Abrahamization' involved two core elements: an internal core that one's representation of the faith of Abraham is the only rightful one, and an external dimension that such a claim is made with reference to, or with the awareness of, rival claims from other communities.⁹ This has been noted by several scholars comparing the scriptural narratives and uses of Abraham.¹⁰ Further to this, the Christian polemic with the Jews also precedes and prefigures Islam's disputational rhetorics (especially in the Qur'ān) with the two religions. Jon

⁹ In the context of scriptural interpreters, Carol Bakhos has recently argued that the figure of Abraham and his family has been recast "in order to accommodate philological, theological, and political concerns." Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham*, 14.

¹⁰ The emphasis on faith by several early Christian figures such as Paul and Eusebius, in contradistinction to the Jewish focus on law, has led to the 'Abrahamization' of Christianity. As Gabriel Said Reynolds notes, "Christianity, a religion of faith and not of law, becomes an Abrahamic religion." See Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext*, 80. Further to this, the awareness of, and reaction to, Jewish claims on Abraham, has also led to Christian figures "asserting that Christianity, far from being a perverse innovation of Judaism, is an ancient and primary religion." *Ibid.*, 81.

Levenson has also alluded to this when he argues that because Abraham predated all the three religions, the respective portrayals of Abraham and the ways in which each faith situates itself in relation to the Abrahamic covenant could be interpreted as a process to claim him. Although these are noteworthy observations in themselves, and helpfully move away from restricting our understanding to an ecumenical perspective, they nonetheless do not elaborate further on how such uses of Abraham reflect the internal and external considerations which were important to each religious community.

A plausible reason for a lack of examination of the process of 'Abrahamization' in this manner is the dearth of scholarship on comparative work between the scriptures of all three religions, especially those that examine possible reactions to competing ideas and claims between them.¹¹ The most extensive studies have been concentrated on two traditions, the bulk of which are on Jewish and Christian conceptions.¹² In fact, major comparative study of the *historia sacra* of all three religions on the subject of Abraham is still

¹¹ This is perhaps a possible research agenda in departments of religious studies with a specialisation in Abrahamic studies.

¹² Examples of this are Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews*; Levenson, *Abraham Between Torah and Gospel*; *Inheriting Abraham*. Although Levenson attempts to include a study of three traditions in his *Inheriting Abraham*, its strength and depth of arguments remain in the Jewish and Christian traditions. For example, apart from a brief examination of Muslim material on the subject, Levenson also wrongly concludes that "In the Qur'ān, he [Abraham] is not, as for the Jews, "Our Father Abraham." Ibid., 105. This is not true, as the Qur'ān does call Abraham the father of all Muslims. See Qur'ān 22:78. Karl Josef-Kuschel's *Abraham: A Hope for Jews, Christians, and Muslims* offers a brief but useful comparison on the scriptural uses of Abraham in all three traditions. On specific comparative themes between two traditions, see for example Lowin, *The Making of a Forefather*; Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis*; Carol Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border: Rabbinic Portrayals of the First Arab*, SUNY series in Judaica: Hermeneutics, Mysticism, and Religion (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

unavailable.¹³ Yet, some pertinent aspects in the comparison of the claims of all three religions may be missed if these claims are not juxtaposed and read closely to one another. This may also explain why the 'exclusivist' notion remains normative. As noted earlier, a reading of *historia sacra* that eschews the polemical thrust may yield important observations on the more nuanced interrelationships between the traditions. The first case study of how 'Abrahamization' took place in the scriptural traditions of each religion, and what it tells us about the religio-cultural considerations of each, is that concerning one's election as Abraham's rightful heirs, as symbolised in the sacrifice of Isaac.

In the case of both Judaism and Christianity, the narratives on, and dramatis personae of the sacrifice on Mount Moria mark out the contours of God's covenant with his chosen people. For the Jews, the Aqedah is principally God's announcement to Israel that they are his chosen people as the progeny of Isaac, and circumcision would be the sign of this election. Unlike preceding prophetic covenants such as Noah's, the Abrahamic covenant was exclusive and paradigmatic for Jews.¹⁴ In the face of rival faiths, some Jewish interpretations of the Bible (such as on Gen. 15: 9-10)¹⁵ arose to safeguard this exclusivity.¹⁶ In

¹³ An exception to this is perhaps Carol Bakhos' work, which has just recently come to print. See Carol Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham*.

¹⁴ See Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles: A Sociological Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 136.

¹⁵ The four animals mentioned in the verse were understood in the *midrash* as representing the four empires that were to dominate Israel, the final and worse of all being Christian Rome. This could be understood as a possible Jewish reaction to the rise of Christianity in the fourth century. Jewish interpretations therefore served as a self-reassuring mechanism that would seek to maintain the perpetuity of the Jewish covenant with Abraham. See Genesis Rabbah 44:15 on Gen. 15:9. See also Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 9-10.

addition, Christian interpretations that sought to exclude Jews were rejected as being antithetical to the Torah.¹⁷ The sacrifice of Isaac is paramount in the Christian understanding in its prefiguration of the crucifixion of Christ. Paul was arguably the most instrumental in initiating this interpretation within the Christian tradition. In Gal. 3:16, Paul reformed the traditional Jewish understanding of God's covenant with Abraham by interpreting the word 'seed' (used in the singular form in Gen. 12:7 and others) to mean Christ. Likewise, he interpreted the (blessed) nations in Gen. 12:3 as referring only to those who believe in Jesus Christ.¹⁹ This was however not Paul's last word on the matter, as we shall later see.

The New Testament writers had also elaborated on Jesus as the progeny of Abraham. For example, Jesus' lineage is traced to Abraham through Isaac.²⁰ But increasingly, non-Christian Jews began to be excluded from the Abrahamic inheritance as understood by these writers. In their theology, Jews were no longer seen as the children of Abraham if they do not repent and accept Christ.²¹ John's disputation of Jewish claims is a case in point. The rejection of Jesus, for

¹⁶ However, the issue of who should be included under the Abrahamic covenant remains open in the discussion of some medieval Jewish thinkers. In response to some criticisms of the exclusionary theology on the basis of such an interpretation, some Jews point out that conversion to Judaism is allowed, although not encouraged. Secondly, in rabbinical thought that stems from an interpretation of Genesis 9, the Gentiles' salvation can be achieved by abiding the Noachide commandments. Some Jewish scholars have used this avenue to accept the faith of both Christians and Muslims. See for example Michael Wyschogrod, "Islām and Christianity in the Perspective of Judaism," in *Dialogue of the Abrahamic Faiths*, ed. Ismail Raji al Faruqi (Maryland: Amana Publications, 1995), 15.

¹⁷ R. W. L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), n.145, 32.

¹⁹ See Hawting, "The Religion of Abraham and Islam," 477-78.

²⁰ This can be clearly seen from New Testament writers who set out the genealogy of Jesus to Abraham, in Matt. 1:1, 1:2 and 17, as well as in Luke 3:23-38.

²¹ Acts 3:25

John, meant that the Jews have simply abandoned the teachings of Abraham.²² In this regard, the notion of spiritual descendance gains the upper hand, as evident in both Luke's and John's interpretations.²³ The New Testament writers were also quick to add that Jesus was not only a descendant but superior to Abraham, and thus the latter subordinated to a witness to Jesus's truth and message.²⁴ The rhetoric against the Jews would intensify after John, especially in the writings of Justin Martry.²⁵ In a total repudiation of Jewish law, Justin deemed the ritual circumcision as not only unnecessary because Abraham had faith before he was circumcised, but that it was a curse because the circumcised Jews were marked out for God's punishment. Justin maintains the views of Luke and John that only spiritual descent counts, and which could be attained exclusively through an acceptance of Christ. With this, the Jews cannot be Abraham's rightful descendants as they reject Christ.²⁶ The implications of this are far greater, because God's promise of the land is now made to be vested only in the followers of Christ.²⁷ The varied interpretations of Abraham could be attributed to factors internal to the Christian faith itself, especially that there were rival

²² John 8:39-40, 53-58

²³ Luke 3:8; John 8:39

²⁴ "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." (John 8:53-58) This latter point is also present in the second-century Epistle of Ignatius to the Philadelphians (Phil. 9:1). "Christ is the door of the Father, through which enter Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and the prophets and the apostles and the church."

²⁵ In his Dialogue with Trypho (Dialogue 119), Justin claims: "And we [Christians] shall inherit the Holy Land together with Abraham, receiving our inheritance for all eternity, because by our similar faith we have become children of Abraham ... Thus, God promised Abraham a religious and righteous nation of like faith, and a delight to the Father; but it is not you, 'in whom there is no faith' [Deut. 32:30]." Quoted in Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews*, 13-14.

²⁶ For example, Justin asserts "We are the true spiritual Israel, and the descendants (*genos*) of ... Abraham." Dialogue with Trypho, 11.5, cited in *ibid.*, 172.

²⁷ See also Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 29.

interpretations as to what it meant to be a Christian. But external dynamics, especially those relating to rival and persistent Jewish insistence of its rightful claim to Abraham,²⁸ had an equally important role to play. In particular, these occurred in early Christianity as the faith wriggled out of its Jewish origins. In sum, these thinkers gave birth to a wide array of hermeneutical perspectives that shed light, as one writer suggests, on “the nature and extent of early Christian controversy with Judaism”.²⁹

Such interreligious controversies surrounding Abraham will only be repeated with the emergence of Islam. On the issue of Abraham's sacrifice of his son, the Qur'ān provides a relatively detailed account of the act itself, although it hauntingly remains silent on the identity of the sacrificial son. If the flow of its narrative is strictly adhered to, there is a possibility that the identity of the sacrificial son did not matter. In particular, the story is told to reaffirm Abraham's unrelenting commitment to his faith in God and his observance of God's commands.³⁰ The absence of any indication that the story is about the inheritance of Abraham's covenant with his son, or as a prefiguration of what is to come in its sacred history, clearly attests to its different emphasis relative to

²⁸ “Issues central to both early Jewish and early Christian identity converged around the figure of Abraham: God's covenant promises, what it means to be heirs of these promises, the eschatological realization of the promises, circumcision, the law, God's relation to non-Jewish peoples, and most important, the character of faith and righteousness.” See Siker, “From Gentile Inclusion to Jewish Exclusion,” 31.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ For example, Rudi Paret identifies three main ways in which Abraham is signified in the Qur'ān: his foundation of the Ka'ba; as a progenitor of the faith of Muslims; and a monotheist who predated Judaism and Christianity and thus, to whom Muḥammad could appeal. According to this view, the sacrifice of Abraham's son does not particularly stand out. See Rudi Paret, *Mohammed und der Koran* (Stuttgart, 1966), 108-110, cited in Jacques Waarenburg, “Towards a Periodization of Earliest Islam According to Its Relations with Other Religions,” in *The Qur'an: Style and Contents*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 107.

Jewish and Christian readings on the sacrificial act. The notion of election and covenant is however addressed differently, set within the narrative on the building of the 'house' in Mecca.³¹

Yet, it is particularly striking that early Muslims read into the narrative what they interpreted as the general Qur'ānic aim to confer the Abrahamic inheritance through Ishmael, and thus, could be seen as an attempt to accord the story with a similar significance as that in Judaism and Christianity. Thus, despite the vagueness of Qur'ānic statements on the identity of the sacrificial son, the Muslim exegetical community (*al-mufasssīrūn*) sought to speak on the Qur'ān's behalf. As Reuven Firestone's study has shown, some very early and minor Muslim exegesis identified the sacrificial son as Isaac,³² but the Muslim tradition as a whole would build a consensus around Ishmael by the tenth century.³³

In more general terms, Muslim exegetes would emphasise that Muḥammad was God's final messenger and the answer to Abraham's prayer, and was tasked to reclaim the religion of Abraham from the Jews and Christians who had corrupted the patriarch's teachings.³⁴ Within the *tafsīr* (i.e. Muslim

³¹ Mecca thus becomes a key geographical connector between Abraham and Muḥammad. The origin of Islam's idea of a sacred sanctuary (in Mecca) is traced back to Abraham's faith and life, and Muḥammad's birthplace coinciding in the city of Abraham's sanctuary (haram), i.e. Mecca.

³² Among the early writers who pointed towards this possibility are al-Ya'qūbī, al-Ṭabarī and al-Mas'ūdī. See Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands : The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis*, esp. 135-44.

³³ "Ishmael," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Brill Online, 2015). Firestone, Reuven. "Ishmael." *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*. General Editor: Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Georgetown University, Washington DC. Brill Online, 2015. Reference. Oxford University libraries. 11 January 2015
<http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-Qur'an/ishmael-EQSIM_00232>

³⁴ See al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān*, 2:580; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān: tafsīr al-Qurṭubī*, 2:130-131; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Kitāb mafātiḥ al-ghayb al-mushtahir bi-al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (Cairo: al-Maṭba'a al-Miṣriyya

exegetical) tradition, various incidents cited as ‘occasions of revelation’ (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) were reported to support this view, as evident in the following examples. In discussing Qur’ān 2:135, the exegetes cite the claims of the Jews of Medina and the Christians of Najran of the truth of their religion and the superiority of their prophets and books. The Prophet was instructed by God to respond to these claims that it was his community who are the true followers of Abraham’s pure monotheism.³⁵ In this context, the term *hanīfiyya* for Abraham is deployed specifically to refute the claims of the Jews, the Christians, as well as pagan Arabs, to the religion of Abraham, despite their associations with Abrahamic rites such as pilgrimage and circumcision, because the central pillar of Abraham’s faith (i.e. his strict monotheism) had been compromised.³⁶ In discussing Qur’ān 3:67, exegetes mention the story of a companion of the prophet Zaid b. ‘Amrū b. Nufail who was in search of a religion in Shām (modern

al-Miriyya, 1862), 1:514. Qur’ān 2:130 also speaks of the *al-musyrikūn* (idolaters) making claims to Abraham.

³⁵ The Qu’ranic instruction is “*qul bal millata ibrahīma hanīfa*” (say but the religion of Abraham the *hanīf*). The missing instructive verb before *millata ibrahīma* has been interpreted by classical exegetes to be one of three: either “*nakūn*” (we become), “*nattabi*” (we follow), or “*nahtadi*” (we are guided). See al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi’ li-aḥkām al-Qur’ān: tafsīr al-Qurṭubī*, 2:136-137, on Qur’ān 2: 135. According to al-Alūsī, the first is more accurate from a linguistic standpoint, whilst the second is closer to the contextual meaning of the verse. See also al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmi’ al-Bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān*, 2:590; Maḥmūd b. ‘Abdallāh Al-Alūsī, *Rūh al-ma’ānī fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘aẓīm wa al-sab’ al-mathānī* (Beirut: Dār Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 19_), 1:394; Ibn ‘Ashūr, *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr wa-l-Tanwīr*, 1:737.

³⁶ See Maḥmūd b. ‘Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf ‘an ḥaqā’iq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl wa ‘uyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh al-ta’wīl: wa huwa tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-karīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 196_?), 1: 371, and al-Rāzī, *Kitāb mafātiḥ al-ghayb al-mushtahir bi-al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 1:521. Al-Rāzī states that only Islam adheres to the monotheism (*al-tauhīd*) of Abraham, as Judaism preaches anthropomorphism (*al-tashbīh*) and Christianity preaches trinity (*al-tathlīth*). As al-Alūsī explains, the Qur’ānic emphasis that Abraham was not among the polytheists (*wa lam yaku minal mushrikīn*) in Qur’ān 16: 120 refutes the Meccans’ claims that they were the followers of the religion of Abraham (*nahnu ala millati abīna Ibrāhīm*). See also al-Alūsī, *Rūh al-ma’ānī fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘aẓīm wa al-sab’ al-mathānī*, 14: 250; al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmi’ al-Bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān*, 14:393.

day Levant), where a learned Jew and Christian informed him of the existence of a religion of Abraham, and that the latter was neither a Jew nor a Christian.³⁷ Islam could be deemed superior through the claim that only it had preserved Abraham's monotheism and had superseded them.³⁸ Qur'ān 2:130 was reported to have been revealed in the context of Muḥammad's companion, Abdullah ibn Salām, a Jewish convert to Islam, inviting his nephews named Salma and Muhājir to accept Islam. According to Ibn Salām, the Torah had already spoken about Muḥammad's prophethood and his descendance from Ishmael.³⁹ The Muslim claim to Abraham therefore developed in the context of an acute awareness of, and in some cases, an engagement with, competing claims from beyond its tradition.⁴⁰

³⁷ *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān*, 5: 486. Ibn 'Ashūr explained that Islam is derived from the Islam of Abraham, and went so far as to claim that even Moses and Jesus were not among those who preached *hanīfiyya*. Ibn 'Ashūr, *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr wa-l-Tanwīr*, 1: 737, 3:274.

³⁸ On Qur'ān 4:125, see al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān*, 7: 528-29; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr fi al-tafsīr al-ma'thūr: wa huwa mukhtaṣar tafsīr Tarjumān al-Qur'ān*, 1: 406. An exception is Ibn 'Arabī, whose esoteric commentaries of the Qur'ān are more inclusive in the context of the acceptance of the faith of other religions. On the exegesis of Qur'ān 2: 130, see Muḥyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1978), 1: 89-90.

³⁹ On exegesis of Qur'ān 2: 130, see Al-Alūsī, *Rūh al-ma'ānī fi tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'azīm wa al-sab' al-mathānī*, 1: 387-88.

⁴⁰ As Carol Bakhos notes, "recent scholars have come to recognize that they must attend to the various internal and external stimuli that give rise to particular interpretations and must look at how those stimuli, though shared among traditions in the same cultural setting, yield different interpretations." Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham*, 11-12. A similar recent proposal is one that relates to "exegetical encounters", which has been defined by its proponents as "an exegetical tradition which appears to show awareness of, or a response to, a tradition from the other faith group. This can either be reflected by borrowing (not necessarily consciously), or through polemic and apologetic." See Emmanouela Grypeou and Helen Spurling, "Abraham's Angels: Jewish and Christian Exegesis of Genesis 18-19," in *The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity*, ed. E. Grypeou and H. Spurling (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 197. As a general argument, this is not new. For example, on Jewish and Christian exegesis in relation to the Aqedah, see Edward Kessler, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Stroumsa, "Athens, Jerusalem and Mecca."

5.1.2 AMBIVALENT RELATIONSHIPS

The awareness of, and engagements with, competing claims from other communities, however, did not only lead to exclusionary attitudes. Although the scriptural hermeneutics of each of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, are suggestive of exclusionary appropriations of the figure of Abraham, they nonetheless display some ambivalence in their judgment of their rivals. For example, such ambivalence can be seen in the question of the limits of Abraham's blessings (Gen. 12:3).⁴¹ Moreover, there have been interpretations that are in favour of a universal and non-exclusionary nature of the patriarch's blessings put forth by the medieval Jewish thinkers Rabbi David Qimchi (Provence, 1160-1235) and Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1508).⁴²

The same could be said of the interpretations of Christian figures, such as Paul. As to the salvific status of non-Christian Jews, Paul's ambivalence is shown in his epistles to the Romans.⁴³ More critically, the disobedience of the Jews in their rejection of Christ does not, in Paul's interpretation, nullify their election nor undo God's faithfulness to them. According to Paul, the salvation of Jews, as

⁴¹ For example, Jon Levenson argues that Abraham is only a byword for blessing. The medieval Jewish commentator, Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitschaqi) interprets as follows: "There are many freer interpretive traditions, but according to its contextual sense, it means this: A man says to his son, "May you be like Abraham!" And this is so in every case of those words, "shall bless themselves by you" in the Bible, and here is the proof: "By you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying, 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.'" (Gen. 48:20) See Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 25.

⁴² See *ibid.* 31-32.

⁴³ See for example Rom. 11:28-29. Jeffrey Siker argues that the Christian self-conceptions of Abraham evolved progressively from one that was more inclusive (i.e. one that also accepted Jews as the children of Abraham) to one that was outright exclusive (i.e. which denied Jews of such a status). See Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews*.

promised by God, remains intact.⁴⁴ For the New Testament writers such as Luke, the promises to Abraham account for all the blessings to Israel.⁴⁵

In the Qur'ānic case, one finds similar ambivalence in Qur'ān 3:68 and 2:124.⁴⁶ In both these verses, references to the legitimate inheritance of the Abrahamic covenant do not seem to *a priori* exclude the Jews and Christians. The character of God's privileges to Abraham, as embodied in these two verses, differs starkly from the 'Qur'ānic prophetology'. Unlike other verses which mention Abraham, the *loci standi* of Jews and Christians are glaringly absent in these statements. Instead, general descriptions such as "those who follow him",⁴⁷ "those who believe" (*āmanū*) and "evil-doers" (*dzālimūn*) are used to signify those who fall into, or in the latter case, cast out of, Abraham's community of believers. As could be expected, it is only in exegetical works that one finds a qualification of the latter group (i.e. "those who believe") as only those who believe in the message of Muḥammad.⁴⁸ As to whether this is a justified

⁴⁴ Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 28.

⁴⁵ See Acts 7, Heb. 13. These include Abraham as the father of the impious (Matt. 3:9; John 8:39), and that Jews are expected to live up to their Abrahamic pedigree (Luke 19:9; 16:24, Heb. 6:13).

⁴⁶ Qur'ān 3:68 "Indeed the most deserving of men to Abraham, are those who follow him, as are also this Messenger and those who believe: And Allah is the Protector of those who believe." Qur'ān 2:124 "And remember when Abraham was tried by his Lord with certain commands, which he fulfilled: He said: "I will make you a leader of the people." (Abraham) pleaded: "And (leaders) from my offspring?" The Lord replied: "My covenant does not extend to the evil-doers."

⁴⁷ Commentators such as Al-Ṭabari interpret "those who follow him" as those who follow his path and way, and do not associate anything with God, and submit themselves fully to him without association. Taken this way, it may include non-Muslims.

⁴⁸ This is akin to the Christian understanding that only those who follow Christ can be deemed as the true followers of Abraham.

exegetical choice is hard to tell,⁴⁹ especially because the term *īmān* as used in the Qurʾān connote numerous things.⁵⁰

Even so, there are several theological and legal issues relating to the exclusionary inheritance in Islam which have not been resolved. For example, to what extent does Islam relate to the teachings of Abraham? And which are his teachings that remain uncorrupted, as it were, by the Jews and Christians? In this regard, classical Muslim exegetes such as al-Rāzī,⁵¹ al-Qurtubī,⁵² and Ibn ʿArabī,⁵³ are in disagreement. Some have even suggested that the 'religion of Abraham' is

⁴⁹ This is perhaps influenced by the polemical flow of the verses in question. However, the earliest exegete Ibn ʿAbbas explains that the term generally refers to "the believers (*al-muʾminūn*).

⁵⁰ For example, see 2:62 "Indeed those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last day and does good, they shall have their reward from their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve." 5: 69 "Those who believe (in the Qurʾān), those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Sabians and the Christians, - any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness, - on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve." The Qurʾān has used *īmān* in specific ways, which is made explicit in other verses, such as "belief in Muḥammad". See for example Qurʾān 47:2 and 7:157. "But those who believe and work deeds of righteousness, *and believe in the (Revelation) sent down to Muḥammad* - for it is the Truth from their Lord" (47:2) and "Those who follow the apostle, the unlettered Prophet, whom they find mentioned in their own (scriptures), - in the law and the Gospel; - for he commands them what is just and forbids them what is evil; he allows them as lawful what is good (and pure) and prohibits them from what is bad (and impure); He releases them from their heavy burdens and from the yokes that are upon them. *So it is those who believe in him, honour him, help him, and follow the light which is sent down with him; it is they who will prosper.*" (Qurʾān 7:157)

⁵¹ Al-Rāzī asks whether the religion of Abraham imposes upon Muḥammad all matters fundamental (*usūl*) and substantive (*furūʾ*). He pointed out that if Muḥammad had superseded all that came before him, he too could be accused of having steered away from the religion of Abraham. See exegesis of Qurʾān 2: 130 in Fakhr al-din Muhammad ibn ʿUmar al-Rāzī, *Iʿtiqādāt firaq al-muslimīn wa l-musyrikīn* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-ʿarabi, 1986), 1: 514.

⁵² Al-Qurtubī is of the view that the laws of Abraham apply to Islam, except those which have been abrogated (*mansūkh*). See exegesis of Qurʾān 2: 130 in al-Qurtubī, *al-Jāmiʾ li-ahkām al-Qurʾān: tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, 2: 131.

⁵³ The religion of Abraham is understood to be monotheism and embodies principles that apply to the teachings of all prophets, but not the substantive details which would have to be different based on context. See Ibn ʿArabī, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*, 1: 698-99.

subordinate to the religion of Muḥammad, because the latter is a *sāhib al-sharī‘a* (i.e. one with an autonomous set of laws).⁵⁴ Exegetes have also pondered on the question of Muḥammad’s stature vis-à-vis Abraham. Here, the use of the same term *islām* for Abraham’s act of submission to God and for Muḥammad’s religion, although seen in a way as a positive connotation of Islam's preservation of the faith of Abraham, has had its unintended corollary.⁵⁵ The description of Abraham as the friend (*khalīl*) of God in Qur’ān 4:125 has also given rise to comparisons among Muḥammad’s companions between Abraham and Muḥammad, which prompted the emergence of prophetic traditions extolling the Prophet’s higher stature compared to Abraham.⁵⁶

5.1.3 CROSS-FERTILIZATION OF IDEAS

The strikingly similar emphasis on the nature of Abraham’s faith in God in all traditions clearly points towards some common understanding of who Abraham was and what he meant for each faith. This, in turn, is suggestive of some degree of convergence between them. In the previous chapter, I have mentioned Guy Stroumsa's argument that the Abrahamic movement in religious history could shed light on how different cultures interacted and cross-pollinated. As the above discussions have also shown, similar ideas and attitudes floated around in different communities, and were adopted and adapted to the specific needs of

⁵⁴ al-Rāzī, *Kitāb mafātiḥ al-ghayb al-mushtahir bi-al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 2: 545.

⁵⁵ Baneth, "What Did Muḥammad Mean When He Called His Religion Islam? The Original Meaning of *aslama* and its Derivatives," 91.

⁵⁶ Ḥadīth narrated by Ibn ‘Abbās. See the following exegesis on Qur’ān 4:125 in al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr fi al-tafsīr al-ma’thūr: wa huwa mukhtaṣar tafsīr Tarjumān al-Qur’ān*, 2: 407; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘aẓīm*, 1: 560. On a linguistic comparison, see Ibn ‘Arabī, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Karīm*, 1: 289.

each. It is therefore not surprising to find the following striking similarities and resemblances in the arguments of each community, especially surrounding the same claim. Writing on “The religion announced by Christ among all nations was neither unexpected nor strange” in his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius mentions that Abraham “was justified by his faith in Christ” and that “the word of God that appeared to him”.⁵⁸ Likewise, in the Muslim tradition on the event of the night journey (*al-isrā’ wa-l-mi’rā’*), Muḥammad led in the prayer with all the prophets (including Abraham and Jesus) gathered behind him.⁵⁹ He had also met Abraham in his ascension to the seventh heaven.⁶⁰ One finds similar themes in both the *midrashim* and the Qur’ān, such as Abraham’s disgust with his father’s idol-worship,⁶¹ his smashing of the latter’s idols,⁶² his conclusion (by observing celestial phenomena) that monotheism is the only true form of belief,⁶³ the condemnation he received for this by being thrown into the fire, and his subsequent safety through God’s rescue.⁶⁴ Further to this, the Qu’ranic statement on Abraham as the first believer echoes that of the Talmud, “Abraham as the first of the Proselytes/converts”,⁶⁵ as well as Paul’s proclamation in Rom. 4:11 that Abraham is “the father of all who believe”. The Muslim exegetical traditions on the story of Abraham’s reflections on celestial phenomena whilst he was still a

⁵⁸ Pamphilus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 27.

⁵⁹ This is as reported by the historian Ibn Iṣḥāq. See Abdul Salam Harun, *Taḥzīb sīra Ibn Hisyām* (Kuwait: Dār al-Buhūth al-’Ilmiyya, 1985), 90.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 94. This event underlines the place of Abraham in the line of prophets according to Islam, which is second after Muḥammad. See Lory, “Abraham,” 14.

⁶¹ Qur’ān 21:60, 6:74, 19:42-6.

⁶² Qur’ān 21: 63-7, 37:91-6.

⁶³ Qur’ān 6:75-81.

⁶⁴ Qur’ān 21:68-9, 29:24, 37:97-8.

⁶⁵ In b. Chagigah 3a, quoted in Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 155.

child could also be found in Jewish texts such as in Jubilees (especially 12:16-17) and the Apocalypse of Abraham (7.8-10).⁶⁶

These comparabilities and parallels certainly call for a deeper and more detailed study of its own, especially in our quest to ascertain the lines of influence. There is, however, currently little to suggest that the simplistic notion of borrowing between the traditions was the case.⁶⁷ Scholars have abandoned the one-way perspective of influence, as initiated by Abraham Geiger, but instead adopted mutuality coded through the notion of “intertextuality” as the plausible explanation for parallels within these traditions. For example, Carol Bakhos calls for an abandonment of a derivative tendency when the relationship between the Bible and the Qur’ān is discussed. In other words, the scripture that precedes should not automatically be deemed as the source from which the scripture that follows has borrowed. She explains further:

The phenomenon of literary, cultural, and philosophical diffusion and cross-cultural dissemination must be understood in terms of the power and vitality of that which is transmitted and of that which is transformed. Traditions taking shape in new contexts should be understood not as “borrowing,” then, but as a facet of how a religious system develops in multiple areas of discourse, how it shapes and is shaped by its milieu, whether literary, theological, social, or cultural.⁶⁸

Given the rife and vibrant state of cross-pollination that existed, the attitudes of any particular faith could readily change depending on the context it finds itself. For example, the Abrahamic theme in the Qur’ān is often discussed in the context of the broader Qura’nic polemics with the *ahl al-kitāb* (people of the

⁶⁶ See Reynolds, *The Qur’ān and Its Biblical Subtext*, 77-78.

⁶⁷ Samuel Sandmel cautions scholars to not hastily conclude that parallelism means the borrowing of the earlier by the later. See Samuel Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962).

⁶⁸ Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham*, 22-23.

Book), especially with the aim of refuting their claims.⁶⁹ The question as to what Abraham represents for Islam, insofar as its salvific efficacy is concerned, mirrors the variegated ways the Qur'ān structures relations with the Jews and Christians.⁷⁰ Quite clearly, the Qur'ānic stance towards the *ahl al-kitāb* is not monolithic, in that it has been recognised that there are several positions that can be advanced, ranging from one of tolerance or even embrace to the other extreme of rejection and even aggression. It can therefore be argued concomitantly that an exclusionary view of Abraham would be but just one possible position. Where exclusionary claims are made, these could be explained as having taken place in the context of its attempt to assert its religious identity in response to rival Jewish and Christian claims. One therefore cannot rule out the possibility of the claim as a rhetoric employed to win the argument with the *ahl al-kitāb*. This is further corroborated by the fact that these polemical verses were of a later period (i.e. Medinan verses) as understood within the Muslim tradition itself, when historically Muslims were in direct contact and conflict with these communities. As a scholar has recently suggested, "as a religious system Islam should be understood as the result of an intra-monotheistic polemic, in a process similar to that of the emergence of the other main divisions of monotheism."⁷¹

⁶⁹ This is, as Reuven Firestone argues, applicable to all the three religions, insofar as the theme of "chosenness" is addressed. See Reuven Firestone, "A Phenomenology of Chosenness," in *The Meeting of Civilizations*, ed. Moshe Ma'oz (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2009). Thus, to the extent that Abraham is central to each religion's conception of chosenness, we could argue, as Firestone, that the conceptions of Abraham are deeply intertwined with the interreligious polemics between the three religions.

⁷⁰ See a discussion of this in Rubin, "Jews and Judaism," esp. 31-32.

⁷¹ G. R. Hawting, *Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam : From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 7. Hawting argues in his work against

Given the likelihood that a cross-pollination of ideas took place but resulted in varying tendencies, from one of exclusivism to ambivalence, how could this understanding profit the study of the history of religions? A consideration of the breadth of the hermeneutical riches of the three traditions and within them, the comparabilities and contrasts, has shown that where exclusionary attitudes are exhibited in each religion in their claims to Abraham, these could be attributed, in part, to the threat of rival claims from other communities. At the same time, these claims make reference, and in some cases, respond directly, to such claims that originate from outside of one's own tradition. Moreover, within each tradition, the possibility that the spiritual progeny of Abraham extends to religious communities that are not their own cannot be discounted, although this possibility is often eclipsed by exclusionary positions which are consolidated later on. Thus, the exclusionary stance in each religion, if decontextualised and understood simply on its own terms, betrays their much more nuanced self-conceptions. Even historical parallelism is evident in this regard. In the case of the Qur'ān, one finds its increasingly exclusionary

the traditional narrative on the emergence of Islam as resulting from an opposition to idolaters and pagan worshippers. He seeks to show that the appearance of Islam was not unlike previous monotheisms. Thus, both Rabbinical Judaism and Christianity "emerged from a common background in ancient Judaism, and their subsequent history ... has been shaped primarily by intra- and inter-communal debates and disputes." See *ibid.*, 6. The importance of the polemical context (with its engagements with Jews and Christians) to the emergence of Islam can be seen from the use of the term *ḥanīf* in the Qur'ān. Several scholars have argued in this way. For example, Gabriel Said Reynolds asserts that "The Qur'ān is using the term in the context of sectarian polemic, not religious history." See Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext*, 83. Uri Rubin already alludes to the same when he notes that "The stress laid on the fact that a *ḥanīf* is neither a mushrik nor a Jew or a Christian, underlines a polemical context in which the use of this term in the Qur'ān should be understood. Implicit here is the notion that polytheists as well as Jews and Christians have distorted the natural religion of God, which only Islam preserves." See Uri Rubin, "Ḥanīf," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 402-03.

rhetoric echoing closely the trajectory of Christian thought from Paul to Justin Martyr.

The above has thus shown how the reference 'Abrahamic' helps us discern further the relationships between the three traditions in the ways they defined themselves over and against rival claims and appropriations of the figure of Abraham in other traditions. The claims to Abraham, done in such powerful ways in the respective scriptures, are unique to these religions. This alone provides a case to consider them as 'Abrahamic religions'. More importantly, the 'Abrahamic' can serve as an overarching framework to comparatively study various concepts and histories, along the lines of establishing aspects of rivalry, competition, mutual influences and reactions between these religions. As shown in the sections above, the 'Abrahamic' theme makes these aspects explicit. Following this, other comparative elements in the study of these religions could then be assessed against features that mark out this unique relationship.

Other possible designations could perhaps be equally entertained, such as the idea of the 'Mosaic religions', which one may argue to be more apt, given that the references to Moses outnumber those to Abraham, as is the case in the Qur'ān.⁷² Nonetheless, the uses of Moses in the traditions lack some key 'Abrahamic' qualities, especially that of a direct and explicit contestation to own the prophetic figure for one's own tradition, and the exhortation to pursue the religion of Abraham is, on its own, unique.⁷³ As the discussion above has shown, the Abrahamic theme in the three scriptural traditions reveals crucial aspects in their relationships, such as convergences, divergences, ambivalences, and cross-

⁷² See fn.2 on page 27 above.

⁷³ For example, see Qur'ān 3:95.

fertilization of ideas. This lends support to the idea that the concept can serve as a heuristic tool in the comparative study of religions.

5.2 REVISITING THE HISTORY OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION

Earlier in the introductory chapter of this study, I mentioned the useful taxonomy of attitudes towards a more theologically oriented approach to religious studies suggested by Brad S. Gregory. He argues that what is usually referred to as a neutral secular form of history can be similarly disputed on the basis of its moral and metaphysical claims. Gregory draws on Quentin Skinner's approach and appeals for a deeper and more honest engagement with epistemic frameworks that a secular worldview tends to hastily reject. Some scholars have also advocated the need to consider alternative approaches to comparing and studying religions. A compelling argument for this is provided by Gavin Flood, a scholar of comparative religion, who calls for a more inclusive field of Religious Studies that "gives hospitality to traditions and their self-representations" and to develop it "as an arena that gives legitimacy to traditions' self-inquiry within a framework of rational discourse."⁷⁵ This self-representation of a tradition transpires in the ways in which it receives and engages with its sacred text, and how these shape its liturgies and rituals. According to Flood, such a "theological expression of traditions" should be given a legitimate place in the comparative study of religion, alongside other various social scientific ways of examining

⁷⁵ Gavin Flood, "Reflections on Tradition and Inquiry in the Study of Religions," *Journal of The American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 1 (2006): 48.

religious phenomena.⁷⁶ This is not to say that such an approach is exempt from the scientific rigour and critical bent of the social science approach, and Flood is cautious to maintain the need for criticality in this more inclusive vision for Religious Studies.

In light of what is advocated by scholars such as Flood and Gregory, we ought to retake stock of approaches to the discipline of Religious Studies and comparative religion in the past, by being “hospitable” and by considering “plurality of discourses”.⁷⁷ As is well established, the discipline has historically been well entrenched in its broader context, and determined, as it were, by the reigning religio-cultural and socio-political circumstances within which scholars functioned. For example, the optimism and confidence of nineteenth-century Europe for a new science of religion to emerge, as epitomised well in Max Muller’s *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, was clearly preceded by the broader European *Geistesgeschichte* of positivism and scientific rationalism. Likewise, in the twentieth century, new contexts provided new impetus, and henceforth, resulted in the advocacy of new approaches. In the inter-war period, many scholars were evidently concerned with the political crisis and aimed to channel their scholarly works towards some kind of universal understanding and brotherhood.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ibid., 54-55. Flood offers an example that “Islamic Theology ... should not be excluded from the academy on a priori grounds, but the incorporation of that Theology entails its encountering other theologies and secular contestation.” See *ibid.*, 56.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ A good example of this is Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who became the Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at the University of Oxford in 1936 until the Second World War. In his lectures on comparative religion at the Manchester College, Oxford, Radhakrishnan set the context for the study in the post-war period. “The War was a great testing time for the Christian religion, which seemed to be identified during its continuance with bloodshed on a gigantic scale. A mood of self-reproach and self-

Yet, because of its acute religious character and spiritual undertones, the worth of Massignon's ideas and approaches has always been questioned, with particular reference to the academic study of religion. In addition, the tendency to misinterpret his 'Abrahamic religions' as an ecumenical construct and ideology *tout court* leads one to discard the concept from the discipline of comparative religion. However, as some of his commentators have suggested, Massignon's epistemology is rooted in the primacy of the 'sacred' and this is in itself a worthy approach to the study of religion. Although the separability, or otherwise, of scholarship, and theological motivations and personal faith remains a thorny issue, the presence of such dynamics, i.e. between scholarship and other forms of "existential engagement", as Patrick Laude argues, "are intimately intertwined, and this close association must be the ferment of penetrating and creative insights." Laude goes on to suggest that "The old scientific presuppositions of *Religionswissenschaft* have to be critically examined and the validity of the light of faith in academic pursuits must not be discarded."⁷⁹ A rethink and review of the assumptions of *Religionswissenschaft*, as Laude suggests here, is in itself a massive project that awaits undertaking. My argument here is less ambitious and is an appeal to simply revisit the formation of the discipline in the twentieth century.

criticism supervened, and the new atmosphere gave greater scope for the understanding of the spirit and value of other faiths." He goes on to call on religious men from both the East and the West "to share their visions and insights, hopes and fears, plans and purposes ... Comparative Religion helps us further this ideal of free sharing among religions which no longer stand in uncontaminated isolation... They are fellow workers toward the same goal. It is our duty to shake hands with their followers to-day and attack the forces of selfishness and stupidity, injustice and irreligion." See Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *East and West in Religion* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1933), 25-27. On Radhakrishnan, see Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 258-60.

⁷⁹ Laude, *Pathways to an Inner Islam*, 16.

The thought and approaches of Massignon should therefore be examined in like manner. As previous chapters have shown, Massignon was reacting against an increasingly secular world which rushed to discard the 'sacred'. To him, the notion of the unflinching faith of Abraham in a unique and transcendent God, so primitive yet so powerfully articulated, is evocative and potent in a secular world.⁸⁰ The 'Abrahamic religions', as examined in the context of Massignon's epistemology, is then rooted in his protest against the raging positivistic methods of his time. As we have seen, this protest is manifested in the ways he selected and interpreted the narratives on Abraham, and in his use of transhistoricality to assert Abraham's continued relevance for humankind. This may have led, as Jacques Waardenburg suggests, to Massignon's mystical approach to interpreting Islam.⁸¹ As I have discussed in chapter two, Massignon was not alone in propounding such an approach. He was part of the Eranos group that privileged the sacred, and under the intellectual weight of Mircea Eliade, sought to advance a theory of religion as *sui generis*. In this sense, we could go so far as to entertain the possibility that Massignon could be viewed as a *Religionsgeschichtler* in the context of a comparison of the unique trajectories of each of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, arising from their respective interpretations of Abraham.

From what have preceded, I argue that the concept of the 'Abrahamic religions' can be fruitfully employed to enrich our understanding of the history of comparative religion, as it explicates further the religio-cultural and

⁸⁰ "C'est ainsi, que M. Massignon peut parler d'un appel de l'Islam, d'un témoignage religieux provenant de cette religion, dans un monde qui ne reconnaît plus ce Dieu." Waardenburg, *L'Islam dans le miroir de l'Occident*, 259-60.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 257.

intellectual currents in the field, especially in the interwar period of the twentieth century. In this regard, Massignon's legacy is directly invested in the study of religion, insofar as it offers the discipline what could be described as an "alternative epistemology" and a science.⁸² In particular, his use of both diachronic and synchronic analyses of different religious texts and histories, and his emphasis on an insider approach, as manifested in his penetrating and unorthodox studies and views of Islam, have both brought about new insights on understanding the relationships between different religions.

5.3 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I reflected on the utility of the concept 'Abrahamic religions' on the basis of a new understanding of its origins and evolution as presented earlier in this study. I have argued that far from simply being a tool to serve interreligious ends, the concept enriches our understanding of comparative religion in two particular areas. Firstly, it helps us in discerning further the history of the late antique period, especially after the introduction of Islam in Arabia. The concept, which symbolizes uses of Abraham in the respective scriptures, helps us understand better how religious identities were formed, what its challenges were, and how each community addressed these aspects of their formation. The comparabilities in narratives and themes also depict the high likelihood of cross-fertilization of ideas, thus indicating a fertile environment of exchange of ideas, although invariably used to pursue one's own

⁸² Jacques Waardenburg has already alluded to this possibility in his analysis of Massignon's work in general. See *ibid.*, 259-60. See also "Louis Massignon (1883-1962) as a Student of Islam," 341-42.

specific objectives. In this sense, the use of the 'Abrahamic' category refers to a particular set of circumstances that may explicate how relationships between different traditions were formed arising from their uses and appropriations of the figure of Abraham as discerned from their respective scriptures.

Secondly, the epistemic nature of the 'Abrahamic religions', especially as it evolved in Massignon's thought in the mid-twentieth century, provides us with an alternative account of the history of comparative religion in the modern period. Both its intellectual and religion-cultural backgrounds attest to its interactivity with the prevailing context of the modern world, and speak of a protest against a materialist world with a rationalistic vision, which Massignon viewed as becoming dangerously less spiritual and a source for many of the world's problems. One may wish to dispute Massignon's viewpoints and ideas, but doing so does not also mean that his *Weltanschauung* with its accompanying epistemology should just be abandoned. Instead, it provides us with a different way of viewing religion and its history.

CONCLUSION

WITHER OR PROSPER THE ‘ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS’?

In the final months of preparing this present study, the ‘religion of Abraham’ became in vogue again, but perhaps for wrong and troubling reasons. It appeared in the inaugural magazine of the militant Muslim group known as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). The magazine is named after the Syrian city of *Dabiq*, which features in apocalyptic Muslim *ḥadīth* literature.¹ In the section under the heading “*Imama is the millah of Ibrahim*”, the writers explicate the theological rationale for the movement by appropriating the figure of Abraham in ways that seek to legitimize its cause and widen its appeal to the global Muslim populace.² The military conquest that it pursues is tied to the concept of leadership (*imāma*), which is a fulfillment of the Qur’ānic call to live according to the *milla* of Abraham.³ Although interpretations by ISIS and many other ‘fundamentalist’ movements globally oppose the idea of ‘Abrahamic religions’ in all its varied meanings as presented in this study (whether theologically or academically), they do less to invalidate the concept itself (as these are just one of many appropriations of Abraham) than to underscore further the need for

¹ See *Dabiq*, Ramadan 1435, 2014. Dabiq is a Syrian city which apocalyptic Muslim *ḥadīth* literature makes reference to. A *ḥadīth* narrated by Abu Huraira states that “The Last Hour would not come until the Romans would land at al-A’māq or in Dābiq. An army consisting of the best (soldiers) of the people of the earth at that time will come from Medina (to counteract them) ...” See *ḥadīth* no. 6924 in *Sahih al-Muslim*, in *Imam Muslim, Sahih Muslim, trans. ‘Abdul Hamid Siddiqi, 4 vols., vol. 4* (Beirut: Dar al-Arabia, 19_), 1501.

² The militant group has been well recognised as being very savvy with effective methods to popularize its movement and place it in the social media. For example, see Henry A. Giroux, “ISIS and the Spectacle of Terrorism: Resisting Mainstream Workstations of Fear,” (2014).

³ Qur’ān 3:95.

scholars of religion to show how such appropriations could be critically explained from a socio-historical perspective, and how these then factor into our interpretations of the 'Abrahamic religions'.

This present study hopes to have contributed towards clarifying how the concept stands historically and theologically after an examination of its origins and developments and after its characteristics and qualities in the study of religion have been discerned. The primary premise of this study is that the history of the 'Abrahamic religions' needs to be reassessed in view of its overwhelming association with ecumenism that undermines any other epistemic qualities. Moreover, this has led to a hasty rejection of its heuristic use for the study of religion. In light of such critiques and the assumptions contained therein, the genesis of the concept needed to be revisited, and its developments and meanings carefully traced.

In this study, I have therefore set out to examine the origins of the 'Abrahamic religions' by pursuing the following questions: when, why, and how the conception of the 'Abrahamic religions' take place, and in what ways the concept has evolved over time. In a general way, the scholarly development over the last three decades in the study of religious concepts serve as important case studies that shed critical light on my methodology. As this present study is also an exercise in intellectual history, it has been guided by two historiographical methods. First is the Cambridge school that aided in an examination of the genealogy of the concept as it evolved in the thought of Louis Massignon. Second is the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriff* that guided the task of tracing the diachronic and synchronic development of the concept over the last half-century. The uses,

merits, and limitations of these methods, as well as the sources for my study, are laid out in the introductory chapter of this thesis.

The first chapter sought to provide a historical backdrop for the 'Abrahamic religions' by discussing how each of the monotheistic religions conceived their relationship with Abraham and understood the claims of others to the same figure. In other words, I explored the *historia sacra* of the three religions, and examined how perceptions on the monotheistic religions that lay claim to Abraham evolved over time. These were important to the thesis, in so far as they functioned as antecedents of the 'Abrahamic religions'. The next few chapters traced the emergence of the concept in the life and thought of Massignon. The second chapter looked specifically at Massignon's career and highlighted aspects that are pertinent to his *Weltanschauung*. Inevitably, his unique worldview that centered around the sacred had also influenced his religious ideas, including his conception of the 'Abrahamic religions'. The third chapter focussed on the birth of the 'Abrahamic religions' as it evolved in Massignon's thought over several decades. Here, I sought to show the various stages of its growth, and the different ways in which the idea was expressed in his thought as his life traversed its various stages, such as his reconversion to Catholicism, his spiritual journey, his commitment to the Arab and Muslim world, as well as his efforts on both religious and political rapprochement.

In both these chapters, I sought to show that the concept has underlying intellectual and cultural influences, and therefore could only be properly understood with these perspectives in mind. Intellectually, the idea as it emerged in the mid-twentieth century was an immediate heir to preceding nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century studies on the linkages between Islam and

the Judeo-Christian tradition. Culturally, it germinated in two key developments. First was a deep religious consciousness formed through an amalgam of Massignon's Catholic sensibilities and an acute awareness of, and sympathy for, Islam and Muslims. The second development is the French Catholic revivalism in the early twentieth century with its emphasis on mystical ideas. Owing its origins to developments such as these, the 'Abrahamic religions' functioned, as first mooted by Massignon, to express various key ideas; as a protest against rationalism with a leverage on a mystical worldview, as a synthesis of preceding intellectual thought, as well as a hope for reconciliation and rapprochement. In the final analysis, the concept has deeper roots in modern western ideological and cultural history than previously thought. Unfortunately, these variegated meanings and significance, as discerned from its evolution, have been obscured by its ecumenical function.

In chapter four, I discussed two distinct trajectories which the concept traversed soon after its inception, one scholarly and the other interreligious. I have also elaborated on recent critiques of the concept, with the intent of fleshing out what have been perceived as its epistemological problems. Chapter five is a defense of the academic worth of the concept. It argues that a careful and comprehensive view of its origins can fruitfully lead to fresh insights on the comparative study of the three monotheistic religions. As I have shown in the chapter, ambivalences and ambiguities are part of the fledgling nature of concepts and categories. In other words, the 'Abrahamic religions' could still be in a state of infancy, whose identity has yet to mature, and is thus in need for further careful assessment. The starting point for this study must be its origins, but one that has not been fully explored, as this thesis has sought to

demonstrate. With a better appreciation of how the concept has evolved, and with a clearer idea of how its use could be apportioned appropriately in the respective domains of comparative and ecumenical work, we could possibly arrive at a viewpoint that offers clarity on its epistemic worth.

To its detractors, the concept is at best fuzzy, and at worst, a false portrayal of history. Moreover, the problem with concepts as ‘generic and monolithic [as the] “Abrahamic religions” ’ is that it “potentially levels all historical and cultural differences.”⁴ The problem with the concept, as Aaron Hughes contends, is that the “three religions are routinely treated as though they are best understood when considered to be essentially the same, possessing the same ancestry, the same essential structures, the same religious disposition, and the same habits.”⁵ One needs to be precise here. Such claims may not be totally amiss, but only insofar as the assumption that ‘history’ here refers to claims of a historical Abraham. Within the normative historical framework of the study of religion, this is certainly the case. Likewise, Hughes’ contention is admissible, but only insofar as one speaks of the concept in ecumenical terms. Yet, the investigations in this present study have demonstrated the nuanced origins and varied meanings of the ‘Abrahamic religions’. Scholars who have employed the concept of the ‘Abrahamic religions’ are also as eager as critics to examine differences and subtle variations between these religions and see no academic value in simply harping on commonalities, which they overwhelmingly submit are the staple subjects for interreligious dialogue.

⁴ Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions*, 6.

⁵ Ibid.

In reflecting on the significance of this study, it is worth keeping in mind Tomoko Masuzawa's cautionary note in her study of how the 'world religions' emerged in the intellectual history of modern Europe. According to her, our understanding is at risk if we are imprecise in what we think we know happened in the European academy. Here, we could easily replace 'world religions' with 'Abrahamic religions'. Accordingly, we risk misunderstanding our past with the lack of our own imprecision in determining "what went on in the European academy", of which Louis Massignon, together with his peers, were members in the twentieth century. Not only do we lose the richness of the meanings and significance of the 'Abrahamic religions', and hence fail to harness its potential for our current comparative purposes, but also lose sight of an important aspect of the history of our discipline. As I have suggested in this study, the 'Abrahamic religions' could be seen as a valiant struggle to cling on to an epistemology that challenged the historical positivism of the twentieth century, and sought to revive earlier methods to make religion reclaim its force in the modern world. I have argued that Massignon did not intend for the 'Abrahamic religions' to be a historical category in a positivist sense. Rather, the common historical origins that he refers to must therefore be referring to the self-understanding and claims of each religion. Massignon thus did not plan to historically evaluate, nor dispute these beliefs, but rather interpret their significance and meanings for each religious community.

There is also much to be gained from employing the concept for comparative purposes. From a historical perspective, the concept can serve well the study of formations of religious identities in the late antique period, as examined in the context of rival religious elements that surround any particular

religious community. The self-conceptions of Abraham for each community are examples of how such religious identities are formed. As is argued in this present study, one could problematise the notion that claims to Abraham are exclusive. The negotiation and renegotiation of religious identities in each of these religions have led, at times, to some ambiguity in their texts as to who could be included in the family of Abraham. Both exclusivist and inclusivist strands of thought could therefore be discerned. The picture of the family of Abraham could be redrawn, as it were.

I. THESIS REFLECTIONS

There are several ways in which this dissertation could have been completed differently. The first concerns the scope of this study. I could have kept my focus on Massignon and his Abrahamic thought, and not venture into the various trajectories of the 'Abrahamic religions' after its inception. However, this approach would not have permitted a more thorough analysis of the epistemic value of the concept for two reasons. First is that subsequent uses build upon Massignon's conception. Where the concept has been critiqued, there is reference to its origins in Massignon's thought. Thus, both the past and present of the concept are interconnected and need to be examined as such. Second is to show the evolution of the concept, in that it has developed into different uses. This is particularly important, in view of arguments that suggest a single meaning and significance of the concept.

The second relates to the presentation of the material in this study. In particular, the chapters on Massignon and his thought (i.e. chapters two and

three) could have been arranged such that Massignon's Abrahamic thought is merged with the introduction on his life as traced in chapter two. The benefit of such a presentation is that one could see the contexts in which his Abrahamic thought developed and how it was articulated at different stages in his life with greater clarity. Nonetheless, this will impede the process of tracing the development of his Abrahamic thought, which is one of the key aims of this study. Pursuant to this objective, chapter two was devoted to an introduction on Massignon whilst chapter three focussed on his conception of the 'Abrahamic religions'. Accordingly, the discussion in chapter three made reference to the contexts presented in the preceding chapter where appropriate.

This present study is also limited both by design and access to resources. The concept of the 'Abrahamic religions' has been traced and examined almost singularly from a western perspective and, with the exception of Isma'il al-Fārūqī's thought, only western scholarly reactions to the concept have been presented. Nonetheless, Massignon's interpretations of Islam as a unique type of Abrahamic religion may have attracted some reactions from Muslim intellectuals with whom he interacted whilst he taught and researched in Egypt. There is little work that has been done in this regard, and the specific study of Muslim responses to the ideas and thought of western Islamicists is beyond the scope of the present work, as this entails consulting materials and archives based in Muslim institutions such as the Al-Azhar University. The inclusion of this aspect may however yield critical insights on not only the reception of the 'Abrahamic religions' in the centres of Muslim intelligentsia in the twentieth century, but also their reactions and responses to Orientalist studies. Further to this, if and when the complete archives of Massignon's files become accessible, more information

could be gleaned on the formation of his thought, and this could enrich the findings of this thesis further.

More research also needs to be done in studying the evolution of monotheisms in the late antique period. In particular, the question of the origins of Islam has become ever more pertinent and somewhat gained more impetus given the contemporary socio-political conditions. As scholarly opinion gradually builds towards the idea that Islam owes its origins to Judeo-Christian strand of religious thought and practice, and that the sources of Muslim claims to Abraham could be found in both Patristic and Rabbinic thought, there are various other examples that need examination to either corroborate or counter such theories. For example, could the Qur'ānic notion of faith and good deeds (*īmān* and *'amal ṣāliḥ*) as an interlinked concept within Islam, be a reaction against the Christian notion of justification by faith, and a return to the Abrahamic ideal (of both as maintained in the Jewish tradition) that it purports to emulate? This and many other related questions provide fresh avenues for further research in Abrahamic studies.

II. THE TEXT AND THE WORLD

This leaves the present study to make one final but no less important observation. As this study has shown, the 'Abrahamic religions' lays at the intersection between scholarly inquiry and lived realities. The academia itself is rooted in society, deriving its interests from the world around it, and contributing towards a more accurate understanding of the world in all its various facets. Often, the academia becomes a critical vehicle in addressing the

pressing challenges in society. Given that the concept of the 'Abrahamic religions' concerns three of the world's major religions but continue to be bound by, and at the same time, set apart because of, a deep and complex history, its import and relevance for both the present and future socio-political and religious climate cannot be ignored. Moreover, its significance in the context of our current realities cannot be overstated. An example of a clear voice that reflects this concern well is that of Mona Siddiqui in her latest work noted above.

There is a symbiotic relationship between the ways we perceive the relationships between the three religions and the realities which they represent. In other words, what, why, and how we decide to read their scriptures and sacred histories, whether as a collective of some sort (as represented in the idea of the 'Abrahamic religions') will necessarily be linked to the contexts in which this identification takes place, and will also impact upon the contexts itself. It could either perpetuate a status quo (of estrangement and discord, or understanding and harmony) or to rethink and reshape it in positive ways. In particular, whilst the study of the origins of the 'Abrahamic religions' is largely a historical one, the three religions are, one must remember, alive and thriving. Thus, this is a study of living religions, which involves highly fluid and ever-changing landscapes that will perpetually impact on our interpretation. The socio-political and religious realities in the life of a scholar could also pull research in various directions.

The origins of the concept have given us some navigational clues as to what the future holds for the study of the 'Abrahamic religions'. As the events of yesteryears repeat themselves, we might find ourselves once again confronted with the need to reevaluate our need for the concept of the 'Abrahamic religions'

because of new interests, questions, and findings that arise. The issue here, as in this present study, remains first and foremost an epistemic one. How has the 'Abrahamic religions' evolved? What new meaning(s) has it taken on? What has driven these new developments? Only with a certain clarity on questions such as these could concepts and categories be properly reassessed.

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