

# The Concept of History and the Concept of Time in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

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## I. The Concept of History

### 1. The Concept of History in Judaism

(Prof. Dr. em. Karl E. Grözinger)

It is possible to think of Judaism as fundamentally a religion of history. However, the salvation history that plays such a central role in the development of Jewish thought is fundamentally different from historiography in the modern sense, as its main intention is the foundation of a Jewish collective memory and the evocation rather than documentation of events. Therefore, in discussing the concept of history in Judaism, we must consider not one, but several concepts of history.

Important Jewish concepts of history can be classed in three groups: 1) Cyclical / typological view of history: This conception of history sees historical events as repetitions of a basic historical topic or type. Biblical stories recount a repeating pattern of the Jews turning away from God, being overpowered by their enemies, returning to God, and being saved and regaining power. Some Orthodox scholars also see this pattern repeated during the Crusades and in the Shoah. 2) Apocalyptic view of history: History is seen as a linear progression in predetermined stages from the beginning of time towards its completion. Such apocalyptic views combine a pessimistic view of this time (at least after the Fall) with optimism about the coming world. This includes the Kabbalistic concepts of history, which often expect world history to have a fixed number of millennia. Sometimes, this linear history is seen as containing many internal cycles, during which the world oscillates between good and evil / unity and disunity. The structure of history is metaphysically determined. The concept of history in religious Zionism falls into that category. At this point, there is also some mutual influence between Jewish religious Zionism and certain Christian ideas of the messianic kingdom. 3) Modern view of history: In the early modern period, the close cross-linkage of human fate with metaphysical powers was rejected, making the modern conception of history more anthropocentric. Where the role of metaphysical forces in history is accepted, this is done by the distinction of, for example, a historical vs a rational truth. Also, the modern view of historical events was increasingly shaped by a critical comparison of sources. However, even these modern accounts of history are not static but depend on their historical and political experience.

Several distinct views of history, rivalling each other and representing all three of these categories, are present until today. While all the older accounts agree on the presence of metaphysical forces in history, modern accounts only allow this through the introduction of different truths. However, even

the pre-modern concepts of history allow for a complex view of historical truth, e.g., through the admission of different interpretations of Biblical truth.

## 2. The Concept of History in Christianity (Prof. Dr. Christoph Böttigheimer)

History in general is understood as a complex sequence of events in time caused by man. In the Christian tradition, this sequence is understood in a teleological sense, as a medium of divine revelation centred around Christ and leading towards the eschatological aim. Historicity, on the other hand, refers to the condition of being subject to temporality, finitude, and change, which in the Christian context underlies the need for salvation. Understanding history as a set of narratives carrying lessons from the past, rather than as a continuum of events or facts, allows for an understanding of Scripture as history. In the Old Testament, history is primarily understood as salvific history, its progression controlled by God and aimed at an eschatological future. The New Testament follows this chronological, eschatological view of history, seeing time as fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Christ's life, death and resurrection are the climax of history, counterbalancing the Fall of Man as the anticlimax. After Christ's resurrection, the rest of history is already part of the messianic age, in the presence of salvation which becomes manifest wherever love is concrete. However, the death and resurrection of Christ is also seen as something entirely different from all of history, in which the end of history is anticipated. The separation between profane history and salvation history, though it has its basis in the Biblical creation story which establishes a separation between God and creation, was fully conceptualized only in Early Modern times. Theology itself, conducted by thinkers in different historical context, is also subject to history. Even within the Biblical text, ahistorically conditioned development of theological ideas can be observed. This historicity also becomes apparent in considering the history of the church, as this shows a lively and therefore in principle incomplete tradition, which needs to be understood hermeneutically and in the context of its historical development. The history of the separation of churches but also of the ecumenical movement is an example for such changeability and historical diversity. History, on the whole, is a constitutive element of the Christian faith.

## 3. The Concept of History in Islam (Prof. Dr. Mona Hassan)

History in Islam is usually approached from a transcendental angle. Classical Muslim histories usually begin with God, who is before and above time, and only then move on to the creation of space and time and the history of the world. Many such historical lessons are reflected in the Qur'ān, which places an emphasis on remembering past events to learn from them. Some Islamic rites seek to reflect and reenact historical realities, making history a main vehicle of communal memory. Pre-history, too, plays a substantial role in the understanding of history as human history, which is conceptualized as beginning with the primordial covenant between God and humans before their creation. This idea of

primordial pre-history may have some parallels to the Christian discussion about the “time” before the creation of time. In the Islamic tradition, history is to a great extent expressed in art. From pre-Islamic times onward, poetry has had a deep effect in recalling and representing history. Music became a way to capture responses to historical events. There are parallels between this and certain religious traditions like the Shi’ite Kerbala reenactments or the Christian passion plays. The prophet Muhammad also plays a central role in the Islamic understanding of history, as he plays a central role in religious life across, but also beyond history.

In the Islamic conceptualization of history, a distinction can be made between discursive history, which is especially prominent in the ḥadīth tradition, embodied history, which shows itself in the practical tradition of communal precedent, and narrative history, mostly expressed in the formal historiographical tradition. Regarding the metaphysical dimension of human history, there is a tension in Islam, too, between human freedom and divine decree. God is seen as constantly present and active in history, which also means that often no real distinction is made between secular and divine history. The orthodox consensus in medieval Islam was that, while humans “earn” their actions, the actions themselves are brought about by God. This is taken up by some contemporary Turkish thinkers who draw a connection between Neo-Aṣ’arism and quantum physics; however, modern approaches include far more discussions of free will.

#### 4. Conclusion

A commonality between all three religions is that mystical traditions usually have a different concept of history than mainstream theologians do. A common feature is seeking the presence of something transcendent, although the explanation of the details varies. However, some modern approaches posit a common core reality behind the different contents of this shared experience. Moreover, in all three religions, historical moments are reenacted or made present in religious acts.

## II. The Concept of Time

### 1. The Concept of Time in Judaism

(Prof. Dr. Sylvie Anne Goldberg)

While the concepts of history and time are hard to separate from each other, any conceptualization of time is also related to other concepts fundamental to Judaism, such as that of creation. The creation account in Genesis 1 describes „days“ even before the creation of sequential temporal succession, which happens on the fourth day with the creation of the celestial lights. The passage of time in Jewish life is punctuated with the Sabbath, sabbatical years and Jubilees, giving time a certain rhythm and linking it to the notion of freedom. By some, the experience of the Sabbath has come to be regarded as outside of human time. As the Jewish calendar, which has always played a large role in structuring Jewish life, begins from the moment of creation, modern science also means that this reckoning has to be relativized conceptually, recognizing a difference between religious time and physical time, or understood metaphorically, as opposed to the astronomical calendar treatises of the Middle Ages.

Words used to describe time in the Hebrew Bible include *’ōlām*, meaning a totality of time (also as in “lifespan”), the totality of the cosmos, or eternity, which thus denotes both human and universal, limited, and unlimited time, and *zāmān*, that is, movement or the passage of time. The words *mō’ēd*, a time of meeting or more generally a fixed temporality or duration (in the plural also denoting festivals), and *’ēt*, meaning a fleeting “now” or an hour chosen by God and used in phrases like “*bā-’ēt ha-hī’*,” “in that time,” are also used.

In the medieval period, various metaphysical questions regarding time were considered. Common cosmological concepts of time were based on either the *creatio ex nihilo* or the emanation model of creation. It is unclear when the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, which is an example of Hellenistic and/or Christian influences in Judaism (the Hebrew Bible does not mention it explicitly), entered Jewish thinking, but at the latest, it is present in the works of Philo. From the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Jewish philosophers developed a speculative concept of time as an eternal divine attribute, which fits into the contemporary Muslim *kalām* context. Later, time was thought of as movement in the context of Aristotelian and neo-Platonic philosophy. To summarize, Jewish conceptions of time include the infinite course of time, historical time, and cyclical notions of time. The Hebrew Bible hints clearly at time being there for human beings (for example in Genesis 1 and in Qohelet 3), although the Christian concept of *kairos* is not applicable to a Jewish conceptual framework. Time may also be seen as both directional and cyclical, a “line of cycles”, so to speak; this has a parallel in the Qur’ānic view of time as moving forward but in cycles.

## 2. The Concept of Time in Christianity

(Prof. Dr. Alan G. Padgett)

In the Christian understanding, the time of creation itself was brought about by God to make room for creation, not just for humans to live in but also in the cosmic sense. Time is thus a gift, allowing for growth, but it has a negative side as the possibility of growth implies the possibility of corruption. The Messiah as Lord of heaven and earth is also central to cosmic time as well as human history. The “end” of time in the new creation does not, in the Biblical text, imply an end to temporality itself, as the new earth still has time, so the “end” of time is better understood in the sense of the telos of time, not merely its endpoint. Explaining the Christian concept of time is impossible without referring to eternity. Within the Christian tradition, there have been conflicting concepts of the eternity of God as either everlasting duration or transcendent timelessness. New concepts introduced by modern science allow for the third possibility of a “relative timelessness”, meaning, God may have His own temporality despite transcending created spacetime. Also central to Christian concepts of time is the idea of kairos, which refers to not merely a moment in time, but the “right moment” of fulfilled time, in which the divine enters human reality. In this sense, the concept is not applicable to Judaism or Islam.

Unlike for many other units of time (day, month, year...), there is no natural rhythm associated with the 7-day week. However, in the creation account of Genesis 1, creation is ordered around seven days culminating in the Sabbath. In remembrance of Easter Sunday, Sunday was originally added as an “additional Sabbath,” until the original Sabbath was later dropped in Christian tradition. Emperor Constantine officially made Sunday the first day of the week, thus Christianising the calendar in the entire East Roman Empire. Time for most Christians today is less structured around prayer times than it is for Muslims and some Jews. However, before clocks became widespread, services and prayer times played an important role in structuring lived time.

In terms of the individual’s time, the Christian concept of time is built into a framework of a finite lifetime, death, and resurrection: Death and suffering are real, but they are not the final reality. The lifetime of each individual is seen as not their own, but belonging to God, which opens up the field of Christian ethics of time. Because it is given by God, time has a practical dimension of deliberation, action, and change, and is to be used for worship and good deeds. Particularly in the Orthodox tradition, worship ties in with the larger metaphysical view of created time in that it is seen as a window beyond time into timeless eternity. The idea that time is a divine gift, including that specific times were made by God for specific actions, has its parallels in the Qur’ān.

### 3. The Concept of Time in Islam

(Prof. Dr. Sajjad Rizvi)

The way time is thought about in the Qur'ān and the ḥadīth engages with the pre-Islamic concept of time as an absolute (*dahr*) by contrasting it with the idea of created time, which has a beginning and an end. The end of time shapes the perception of time as such as a series of trials before the final judgment. Temporal terms in the Qur'ān, such as *as-sā'ā* (hour), are often used in an eschatological context. Periods of time like days and months are described as completely under God's control. Unlike the Jewish Sabbath or the Christian Sunday, no divine origin is claimed for Friday, which, although it is the religious high point of the week, is not fully set apart as a day of rest or celebration.

In the later Islamic tradition, there are three types of influence from the Hellenic tradition on the ways time is conceptualized: The Platonic notion of time and eternity as expounded in the *Timaeus* was taken up by some Islamic thinkers, most notably the *Ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafā'*. The Aristotelian model of time as a measure of motion was also taken up in Islamic philosophy, including the paradox of the now. Thirdly, atomism entered the Islamic theological tradition, particularly *Ash'arism*, although unlike the Democritan tradition, the *mutakallimūn* had a primary interest in the origin of atoms in the sense of a *creatio continua*. A technical definition of creation used in Islamic thinking is "being preceded by non-existence" (*ba'd al-'adam*), although this does not necessarily have to be interpreted as implying a beginning in time.

In the Sufi tradition, man is seen as existing between two moments of non-existence and timelessness. The role of mystic practice is to attempt to actualize that timelessness in time. The relationship between time and eternity is understood as not between two levels but three: that of time as such (the level of interaction among mutables), that of perpetuity (*dahr*; the level of interaction between immutable and mutable, which is also the level at which creation is possible), and that of timelessness.