

Chapter Seven

Is there a “true religion”?

This is a question that cannot be avoided in an inquiry about God. We shall begin our inquiry by explaining the question, and this means rephrasing it this way: has God revealed a “true religion,” that is, has God truly “spoken” to the “tradents” of a particular religion, and only to them? Tradents are the “transmitters,” those who have passed on divine revelation, from generation to generation.

The great religions –I mean Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity and Islam; Buddhism may not be a “religion,” if we define religion as essentially a way to relate (or to be tied or bound, which is what *re-ligio* means) to one or more deities– have this concept of divine revelation by the deity to specially chosen individuals. Thus in Hinduism the Vedas are considered divine revelation to seers or auditors of the divine realm. In Judaism divine revelation is represented by what God revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai, which he either wrote down (the written Torah) or passed by word of mouth to Joshua (the oral Torah), who then passed it down to a series of special tradents until, centuries later, the oral Torah was also written down in the Talmud.

In Christianity, the Jewish Scriptures are accepted as divine revelation, although they are of course interpreted differently than in Judaism. These Scriptures are called the “Old Covenant” (already in Paul, Second Corinthians 3:14, where it seems he has invented the term), but they are supplemented by the writings called the “New Covenant” (already a term from the prophet Jeremiah 31:31), which concern Jesus and the “church” which resulted from his preaching, life, passion, death and resurrection. These writings were probably not written by his direct disciples, but by disciples of his disciples, and the process of writing and accepting or receiving the writings as “canonical,” meaning as forming part of an authoritative body of texts deriving from God himself (“divine” revelation) took decades (in the case of producing the writings) and centuries (as far as arriving at universal agreement among the Christian churches as to what was the canon of the New Testament). In Buddhism, too, where the “sacred” or at least authoritative texts can also be deemed to constitute a “canon,” the teachings of the historical Buddha were not written down until centuries after his life.

Islam derives from the belief that God sent the biblical messenger/angel (in both Hebrew and Greek usage one word means both angel and messenger) Gabriel to Muhammad and told him to recite what was being revealed to him; his followers wrote down what he recited, and thus there came to be the Qur'an, which means "recitation." Muslims consider it the last, most definite and authoritative divine revelation, correcting where appropriate the Jewish and Christian canonical texts which came before and which seem to have greatly influenced Muhammad.

The idea of a "true religion" depends on belief in God and in God as one who reveals himself in an authoritative way. One can believe in God as the creator of the universe and also as mysteriously present and even guiding all things in some way, but this does not necessarily entail the notion of divine revelation, beyond what nature, the world, manifests. This Catholics call "natural or general revelation." This idea is based on what Saint Paul says in the first chapter of his Epistle to the Romans, that God can be known, that God has manifested himself, in nature. But obviously awareness of divinity, or even "knowledge of God," by meditating on the natural world and its phenomena, although it can lead to great spirituality and mysticism, does not directly lead to the creation of a "true religion," if we mean a coherent way in which a collectivity understands and worships God.

One understanding of the expression "true religion" can be that of a "religion" (and in this sense it can be a personal, as opposed to primarily a collective one) which rings "true," in that it consists of teachings and practices which are deemed to be right and good, as consistent with a "noble" or "sophisticated" notion of what the deity would want. This would accord with our "best" updated understandings of ethics, the "social contract" (what neutral, enlightened persons would agree on as rules to live by, if they did not know beforehand where they stood in society), what is fair and equitable, etc. Here we are close to Gordon Kaufman's "construction of the concept of God," discussed in chapter two above, that is, "religion" divested of atavistic accouterments, of what is irrational and unjust, of what "doesn't work," especially in our times. This is in direct opposition to the notion of revelation; its premise is that claiming that God has revealed himself only to a few is *ab initio* or *a priori* (by logic, without having to weigh experience or facts) wrongheaded. No, these kinds of claims have resulted in the most cockamamie notions, and what is worse, in horrible deeds of oppression, lying, injustice and destruction. Humankind must use the ubiquitous concept of "God" in an ennobling, constructive,

all-inclusive way; otherwise, we abjure our reason and give in to all kinds of irrational, destructive instincts and ideas.

But this view is premised on the *belief* that God “could not” (or would not) have revealed himself in a special way to anyone (presumably leading to an “authoritative,” divinely-sanctioned set of teachings). Whatever God is, however he or she or it may have dealt with the world and its human inhabitants after creating it (assuming God did create the world), however he continues or does not continue to act or intervene in the world and in people’s lives, God has refused to communicate anything special to anyone, at least with doctrinal consequences, meaning, resulting in teachings which are deemed to be universally valid, at least in similar situations or circumstances.

Here we are already on grounds that posit that a “true religion,” if it exists, would have to tend to be “universally applicable,” and not so imbued with particularism or idiosyncracies, that it is mostly relevant or practicable by a limited number of persons. A religion, in my view, depends on the belief that there is a God, that the God is personal, and that this divine Person has communicated with special intermediaries, who have passed down what God has revealed. A “true religion” would then be a religion so sanctioned by God, and it is possible that God has sanctioned several such religions, but it is not possible that God contradicted himself while communicating to the tradents of the various “true” faiths.

So the discussion of whether there is a “true religion” hinges on several sets of *beliefs*, and this has been my consistent position through this entire essay. My intent here is to explore this issue, which derives from belief that God exists and is “personal,” that is, not just a higher power behind the universe, but at least as “personal” as human beings are, that is, intelligent, self-conscious, volitional (having a will), able to act and relate. I find it illogical to posit a “God” worth his salt that is more “nebulous” than human beings, although I am aware that God has been associated with clouds at least since the days of Ugarit, Israel’s predecessors in the “Holy Land.”

A personal God would “communicate” with others, as all persons do. The problem is that God is at best hidden behind nature (or “within”), and at most can “speak” only through human persons. It is clear that in religions which lay a claim to divine revelation, the seer or auditor is the one who actually formulates what he or she has “seen” or “heard;” in Hinduism, the divine teachings are filtered through the experiences of the mystic, although it can be argued that Lord

Krishna, considered to be an incarnation of the divine, or at least a prophet of divinity, gave Arjuna the “Hindu Gospel,” the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Divine revelation “came upon” Israel’s prophets in the form of “God’s word,” or of visions; many of the books of the prophets (Isaiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk) are basically called the “vision(s)” of the prophet, who used to be called seer (First Samuel 9:9). Jeremiah speaks of seeing *and* hearing “God’s word,” which must mean “revelation” (Jeremiah 23:18). This mentions the “divine council” (in Hebrew, *sôd*), the celestial court where God deliberates with his “kitchen cabinet,” so to speak; a good example may be found in First Kings 22, where a prophet (also) called Micah sees and hears what is going on in the celestial court. This is illustrative of the notion that God communicates through special individuals, who then transmit the “message” in their own language, with their own talent, etc. (although some point to the “inspired” nature of this communicated message, which seems to far surpass the talent of the human being who transmits it; thus Muslims emphasize how uncultured and illiterate the prophet Muhammad was, and how sublime the Qur’an is; the Jewish Sanhedrin is said to marvel at Peter’s and the other apostles’ preaching, given that they were “unlettered and untrained,” Acts 4:13).

So most religions claim special revelation, and can even point to factors which indicate that it is unlikely that it derives from merely human talent. That a given religion is “true,” or the only true one, is a matter of belief. My intention here is simply to discuss the likelihood that if one were to believe that God has communicated to humankind, He would have done it in the most personal way possible, given his hiddenness which presents us with an enigma and a mystery. This of course is still a matter of faith, but my intention is to discuss its ramifications.

The best way that I can do this is to study the phenomenon of the Israelite religion. It is what I know best, and can discuss most authoritatively. I will also confess straightaway that I “believe” in Jesus Christ, and that I believe that the logic of what I have formulated above (and I have tried to formulate it logically and by grades without undue “jumps” in my argument) leads to the idea that God ultimately chose to communicate in or through a man who differed from prior prophets in some definitive way. I understand that a Muslim can say that this is true, but that the “ultimate prophet” is Muhammad, not Jesus. I will only be able, I think, to address this question inadequately, but hopefully sufficiently to complete my argument for purposes of this essay, and specifically of this chapter.

The hidden God necessarily has to communicate by way of human beings, if He is to go beyond what nature, with all its wonders, can communicate to us about him. By observing only nature, we can experience great wonder and be enticed to great praise, but at the same time we can also have a feeling that it is ultimately a very cold world, where only the “fittest” survive, and even they ultimately do not; it is the human being who has to step in to try to make life other than just “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,” as Thomas Hobbes said. A personal and caring God would not leave us alone like that, one can reasonably believe. God would in all likelihood, to be “worth his salt,” communicate, and this means “choosing” witnesses that can adequately transmit “his message.”

Clearly we *know* a lot about who Israel’s prophets were, and, for that matter, all other prophets whether genuine or not. “Prophets” are usually sensitive, and good speakers, or at least become able to articulate their message in a memorable and impressive way; otherwise, there has never been a sign dropped from the sky that someone can place around his or her neck to verify that they are a true prophet! Israel had many “prophets;” most were “cheerleaders,” able to rouse an army, and the king, to confidence that they would win the battle, as in the case of the Micah mentioned above. Perhaps the earlier function of the prophet (who typically were on the king’s payroll) was the other side of the coin: to curse the enemy, as can be seen by the fact that most of Israel’s prophets whose writings (usually actually those of their disciples) have come down to us include “oracles against the nations,” meaning Israel’s enemies. To be able to do this in an effective way was the most important part of a prophet’s “job description,” for which he was hired.

Here we get into the realm of the suitability of the tradent who God would in all likelihood choose: it would be difficult to believe that God, who is considered and believed to be moral and a judge of human action, would choose to communicate through scoundrels. But it is clear that those who were called “prophets” in Israel were not all of immaculate character, and, judging by today’s standards –which may be unfair, but which does provide some sort of “veto power” against, or “blackballing” of, individuals who fall short of what a truly enlightened person may say or do, or at least *relativize* their authority– divine revelation by their means must be considered to be gradual and in stints at best.

Thus even Abraham, called a prophet in Genesis 20:7, seems to us to have behaved like a cad in telling his wife Sarah to pretend she was his sister so that the Egyptians, and especially the

pharaoh, could sleep with her without killing him as a rival!¹ Many prophets called Israel to arms, or like Elijah slew hundreds of “pagan” prophets; his successor Elisha was a great military strategist and fomenter of violent governmental change, so much so that Hosea a century later prophesied that God would “visit” (call to account) the house of Jehu (put in power by Elisha) for all the blood it shed.

This “divine revelation” thus took place, at best, slowly and with many “errors,” things which make us look askance and even condemn the actions of many if not most of these “canonical” prophets (let alone those who were ultimately dismissed as false!). I have found that the best persons all have a weak side; Gandhi was a great moral leader and example, but if his life and actions are examined, he is found wanting (he came up with cockamamie schemes, like the nudity social experiment in South Africa, or the way he treated his wife), even though he died for a good cause, unity among Hindus and Muslims, and can thus be considered to have been a “martyr.” I would immediately place Muhammad, with all due respect, among war-monger prophets, and in this sense, less than ideal. In the twentieth century, a man like Theodore Roosevelt had a great social conscience and the highest ideals, and accomplished many good deeds for the benefit of the United States, but had some despicable ideas and did some things (like, again, go to battle in Cuba thinking more of his glory than the lives of his soldiers) unworthy of a great person. Every great person has had a dark side; is there an exception?

And so we come to a central tenet of the Christian faith, expressed in the first verse of the Epistle to the Hebrews: that in former times God spoke in parts and in varied ways to Israel’s prophets, but that in the end (“ultimately”), he spoke through a Son who is his very image, who communicated what God is really like and what he really wants. Jesus in fact is called “the word of God,” the “icon” (representation) of the invisible deity (Colossians 1:15).

Jesus –called a “sign of contradiction” (Luke 2:34) and a “stumbling-block” (First Corinthians 1:23) to both Jews and Gentiles– is my best candidate as witness for God. He is in fact called the “faithful” (or “trustworthy,” the Greek *pistós* means both) witness (in Greek, “martyr”) in the Book of Revelation 1:5. Our task is now to examine the life and death of Jesus, in order to explore how they relate to the notion of a “true religion.” Because it is not a given that believing that Jesus is the “Christ,” or was God’s final revelation, or his image, is tantamount to showing that Jesus established a “true religion.” For this, we must examine Jesus’ message as

¹ See Genesis 12:10-20.

preached and lived and suffered for, that is, his witness to God, in order to discuss the consequences that may derive therefrom.

A few preliminary words are in order, because most people have little knowledge of what we know about Jesus, or how to evaluate the sources about his life and death. Perhaps the best and most comprehensive recent study of the “historical Jesus” is that of John P. Meier, in four volumes of great analysis and detail. I think there is great agreement among scholars as to some basic facts. Jesus was a Jew from Galilee in the north of Israel, probably from the tribe of Judah (from which the messiah was expected to come), not a priest, but a simple country preacher. He acquired a great reputation as a healer and worker of “portents,” such as what was taken to be a miraculous “feeding” of a multitude with a few loaves of bread. Now many may balk at believing this, but suffice it to say that Jesus must have done, or been perceived as doing, some extraordinary things in order to arouse fervent expectations that he was the messiah.

It cannot be doubted that he was executed by Rome with crucifixion, the penalty for political offenses. I don’t think it can be doubted that the great or most specific catalyst for his arrest was his “messianic entry” into Jerusalem just before the Passover, the feast of the Jews celebrating liberation from slavery in Egypt, and also expressive of the desire for present liberation, which in their day meant from the Roman colonial power. We know that Pontius Pilate, unlike his depiction in the gospels, was ruthless, executing the accused often without trial. Jesus, according to the Gospel of John, which my studies and that of others show contains at times uniquely accurate information about Jesus, was acclaimed as “king” when he entered Jerusalem in rather obvious enactment of ancient prophecies regarding the messiah, specifically Zechariah 9:9-10 and its basis, Genesis 49:8-12. Jesus was acting out a role, and the people – enough of them to warrant Rome’s concern and forceful intervention– accepted and clamored for him to do what the messiah was expected to do, free them politically.

Also in the Gospel of John is found the account of the “feeding of the multitude” likewise attested in the other gospels, except that in John it is said that some five thousand men wanted to make Jesus “king.” This title for Jesus is already found in chapter one of John, and no scholar doubts it was the reason he was crucified. Many other persons, many Jews, were also crucified; what made Jesus special? In the eyes of his followers, as manifested in the accounts they wrote of what Jesus did and how he suffered, Jesus was wholly good, of one piece, fearless, and one who did not avoid what he deemed to be his fate, his mission: to die crucified, for that was the

penalty to be expected for the crime of *laese maiestatis*, affronting the emperor by competing for the throne where the emperor ruled.

The accounts about Jesus differ widely in many things. Unlike the case of the Qur'an, where it seems that variations in the text or its transmission were eliminated in the interests of uniformity, in the case of the gospels even the resurrection accounts present contradictions which never bothered the Christian community enough to want to eliminate them. And yet what emerges, on the essentials, is a remarkably coherent picture of Jesus, who appears to be a man of one piece. He was a Jew and his world view was that of the Jewish Bible, which he interpreted in a radical way, although in this he was not alone. There were many other dissident Jews, most notably the Qumran community famous for the Dead Sea scrolls. They too had distanced themselves from mainstream Jewish life and its temple in Jerusalem, they too believed, as did John the Baptist, that after a long period of "slumber," God was beginning to act again, raising prophets (like John, his followers, including Jesus, believed) and later, Jesus himself. The Qumranites also looked to the establishment of a "new covenant," prophesied by Jeremiah, and saw themselves as the community of this New Covenant, as the Christian church would, too, later on.

But Jesus was unique in several ways. Unlike most devout Jews of the time that we know of, specially the Pharisees and their opponents the Qumranites or Essenes, who were very exclusive and set up barriers between those who were "pure" and those who were not, Jesus was famous for eating with outcasts, "sinners." He was apparently "enacting" a little-focused on role of the "messiah," the actual working out of the expected in-gathering of the "lost tribes of Israel." In the Jewish expectation, "salvation," or "deliverance," would involve, perhaps first and foremost, the reunification of Israel as a kingdom of twelve tribes, who had been dispersed because of their misdeeds. "Deliverance" would involve forgiveness of sin and its punishment, and thus "return" to a free land, where the people could worship God in *shalom*, peace and well-being and the righting of all wrongs, the straightening of all that had been crooked. The messiah, in the views of the time, would play a great role in this, and Ezekiel depicts the "messiah" (not a term he uses, but it is clear that he is speaking "messianic" language), the "lifted-up one" or "prince" (not king; only God is that) as leading the flock in the name of God (Ezekiel 34).

The in-gathering of Israel, for Jesus, started with the poor and the outcast, as Ezekiel 34:15-16 presents God as doing, seeking out the stray and ill sheep and helping them return to

God and healing. This is the sort of scene presented, likewise in terms of a meal, by Mark's gospel, chapter 2, where Jesus, criticized for eating with impure sinners, refers to himself as a physician who heals the sick. This presents us with an unusual Jew of the time, unconcerned with his own "purity" and reaching out to outcasts so as to include them in the embrace of a loving God.

Another unique thing about Jesus is his proclamation that the age of salvation has already dawned, that God has woken up and returned to work, as it were, as manifested in the "wonders" being wrought by Jesus. Prophecy had been dormant for centuries; God had raised up John as a mighty prophet. The messiah was expected to perform works of healing, and this Jesus was doing. This, in fact, is Jesus' reply to a skeptical John in the "Q source," probably our oldest record of Jesus' sayings, as evidenced by Luke 7:18-23 and Matthew 11:2-6. Even non-Jews are included, as Jesus has dealings with a Canaanite woman and the Roman centurion. Mark's gospel (7:37) has the people remarking, "He has done everything well." Even the most ardent "eschatologists," such as the Qumranites and John the Baptist (who has some things in common with them) did not think God had already really begun his final work of "salvation." Jesus proclaims that He has, that God's kingdom has finally drawn near (Mark 1:15), in the person of Jesus; this, in a nutshell, is his message, which he acts out.

Also unique is Jesus' peculiar notion of being God's "son." There were "sons of God" in the Jewish Bible: divine or semi-divine beings later identified as angels (such as in Genesis 6:1-4); Israel is "God's first-born son," in Exodus 4:22-23 and Hosea 11:1); the messiah or son of David is adopted by God as son (Psalm 2:7); and the "righteous sufferer," especially in the deuterocanonical Jewish Book of Wisdom (see chapters two and three) is God's "child" and "son." But Jesus spoke about God as father in a particularly emphatic way, and what's more, about God as his very own father who had entrusted him with a most dolorous mission.

We are here now in the realm of a "mystery," in the sense that what I have presented I regard as facts established by scholarship. What one makes of them is another issue. My argument is simply this: the evidence we have about Jesus is that he was a do-gooder who reached out to and reached his people, and made enemies who sought his death. He viewed his likely death by crucifixion as foreordained by God (scriptural bases for this would be passages such Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22, as well as other passages which speak of the "refinement" of the righteous and their subsequent vindication, as well as the Jewish notion of the "birth-pangs" of

the messiah, since deliverance does not come except after a great trial; see especially the last chapter of Daniel (chapter 12). Jesus is reported to have been anxious to consummate this fate, seen as a “baptism” (Luke 12:50) and as a “cup of wrath” which he must drink (Mark 10:35-40).

We now come to a most peculiar situation: a man normal by all accounts, a social man even accused of being a glutton and a drunkard (again, in the Q source, Luke 7:34 and Matthew 11:19), who, after a violent struggle with himself and with his God (in the ‘garden of Gethsemane’), resolutely goes forth to meet his fate. And he does it by assuming the meek role of the pious Jew, who does not protest or try to defend himself too much, but lets all things be placed in God’s hands. In this, Jesus may not be unique, but it is difficult if not impossible to find a parallel for the fact that he did not curse his adversaries during his passion, but is presented as forgiving them.²

It may be that this presentation, as other elements in the passion accounts, is “traced” from Old Testament passages; the righteous servant in Isaiah 53:7 ‘opens not his mouth, like a lamb led to the slaughter’; Jeremiah 11:19 had already spoken of himself as a helpless lamb; the model of the pious Jew who is meek and silent as he bears unjust affliction already existed. But it is clear that Jesus was a real man whose disciples witnessed how he lived and died, and that this must have paved the way for their conviction that after he died God vindicated him almost immediately by “raising him from the dead” and “making him Christ or ‘Lord’.”

So we have here the personal witness of a man who lived a uniquely coherent life and whose death would have an extraordinary impact on his followers, who at first recoiled at the notion of suffering which Jesus expected and embraced, but who subsequently saw it all as part of a divine plan in which Jesus was vindicated in the most astounding way, in their view and experience. And with the power of this conviction, Jesus’ followers also largely went on to meet a similar fate. It is the witness both of Jesus and, necessarily, of his followers, that we have concerning the “Jesus event.” It is my argument here that the best candidate for a “true religion” is Christianity, as presented in the New Testament.

² Compare, for example, the account of the martyrdom of Razis in Second Macabees 14:37-46, who died for his Jewish faith after being surrounded by 500 “men of war” who had come to arrest him, determined to wipe out Judaism. Seeing no way out, he fell on his sword in order to avoid having to fall into the hands of the sinful, who would abuse him. But when he missed, he threw himself down from the wall on top of the thron and, after they retreated, got up on a steep rock full of anger and, tearing out his entrails through his open wounds, threw them at the crowd.

Interestingly, Christianity is based on the experience and writings of the Jews; whatever claim Jews have to being God's "chosen people" and the recipients of "true revelation" are, if anything, a "prolegomenon" to Christianity, in the sense that Christianity cannot be understood, and could not have taken place, without Judaism. It is a noble pedigree. But in the scheme of things, already in the New Testament we have a record of sibling strife, as "the Jews" (the expression is used as if referring to a cast of characters, and works only when the church has become non-Jewish) are presented as persecutors of Jesus (intra-ethnic and religious strife is of course not unique to Judaism), to the point of being called murderers and children of the devil (John 8:44, in a gospel that also says that "salvation comes from the Jews," John 4:22).

And, as in much of the Jewish Bible, tension is built into the framework of God's revelation. The Christian claim to being "the true religion" has a built-in "monkey wrench" or sobering caveat: the witness of Jesus' unique life and death, and resurrection, if it is to be believed, must "work," must result in "messianic changes." If God revealed himself truly in Jesus, it seems not to have been for the purpose of our admiring or even worshipping Jesus the Christ, but to enable us to think and act like Jesus; otherwise, his labor has borne a still-born child. Paul himself speaks of his own birth-pangs "until Christ be formed in you," he tells the community in Galatians 4:19. And the principal judges, at least on earth, of how well or badly Christians are acting "messianically" speaking (bringing "salvation" into the world, or "repairing" it, as the Jews say) are the Jews. Paul himself, discussing Israel's rejection of Jesus as messiah, says that Christians must make Israel "jealous," Romans 11:11-14. So far, the grade is very low, perhaps not even passing, despite recent changes in attitude and behavior.

"Truth," in the Jewish Bible, has more to do with what can be depended on and trusted than on abstract ideas without action. Jesus himself said that verification of discipleship is by the fruits, and Matthew's depiction of the "final judgment" (Matthew 25:31-46) is that it will be based on deeds, not words or ideas. This is very Jewish: *halakhah* (how one behaves) trumps theology (what one thinks). And so the hidden God rarely leaves his people—the whole human race—off the hook. There is always a "thorn in the side" to keep anyone from boasting. Talk about a "true religion" is "confirmed" (in Hebrew, one could say "made true") by concrete deeds. Such talk then takes on, as in most of the Bible, an exhortative or operative or functional value: it is not for the purpose of intellectual pride or curiosity or delight, but a call to self-examination and to action, all very Jewish.

I cannot say much about the third religion, Islam, which is based on Judaism and Christianity. It did bring monotheism and unity to disparate, animistic tribes. It stresses discipline and some forms of purity, but early on, starting with Muhammad himself, it was a “religion of war,” like that of the early period of the “Old Testament.”³ But I would point out three negatives. First, it seems afraid of the truth from the beginning, and this means afraid of differences. The very text of the Qur’an is artificially uniformized, obliterating the variants which would shed light on what the best form of the text might be (this, called “text criticism,” is fundamental in Christianity, and is also practiced by Jews). In effect this is a disregard for the inherent ambiguities that the transmission of divine communication has: God cannot speak, or at least be heard, except in human language and with human means. Being oblivious to this is like hiding your head in the sand.

This has led Islam to believe that it was Ishmael, not Isaac, whom Abraham was to sacrifice; in other words, that the text of Genesis 22 has been corrupted in its transmission. Now, Jews and Christians are well aware of “corruption” in the copying and handing down of the biblical texts; there is plenty of *evidence* for this, but alleging a specific instance of it requires just that, evidence, and not just wishful thinking. Scholars pore over many manuscripts, comparing them and classifying them in the process of textual criticism, to try to arrive at what appears to have been, or what is the best candidate for being, the “original” text, there being no “autographs,” that is, the actual writing of the authors themselves, but only copies, and hand-written copies always have mistakes or “corruptions.” Islam seems to be quite uncomfortable with this notion as applied to its own texts, and seeks to simply *deny it*, while freely applying it to others, but oblivious of the need for evidence.

Related to this is the Qur’an’s reluctance to accept the manner and fact of the death of Jesus, relying instead on later, Gnostic accounts (based on the New Testament writings), to present his death as a farce, since he really did not die, but only a likeness of him died as he

³ In the later period, pacifism is stressed in such passages as Zechariah 4:6 (“Not by power and strength, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts”), and Daniel 2:34 (the Babylonian empire, represented by a giant statue with clay feet, falls by way of a divine stone which hits its feet without human intervention). In the New Testament, warfare is a purely spiritual battle: war is not against flesh and blood, but against the preternatural rulers of this dark world, evil spirits who are in the heights, and our virtues weapons are the only weapons, Ephesians 6:10-17. Jesus himself eschewed a violent reaction to his arrest, Matthew 26:47-53. Early Christianity (for the first two centuries) was pacifistic, and Christians even avoided having to inflict the death penalty. The “barbarian invasions” caused the church to have to decide to fight back, under the principles of the “just war,” with some parallels to when the Maccabees decided to fight even on the Sabbath in order to survive and keep Judaism alive. This, of course, was not observed in the later Church, which often engaged in wars of religion and Crusades, etc.

looked on from a cave and laughed. Denial of history is not dealing with it intelligently; Jews and Christians disagree, but rarely, among intelligent people, is the argument solved by simply denying the facts. It is better to be comfortable with uncomfortable facts and to focus on their *interpretation* than to seek to do away with them, which indicates an inherent insecurity with the truth.

In turn related to this is the fact that Islam, as a religion, seems not to have the elements to evolve as Judaism and Christianity have. The Enlightenment was an important turning point for Christianity; people became aware of subjectivity, of our process of thinking and interpretation, and increasingly renounced a “magical” view of the world, where there are realms simply not subject to human exploration, but where everything is readily explained as being “God’s will,” when in fact it is humans who want it. This fatal flaw, which afflicts many forms of Judaism and Christianity, too (whenever there is “fundamentalism,” which is called “intellectual suicide” in a document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission), seems to be the norm in Islam.⁴ At least, it is apparent that that faith, and most of its leaders and spokespersons, has to a large extent been hijacked by fundamentalists and fanatics, who make all others, whatever their numbers, cower in silence and cowardice. The result is obvious: fanatical killing and terrorism, with fantastic justifications and hopes of celestial reward. Facts are denied and not even listened to; all seems anger and hurt pride. Islam should calmly reflect on the golden periods, when they dominated science and philosophy, and this seems to be their challenge, to live up to and return to that mind-set (though not to that time, as one can never go back). If we were to judge them, too, by their fruits, in this author’s view they are much farther behind than even Christians.

In the end, discussion of the “true religion” is fraught with shoals, places where one can run aground, actually betraying his or her religion. Any dialogue –communication is a good thing, that is why God has done or does it!– must proceed from an attitude of respect for other persons, and for facts, from openness to learning and growing and accepting one’s faults and the other’s virtues; we usually have no trouble doing the reverse! In this way truth, which is more of a light that shines than a fire which destroys, is sure to triumph in the end.

⁴ The document is *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Rome, 1993), I.F. (page 72 in one edition).