

The Concept of Faith and the Concept of Truth in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

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I. The Concept of Faith in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

1. The Concept of Faith in Judaism

(Prof. Dr. Susanne Talabardon, University of Bamberg)

As point of departure, we should recognise with Martin Buber that faith can be understood in two basic ways: as trusting someone (the Hebrew concept of *emunah*) or as acknowledging something to be true (the Greek Christian concept of *pistis*). This dichotomy is of course highly simplified, but can be used as a platform of departure for further analysis and debate. For instance, the distinction shows a fundamental difference between Judaism and Christianity in the functionality of faith: Unlike Jews, Christians belong to their religion primarily as a result of their faith.

This difference in importance can be illustrated by the fact that in the Hebrew Bible, the most prominent Hebrew root for “faith”, *'aman*, is only used 51 times in the narrow sense of “trusting” or “believing” and a further 49 times as a noun, compared to 243 instances of the verb *pisteuein* in the New Testament. Where it occurs in the Hebrew Bible, the word “faith” is often associated with concepts such as trust, trustworthiness, solidarity, but also fear (in the sense of respect or awe).

In early rabbinic texts, there is no systematic creed or catechism or any kind of systematic dogmatics that would prescribe faith; although there are sets of tenets which are named as being essential to the Jewish religion, these vary in different sources and do not form a coherent picture. In the Middle Ages, belief becomes a general philosophical category, presenting a junction of the concepts of faith and truth which is not present in the Bible. Nevertheless, in texts such as Jehuda Halevi's *Sefer ha-Kusari*, for instance, the Jewish faith in God is described as being founded in the historical relationship and communication of the Jewish people with their God rather than in abstract speculative truth.

In the discussion following the paper, it emerged that in the Jewish tradition, individual theoretical beliefs are not relevant for the development of the community. The Torah forms the centre and only constant of tradition, however, there are no definitive answers to

questions of its interpretation. Rather, it is an infinite discussion of how to adapt the commandments of the Torah to current circumstances which keeps tradition alive. Even the faith of Abraham, which seems highly individual and even led Abraham to leave his original community, has relevance mainly because it led Abraham to found a new community and tradition, rather than as a model for individual faith.

2. The Concept of Faith in Christianity

(Prof. em. Dr. Walter Sparn, FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg)

There is widespread agreement among Christian theologians in tracing the Christian concept of faith back to the faith of Abraham and to the trust in God expressed in the Psalms, thus effectively founding the concept of faith on Jewish sources and establishing a concept that can be seen as common ground for discussion between monotheistic religions. However, even within Christianity, the concept of faith takes many heterogeneous forms and allows for many different interpretations. The word “faith” has always been a polyvalent term and has, along with all Christian religious language, been subject to translations and shifts in meaning, as the divine message needs to be appropriated by persons living in particular surroundings and circumstances. Thus, the concept of faith is intimately connected by the relational religious life of the believer, not admitting of a general or metaphysical definition. Instead, the phenomenology of faith connected religion with anthropology by assuming three aspects of faith in general, namely the intellectual, the moral, and the emotional. Different branches of Christianity differ in their understanding of the relation between these aspects of faith and their relative importance.

The importance of faith for salvation is particularly emphasised in the Protestant tradition, as expressed in the famous formula *sola fide*, “by faith alone”, which creates a strong distinction between faith and works or between divine action and human action. It also leads to a constant duplicity of dependence on God’s grace and confidence in one’s own faith. Protestantism also places a strong emphasis on the liberating and pluralising aspects of faith, conceptualising faith as free from formal law.

The Nicean creed, which was mentioned in the discussion as the most widely used, fundamental expression of the Christian faith, was not mentioned in the paper itself as individual faith is more closely expressed in more personal forms of prayer such as the

confession of sin. In the Protestant tradition especially, the liturgy carries less importance for the expression of faith than in other Christian traditions.

3. The concept of Faith in Islam

(Prof. Ovamir Anjum, Ph.D., University of Toledo)

The Qur'ān makes a very clear distinction between inner belief and outward actions, as can be seen from a number of verses. The debate around the relation between faith and works that was sparked by these verses formed the context in which the concept of faith in Islam was elaborated and clarified. Abu Hanifa, for instance, defined faith (*īmān*) as the inner affirmation (*taṣdīq*) of God's unicity and Muhammad's prophecy, which can be supplemented by good works but is in itself fundamental and indivisible, i.e. it cannot differ in quantity or strength, it is either there or not.

In contrast to this, the mainstream opinion among the traditionalists (*ahl as-sunna*) was that faith can increase and decrease and different persons have different amounts of faith, as they understood faith as inclusive of works, being added to or detracted from by good or bad deeds, which is mentioned in Scripture. However, this would mean that no one ever completely attains faith to a perfect extent, as there are an infinite number of possible acts, which is why Abu Hanifa argued for faith as an indivisible quantum that precedes religious practice rather than including it and, like everyday knowledge, cannot be lost again once it is attained. This leads to a relatively inclusive demarcation of the community of believers (anyone who believes in God and the prophets), possibly in opposition to the excessive use of *takfīr* (declaring someone an unbeliever) by groups such as the Kharijites.

From the position just outlined, it follows that in Abu Hanifa's view, anyone who claims to be a Muslim is in some fundamental sense equal to all other Muslims, which raises the question how this can be reconciled with the fact that there clearly are different levels of commitment to faith. Abu Hanifa illustrates this by analogy to the ability to swim: Two swimmers can have highly different levels of skill and confidence, but they are equal in that they are both swimmers. However, two swimmers can be completely different in every other respect related to their ability to swim, including the knowledge that they are indeed able to swim. Because the same is true of faith, Abu Hanifa's assumption of faith as an indivisible quantum made it necessary for the traditionalists to distinguish between *islām* (formal, fundamental belonging to the group of believers) and *īmān* (actual level of commitment, comprising not

only belief, but also motivation and action). In the later course of this debate, further elaborations and refinements were added, such as the added dimension of motivation or the idea of “branches” or aspects of faith. Generally, the tension in this debate is between setting the bar too high, recognising only few people as believers in the full sense and thus encouraging a certain elitism, and making the definition of faith so encompassing as to have little meaning.

The discussion focused on the relation between faith and knowledge, which was only briefly mentioned in the presentation. The Qur’ān emphasises that all true knowledge is coherent with faith, otherwise it is not knowledge. Similarly, all valid human reasoning, according to the Qur’ān, necessarily leads to faith.

4. Concluding Discussion (September 28, 2017)

The crucial difference between Judaism and the other two Abrahamic religions is that Judaism is not a universalist-individualist religion: there is an interaction between God and the Jewish People as a whole, rather than an individual’s relationship with God. Although in the Catholic tradition, the Church as a whole is also more important than any single individual, it is still each individual’s salvation which is at stake, whereas in the Jewish tradition, it is the whole community that will either be saved or not. As a result of the lack of universalism, the Jewish faith is unlikely to cause clashes with other groups in a pluralistic society, as there is no missionary zeal but it is recognised that other groups of people have different faiths.

Faith in Judaism is inherently dialogical and characterised as a response to the collective experiences of God. The Biblical figures of Abraham and Jacob are paradigms of two very different types of faith, one all-consuming and non-negotiable, the other rationalised and pragmatic, each of which has its strengths and weaknesses. As there is no unified concept but a large variety of different conceptions of faith in the Jewish tradition, it is not possible to simply pin down “the” Jewish idea of faith.

From a Christian perspective, the expression “having” or “possessing” faith is misleading, as faith is not independent of time but means living in a relationship. Thus, the concept of “the faith” is misleading; rather, a historical understanding that takes into account its changeable nature is needed. The fluid phenomenon of faith is more important than any absolute knowledge. While sound human reasoning should lead to faith, it does not do so in our reality

because humans are flawed, so that a perfect philosophical conception of faith is not possible in this world but divine grace is needed to transform philosophy into faith.

There is no direct opposition of individual and community, as an individual person only becomes a believer within a community. Faith is also closely connected to the question of freedom as it entails both a radical dependence on God and a radical independence from everything and everyone else. There are many different possible understandings of faith: it can be conceptualised as a habit, a status, a propositional attitude, a set of propositions How these different aspects relate to each other and which of them should be emphasised is subject to debate.

II. The Concept of Truth in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

1. The Concept of Truth in Judaism

(Sen.-Prof. Dr. Stefan Schreiner, University of Tübingen)

In the Hebrew Bible, the word for “truth”, *emeth*, is used in a large variety of contexts and associated with a number of different notions such as faith, integrity, grace, and loyalty. Its translations in the Septuagint mirror that diversity, including not only the obvious translation *alētheia* (“truth”), but also, for example, *dikaiosynē* (“justice”). The Greek word *alētheia* connotes the quality of being revealed or disclosed, whereas the Hebrew *emeth* instead implies steadfastness or reliability. The associations mentioned above suggest that, as Steven Schwarzschild said, *emeth* is primarily an ethical notion of truthfulness, rather than a theoretical issue. The Greek philosophical notion of truth as correspondence to reality was only later adopted into the Hebrew and Arabic traditions.

Truth is also named as the seventh of the thirteen attributes of God named in Exodus 34. This position in the middle of the list of attributes gives truth a special status. In the rabbinic literature, “truth” is sometimes even used as a substitute for the name of God, just as in the Muslim tradition *al-ḥaqq* (“truth”) is one of the names of God. Rabbinic literature also sometimes treats *emeth* as an acronym, although there are different interpretations of what the letters stand for, including the prominent notion that they represent the beginning, middle, and end of the alphabet.

The notion of “doing the truth” does not merely describe acting in accordance with the truth or acting with authenticity, but as the Torah is recognised as truth itself, fulfilling its commandments amounts to “doing” the truth. Religious truth does not describe facts to be proven by logical argument, but shows its value by giving meaning to personal lives. This also means that interreligious dialogue cannot be a discussion about dogma, but only the practical consequences of the different creeds.

2. The Concept of Truth in Christianity

(Prof. Dr. Dr. Thomas Schärfl-Trendel, University of Regensburg)

Truth seems to be first and foremost an attribute of sentences or propositions, which is at odds with the idea shared by the Abrahamic religions that God (or, in Christian doctrine, Jesus Christ) is the ultimate truth. This means that in order to make sense of the concept of truth in Christianity, it is necessary to refine the notion of truth in such a way that it can be applied to a personal entity.

Thus far in the Christian tradition, truth seems to have been mostly understood as correspondence (with reality), although St. Anselm's interpretation of the notion of truth seems to focus on a normative aspect, within which truth does not only include the correctness of statements, but also a rightness of thought and action. In addition, the way Christian theology has been practised historically suggests the notion of internal coherence and consensus as a "working criterion of truth". Philosophically, the theory of correspondence expresses our common sense intuitions about what truth is very well, however, it does not answer questions such as what the attribute of truth can be an attribute of or how its relation of correspondence to facts or reality can be judged. The practically useful coherence theory leads to the problem of circularity, as a sentence's truth in this model is defined as its coherence with a web of other true sentences which all depend on each other as their truth criterion. This leads to the question of whether there is an external reality that true sentences "refer to" that can be empirically authenticated. This debate about realism is in turn connected to the question of how the conceptual framework that is used to ground the rational debate about what statements are true can be authenticated.

In order to make sense of the notion that God is the ultimate truth, a creator God can be understood as the ultimate truthmaker. However, this notion seems to aim at a deeper identification, perhaps as the identification of God with the pure truth every thing (sentence, thought, ...) has to participate in in order to be true. Moreover, an ethical dimension can be seen in this identification since if God is the ultimate truth, then according to St. Augustine, this truth is also the goal towards which humans' inner life should be oriented. This can also be used as a criterion for the truth of religious beliefs, which can be assessed as to how they serve to cultivate this "inner life".

Thus, as was summarised in the discussion, propositional truth plays an important role in Christian tradition because of the importance of doctrine, but it is always connected with the ethical or spiritual dimension of truth. However, the debate as discussed so far is extremely epistemological, the application of the theoretical or conceptual tools to theological doctrine would require a different paper.

3. The Concept of Truth in Islam

(Prof. Dr. Nader el-Bizri, American University of Beirut)

The word most often used for “truth” in the Islamic scriptural sources is *al-ḥaqq*, which stands in opposition to *an-nifāq* or *al-bāṭil* and is closely tied to the concept of *wahy* (revelation) and therefore to the idea of the divine. Truth, then, is essentially that which has been revealed by God. This revealed truth has the purpose of protecting believers from doubt, uncertainty, and falsity, which is the reason behind the many threats and condemnations in Scripture against those who obscure or deny the truth.

Al-ḥaqq is also one of the attributes or names of God. The mystical tradition within Islam is focused on the revelation of the divine truth not through Scripture but through direct mystical experience. Another tradition within Islam in which truth is a relevant concept is the philosophical tradition, exemplified for instance by ibn Sīna, according to whom philosophy is engagement with the truth (particularly in terms of necessity, contingency, and impossibility).

More generally, truth and falsehood are regarded as what leads to righteous or forbidden acts respectively. Currently, however, public discourse is driven more by populism and power dynamics than by an objective search for the truth, which opens up questions about the role of the concept of truth in the future.

It was argued in the discussion that the relative stagnation of Islamic philosophy in recent centuries is partially caused or at least reinforced by a prevailing belief in the literal truth of the Qur’ān; for instance, the interpretation of the Qur’ān in some schools of thought is still based on Ptolemaic cosmology, which is ineffective. It was speculated that the application of modern hermeneutics might help Islamic scholarship in this regard.

4. Concluding Discussion (September 29, 2017)

The Jewish insistence on recognising only one God is, historically, monolatry rather than monotheism in the actual sense of the word, i.e., it was accepted that other peoples had other gods, Jews were merely forbidden from worshipping them. Thus, despite the Biblical identification of God with truth, other gods may not be seen as worthy of worship for the Jews, but they are not necessarily non-existent or false gods.

Because of the limited time, the paper of the previous day left out the topics of the internal diversity of opinion on the concept of truth within Judaism as well as the role of interreligious debate in the historical development of the concept. While it is accepted within Jewish

tradition that “there is no prophet like Moses”, this is sometimes taken to refer only to prophets within the people of Israel, meaning that other nations could have a prophet of equal status. This paves the way for dialogue with other monotheistic religions, particularly if it is assumed that Christianity and Islam made the faith of the Jews known to the rest of the world, which expresses a kind of appropriating tolerance towards these two religions. Similarly, according to Islamic Scripture, there is only one source of revelation for all holy books, although this is sometimes conceptualised as an ascending series culminating in the Qur’ān. This would make the Qur’ān a “gold standard”, so to speak, for truth in other revealed texts. In Islam, its linguistic beauty is understood as an outside proof for the truth of the Qur’an as Scripture, something which is new in the history of religions, while earlier traditions instead accepted miracles or signs as authentication.

In the Christian tradition, the question of normativity is central to the understanding of truth: Sources have to fulfill standards of normativity in order to be taken as a witness or to have recognised importance. In terms of dialogical moments in the conceptual development, doing Christian theology in Arabic (the language of Islam) led to innovation in the Eastern church. The concept of truth in Christianity is also tied up with the concept of the Trinity, as Christ is said to *be* truth and the Holy Spirit is sometimes called the “spirit of truth”.

Panel Discussion (September 28, 2017)

Prof. Dr. Tarek Badawia (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg), Prof. em. Dr. Jens Kulenkampff (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg), Sen.-Prof. Dr. Stefan Schreiner (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg), Dr. Katja Thörner (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg); Chair: Prof. Dr. Georges Tamer (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg)

The central question discussed in the panel discussion was whether faith, understood as exclusive truth, has a destructive effect on a peaceful life in society.

From a Jewish point of view, faith is a human answer to an experience of transcendence. Statements about God are only true as long as they are not separated from the individual uttering them. There can only be statements about “my”, “your”, or “our” God. Thus, faith in Judaism does not have an exclusive claim to absolute truth that could be prescribed to other groups. Imposing one’s own religion on others would be hubris.

The Christian answer to this question depends on the concept of faith, the concept of truth, and the type of society concerned. A distinction can be made between *fides qua* (the act of faith) and *fides quae* (the content that is being believed in), neither of which can stand alone one-sidedly. The truth of statements is dependent on the context and, in the case of statements in the first person, on the speaker. Since statements of faith fall in that category, they cannot be turned into absolute, timelessly valid truths, although they are also not entirely subjective but allow for a rational discussion. While homogenous societies can be strengthened by the concept of a shared faith as truth, pluralistic societies need a discursive, non-absolute claim to truth which allow for a critical discussion of the contents of faith whilst not relativising the active practice of faith.

In the view of Abū I-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmirī, who formulated an Islamic perspective on religious diversity in the 11th century, there are two essential, generally valid truths: That there is a creator God, and that man is limited between birth and death. Religiosity thus becomes an anthropological constant. However, once a human being claims to possess the one and only truth, they are committing hubris. The Qurʾān does not impart the possession of theoretical truth but makes ethical injunctions, following which can build trust in the truth. Truth, then, is expressed in human action. Religious diversity, according to the Qurʾān, makes groups of people a test for each other.

From a philosophical perspective, religious convictions are at first not fundamentally different from any other, everyday convictions, i.e., taking something to be true. However, there does seem to be a distinction between “believing that ...” and “believing in ...”. Therefore, a distinction must be made between the perspective of theoretical consideration “from outside” and the perspective of the believer, which usually includes the conception of belief as trust. From the outward perspective, the specific trait of religious belief as opposed to other beliefs is its content as belief in a transcendental truth which cannot be empirically verified. From the perspective of the believer, those transcendental truths are self-evident realities, as long as faith is passed on and affirmed in a social context. Thus, faith is essentially a marker for group identity. This in itself does not make it a destructive force, but it does provide a point of leverage for potential conflicts and allows for its instrumentalization, which is, however, also true for other kinds of group identities (e.g. ethnic or cultural groups).

However, someone who is truly secure in his or her own convictions does not need to feel threatened by others believing differently, so that missionary zeal may be a sign of weakness of faith rather than strength. It can be argued against this that someone who is truly secure in his faith would feel the need to express this and share it with others, although historically, a mere public expression of faith has not been what was meant by “mission”. In any case, the public practice of different faiths creates a situation of rivalry and a peaceful co-existence is a cultural achievement and needs to be passed on through education.

Part of this consists in teaching a correct way of dealing with incitation to violence in religious scriptures. Instead of taking religious texts literally, they must be taken seriously. A certain amount of knowledge is needed in order to handle the foundations of religion, which can be easily misunderstood, similar to a person helping him- or herself to medications in a pharmacy without having the necessary knowledge.

While many of the most destructive ideologies of the 20th century were accompanied by a marked decrease in religiosity, there is not necessarily a causal link, and religions are not a panacea against the possibility for the exploitation of group identities. However, from the internal perspective, religions do have that function.