The Concept of Religion and the Concept of Rationality in Judaism, Christianity and Islam

February 15 - 17, 2023

I. The Concept of Religion

Opening Remarks (Professor Dr. Georges Tamer)

In his introductory remarks, Georges Tamer observed that presenting one's religious standpoint in an interreligious setting does not leave one's own position unchanged. Stating and illuminating a key concept in one's own religion necessitates an active reflection on beliefs that are usually left unarticulated. Thus, interreligious discourses evoke an in-group engagement within a religious community's self-understanding. For example, while each of the three contributors broached the subject of the concept religion in relation to Judaism, Christianity and Islam from a distinct angle, a shared openness to this dialectic between self-representation and self-reflection is a moment of commonality along which these efforts can be reconstructed.

The Concept of Religion in Judaism (Professor Dr. Oliver Leaman, University of Kentucky)

Oliver Leaman focused his talk on the challenge that lies in bridging the gap between concepts in Judaism, that draw on religious sources and the lived reality of Jews, who do not necessarily define their Jewish identity in these terms. Leaman observed that people frequently identify with their religious affiliation in a much more matter-of-factly manner. He illustrated this using a variety of real-life examples from U.S.-American Jewish culture. As a particularly instructive example Leaman referenced a scene from the television show *Transparent*, in which a character celebrates a Yom-Kippur *breakfast*. Of course, if one were to define Yom Kippur from a more traditional standpoint, one would have to question if this could be considered a Jewish practice, since fasting would be central to any traditional definition of Yom Kippur. However, this character is not breaking with tradition with the intention of distancing herself from her Jewish identity. On the contrary, by calling the meal a *Yom Kippur* breakfast she is affirming her Jewish identity. Leaman also points to secular practices like the convention of ordering Chinese food on Christmas Day that may be interpreted as a result of being non-Christian rather than as a direct marker of Jewishness. However, for those American Jews who are not observant or even particularly familiar with the Torah or the Talmud, partaking in secular acts of this nature may be an important point of reference when a person explains what makes them Jewish.

Leaman uses this reference to the lived reality of Jews to criticize the narrow scope of the theoreticians' approach to the concept of religion. Defining a religion by dogma isn't possible in the case of Judaism since Jewish religious identity isn't linked to holding a certain set of beliefs. However, Leaman states that as most Christians today are not adulthood converts, but baptized at birth, overstating the role of a belief-system is problematic beyond this context.

Since not all (and, one might argue, very few) members of religious communities have historically been drawn to live their life in accordance with strict religious codes, we must include this empirical fact in our definition of the concept of religion. To emphasize the importance of this insight, Leaman points out that the longevity of religions cannot be explained solely by the power of devout groups to draw the masses to their more strict understanding of ritual and scripture. Instead, the staying power of religion must be explained by an innate flexibility within religious communities. With this broad perspective Leaman did not only offer a self-reflective view of Jewish identity today, but brought us to question the viability of defining an abstract concept of religion that can meaningfully engage with the lived reality of those who identify with it.

The Concept of Religion in Christianity
(Professor Dr. Gregor Maria Hoff, Paris-Lodron-Universitat Salzburg)

Gregor Maria Hoff jokingly took up the thread of Oliver Leaman's talk by stating that he would now speak about the religion of Christianity as a Catholic theologian — a real problem considering the previous talk. But, in all earnest, he addressed the very question of how one might broach the subject of religion in Christianity without taking a reductionist approach that makes light of the difficulties that lie in the application of the term „religion". Namely, the problems that arise from the question of perspective: Should a religion be defined by an insider's or an outsider's point of view? Can a definition of Christianity as religion be at once theoretically useful as a basis for interreligious discourse and scientific studies while also capturing the core elements of Christian self-understanding? Instead of brushing past these issues, Hoff set out to make them explicit in order to formulate a framework within which definitions of religion might be articulated that are broad enough to address a wide spectrum of necessary criteria and thus take into account the complexity of the phenomenon.

Drawing on Krech, Hoff defines religion as a social function that mediates between the transcendent and the immanent by means of signification. This point is further illuminated by a reference to Genesis: a transcendent and invisible God creates the world — the very essence of immanence itself. The division between existence and non-existence in the act of creation functions as a first semiotic bridge between that which can be seen and that which cannot be seen. Hoff can thus *include* the theological standpoint in his representation of Christianity without narrowing the scope of his treatment to exclude the perspective of the social sciences. In this framework the divine—human relationship that is so central to Christianity is representable in a fashion that it is accessible both from the position of the social scientist and from the position of the Christian. Hoff's

methodological focus on the symbolic points of reference allows for a wide scope that encompasses Christian scripture and a combination of methods based in religious studies. Hoff states that the mediation between the immanent and the transcendent is not a fixed relationship. Rather, Christianity as a religion has come into being through the production of religious codes that are effected by outer socio-political impulses and intra-theological discussion. Hoff defines the process in which Christianity comes to manifest itself as a religion (i.e. its „religionization") as the result of these inner and outer challenges. In this sense, Christianity manifests itself as a religion in its (associative as well as dissociative) interactions with the social environment surrounding it. Thus, the historical process of religionization should be understood as an engagement with the external world. Because the process that brings forth the key concept of religion in Christianity is essentially dynamic, the religion itself must be understood as an entity engaged in a constant evolutionary development. According to Hoff, to glean the meaning of the term religion in the context of Christianity, one would be well-advised to reconstruct these moments of historical code production.

As Hoff shows, the challenge of presenting a religion for the purpose of holding an interreligious dialogue results from the very nature of religion itself. As an entity in constant interaction with the outer world and thus engulfed in a process of evolution, fixing on a reductionist definition of Christianity is neither theoretically nor practically helpful. Instead, our best chance to meaningfully engage with religion lies in embracing its evolutionary, and, as such, complex nature. Because every religion's self-understanding is informed by the world around it, Hoff voices the hope that this framework may help us arrive at a methodology that is sufficiently broad to analyze different religions while acknowledging their relative singularity.

The Concept of Religion in Islam
(Dr. Ahab Bdaiwi, Leiden University)

In his talk Ahab Bdaiwi addressed the qur'ānic trope of using so-called „pagan" forms of worship as a negative contrast in order to define Islam as a („true") religion. While there is no lack of authors who have studied the relationship between theology and intellectual history, Bdaiwi explains that new findings have made it possible to reevaluate the relationship between early Islam and its pre-Islamic „other". While newly discovered engravings do not contain any reference to polytheistic practices or beliefs, monotheistic themes are much more prevalent. According to Bdaiwi, these findings necessitate a critical examination of the Qur'ān's placement of early Islam in juxtaposition against its surroundings. Bdaiwi is thus urging the discipline of Islamic studies to examine the early Islamic period while going against the grain of the established position that interprets the appearance of Islam as a radical break with a formerly pagan culture. Thus, Bdaiwi searches for the idea of religion in Islam at the origins of its tradition not to offer a more traditional reading but rather to question the Qur'ān's representation of its environment and unmasks it as a mode of self-representation by means of othering.

First, Bdaiwi presented the recent findings that inform our understanding of pre-Islamic Arabic culture. Archaeological excavations have resulted in the discovery of various inscriptions. There is a marked absence of mentions of pagan forms of worship from the fifth century A.D. onward. A lack in evidence that, Bdaiwi argues, points to an invalidation of the established thesis that early Islam found itself surrounded by idol worship. The representation of non-Islamic Arabic culture was then set against its Qur'ānic representation. Comparing and contrasting the two, Bdaiwi argued that the Qur'ān delivers further proof of the monotheistic character of Arabic rituals and belief in the time of Mohammed. When idol worship is mentioned in the Qur'ān, the idols that are usually those that appear in the Jewish Bible. Additionally, when the so-called pagans are addressed, references are made to figures such as Moses and Abraham.

Before the backdrop of his analysis of the newly discovered sources mentioned above, Bdaiwi takes these references to mean that the prevalent form of veneration in Mohammed's time must have been some version of monotheism that drew on remnants of the Jewish corpus and tradition. Consequently, the appearance of Islam should be read not as a sudden apparition, but as a process of emergence from within the Arabic world of its time. If this is the case, then why does the Qur'ān paint non-Islamic individuals as pagans? Bdaiwi argues that the frustration with those who did not chose to follow Mohammed was not motivated by their radical otherness, but rather by the fact they were so close and yet so far from the „true" religion of Islam.

Discussion

The three talks differed in more than their being situated in the context of three different religions. Each of the authors questioned a core element of conventional self-representation within the context of each religion, while presenting the respective tradition in an interreligious discourse. Additionally, each of the three talks pointed the listeners toward a tension between the necessity to allow for ambivalence and complexity when representing a religion without losing the capacity to say something of the character of these religions.

With respect to Professor Leaman's talk the possibility was discussed that the heterogeneity of the Jewish community contributes to its staying power in two senses. On the one hand, there are those Jews who make the religion fit their way of life, who make use of its flexibility and thus make it malleable. However, if everyone shared in their lack of regard for an engagement with traditional texts and observance, the usage of terms such as Yom Kippur might disappear entirely. Considered from this perspective, each end of the heterogeneous spectrum of religious identity comes to bear in equal measure: More traditionally informed understandings of religion make less informed identifications possible and the latter contribute to widening the possible span of cohesion for the religious community.

Professor Hoff's method addressed the tension between meaningful definitional work and the complexity of the phenomena of religion and religionization while allowing for

theological as well scientific elements as part of a possible framework of analysis to study Christianity as a religion. While this talk did offer a solution for the aforementioned tension, there was no suggestion that this might be easily garnered. On the contrary, Hoff set out how complex and time-consuming any earnest effort of this nature would be.
Dr. Bdaiwi answered questions concerning the controversial nature of his talk and the very limited amount of inscriptions that have already been made available by stating that he finds that most of the criticisms stem not from scientific but rather from religious concerns. While new discoveries may appear and disprove his hypothesis, the absence of references to active idol worship after the fifth century A.D. must be taken at face value until we are made aware of evidence to the contrary. In addition to Professor Leaman's contrast between the lived reality of contemporary Jews and theology and Professor Hoff's integration of religious studies methodology, Bdaiwi thus draws our attention to the importance of a meaningful engagement with the discipline of history and its method — even at the cost of religious discomfort.
While our discussion did not resolve the tension between complexity and definition, it did promote a better understanding of each of the presented positions. The central take away from these sessions may be that the complex interrelation of self-reflection and outward representation is not a drawback to interreligious discourse. Instead, the essential complexity of religious self-constitution means that interreligious discourse is a beneficial means of self-reflection.

II. The Concept of Rationality

As rationality was treated by the contributors as one means of self-elucidation in each of the three following talks and the ensuing discussion on the concept of rationality in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, these reflections tied in to the core issue of the previous discussions.

The Concept of Rationality in Judaism
(Professor Dr. Daniel Frank, Purdue University)

Daniel Frank introduced the topic of rationality in Judaism by pointing to the fact that one cannot simply take a critical stance toward the effort to ground religion in reason to entail the promotion of irrationality. Frank set out to elucidate this thesis by means of the comparative method. He made clear that this should not be taken as an endorsement of comparative analysis. Because the concept of rationality in Judaism cannot possibly be treated in one talk, Frank had explicitly chosen to use the broad brushstrokes of the comparative approach. Before comparing Maimonides' and Saadia Gaon's stance on the role of rationality in Judaism, Frank introduced the Socratic method of the platonic dialogues and the Aristotelian syllogism as points of reference. Plato's Socrates leads his listener and the reader to question the semblance of necessity in social norms. The Aristotelian method leads us from the well-known to the lesser known by means of

analyzing and evaluating sensory data in order to derive more abstract forms of knowledge from this basis. While Plato's Socrates is presented as a moralist who questions the legitimacy of convention and Aristotle's interest lies primarily in the sciences, both figures can be viewed as calling for a form of validation, albeit it validation of differing natures.

Maimonides and Saadia also strive to deliver a justification for the Jewish faith. Yet their motivations differ in relation to the context and the community's resulting needs due to which they each find themselves in search of such a validation. In Maimonides' case, the audience he has in mind is already relatively secure in their religious practice. Thus, he sets out to deliver a rational foundation to strengthen an already lively identification with Judaism. He presents Abraham as a philosopher who exposes the error that lies in idolatry. Frank likened his critique of idol worship to Plato's criticism of those who fixate on „sight and sound" rather than reaching beyond the given to abstract principles. In Maimonides presentation of Judaism, the revelation on Sinai is shown to be compatible with a rational foundation of monotheism and an important tool to include those Jews who are not equipped to identify with the tradition through rational reflection.

Saadia on the other hand finds himself surrounded by competing religious groups. The constant interaction with members of other religions have generated doubt in Judaism's claim to truth within the Jewish community. Because of this challenging situation, Saadia places revelation at the foundation of his defense of Judaism. It is the point of departure from which his rational defense of Judaism makes its start. Frank presents Saadia not as a sceptic but rather as an adept expert on the structure of rational enquiry. Saadia, in his view, addresses the fact that what can be gained from inductive reasoning may not suffice to reassure his audience.

In this sense, the fact that Saadia does not put the entire weight of his argument on the foundational value of rationality is not directed against rationality. Instead, we might understand Frank as saying that Saadia's position should be understood as a form of empirically-informed scepticism toward a legitimation of Judaism based *solely* on rationality. In this case, his claim is neither epistemic nor ontological in nature, but *pragmatic*. Because rational justification cannot assuage the doubts of all members of his community, one must draw upon revelation as the material for a foundational argument and then apply the methods of induction to this material. Saadia's case disproves the thesis that a certain reserve toward rationality as a founding principle for a defense of Judaism necessarily runs counter to a high regard for rationality. Thus, the method of comparative analysis with its broad brushstrokes sufficed Frank to prove the statement set forth at the beginning of his talk.

The Concept of Rationality in Christianity
(Maria Elisabeth Höwer M.Sc., FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg)

Maria Höwer stepped in for Prof. Breul as he recently had to cancel his attendance at the conference. She limited the scope of her talk to the role of rationality in the Catholic

tradition. This necessary limitation gave way to an extensive and yet detailed account. Höwer drew on the catechism as a basis for her exposition and opened with the foundational principle that rationality and religion are certainly not considered mutually exclusive in the Catholic tradition. In fact, rationality can be better understood as a disposition that brings the human individual in alignment with God as the truth of creation. This principle is encapsulated in the concept of the „recta ratio“ that draws on the condition of an adequation between thought and existence in order for a statement to qualify as true. In the catechism of Pope John Paul II, rationality is explicitly interpreted as a capacity for God and the human disposition toward reflection is thus seen as an innate desire for God. While human rationality makes a relationship with God possible, this disposition itself is only a necessary precondition. For this relationship to become realized, the human individual must accept this invitation. This is where the role of revelation comes to bear. Rationality alone does not suffice — rationality as a predisposition for God is dependent upon revelation for the communion between God and the human individual. While rationality is held in high regard in Catholic teaching, Höwer summarized, it is contextualized as drawing its meaning from a religious framework.

After this exposition, Höwer turned toward historical critiques of religion that claim an incompatibility between faith and rationality. She addressed the claim that God is nothing but an anthropological projection motivated by a fear of the unknown by showing that the Christian Bible openly rejects man-made depictions of God. Because the subject of a critique of Christianity as irrational has been exhaustively studied, Höwer chose to present another very different articulation of the limits of reason within religion by turning to Christian mysticism.

With reference to Edith Stein's *The Science of the Cross*, Höwer showed, that Christian mysticism offers a form of communion with God that originates, quite counter-intuitively, in the realm that demarcates the limits of the capacity for rational understanding. While the rational encounter with God is conveyed through the metaphor of light, in the mystical encounter the closeness to God manifests itself in darkness. This does not mean that the mystical encounter with God is irrational. It is counter-intentional and thus complementary to the rational communion with God. While in the latter case, communion is reached by the rational faculty „reaching out“, in the former case, the individual encounters a mystery that it cannot comprehend. Something can be at once ungraspable to the human mind and yet free of contradiction — just because an idea cannot be actualized by the human mind it is not necessarily irrational and thus potentially graspable (i.e. by a higher faculty).

The Concept of Rationality in Islam
(Professor Dr. Nader El-Bizri, University of Sharjah)

Nader El-Bizri opened his talk by etymologically tracing the meaning of rationality in Islam to the root of the Arabic term for rational, "'aqlānī", (rationality = 'aqlāniyya). The term refers to the faculty of discernment and while it encompasses the normative capacity to discern that which is true from that which is false and right from wrong, its literal

meaning is to „make correct connections“. El-Bizri then turned to references to the rational faculty in the Qur'ān and stated that there are no immediate mentions of ʿaql, but several references to the human capacity to think. Additionally, several related concepts are mentioned, for instance *al-ḥulm*, a form of reflection that is grounded in a disposition toward calm and careful reflection or *al-hijr* or *an-nahy*, which signify a commitment to speak only when a position of certitude has been reached. Uses of the former in the Qur'ān frequently relate to a certain disposition in matters of the heart. El-Bizri reiterated this point several times during the course of his talk. El-Bizri then turned to the relative absence of the concept of rationality in the Hadith and attributed this to a scepticism toward overstating the role of rationality as a foundational tool due to the conflictual political context in which it originated. In these periods of political unrest, stricter interpretations and more literal readings gained in influence.

After this historical contextualization, El-Bizri reflected on the potential role of rationality in Islam in a more general sense. Because of the etymological breadth of the original Arabic term, rationality in the Islamic tradition encompasses various forms of truth valuation and is frequently identified with a thoughtful disposition that carefully distinguishes to what degree (if at all) a statement can be regarded to be truthful. Taken in the broad sense of the word it is applicable in various fields of enquiry (the sciences, culture or theology). In a narrower sense, it can refer directly to logical methodology.

After this reflection, El-Bizri elucidated the foundational role of rationality in the tradition of dialectical theology (*kalām*), where the intellect guides the interpretation of scripture and informs the proper manner of engagement with religious laws. He explained that this brought the *kalam*-tradition in theology into conflict with the Prophetic tradition in Hadīth and Sīra. In reaction to this conflict, the Ashʿarite kalam-tradition mediated between these two poles by giving priority to religious law and scripture, while attributing a supporting role to rational proofs. Lastly, El-Bizri turned to the theological mysticism of the Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī. In his autobiography, al-Ghazālī reported on a phase in his spiritual life where understanding could no longer move him further along. Instead, it was his heart that brought him closer to the divine truth by submitting to God. Here, El-Bazri again pointed to the role of the heart in disclosing truth in its purest form.

El-Bizri closed his talk by pointing out that new developments in the sciences (i.e. AI as a teaching tool) may bring on new questions of the relationship between Islam, rationality and the sciences.

Discussion

Interestingly, all three talks addressed the limits of rationality as a contributing factor to faith and not as its detractor. It became clear that because of the limits of human understanding, the relationship between a religious tradition and rationality can never be exclusive. One theme of the talks was that the individual has to draw on at least one other source, whether it be revelation, a desire to be close to God or an affectual disposition. Rational explanations of religious traditions cannot fully explain what moves a person to

identify with his or her religious identity. At the same time, it was apparent that while there is a close relationship between religion and rationality in each of the three traditions, rationality gains its value through its relationship with the divine.

Summary: Antonia Sophie Steins