

# Desperately Needed: Dialogue among Judaism, Christianity, Islam

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## 1. What is Religion?

### 1.1 My Definition

Many scholars have offered different definitions of religion which are helpful in one way or another, but they often are also very specialized and narrow. I have developed a definition which is broad, and, I believe, not difficult to understand, though it needs to be “unpacked” a little. Here it is:

*Religion is an explanation of the ultimate meaning of life, and how to live accordingly, based on a notion of the Transcendent.*

Every religion normally contains the four *C*'s: *Creed, Code, Cult, Community-structure*.

*Creed* refers to the “meaning” aspect of a religion, everything in the “explanation” of the *ultimate*—not *partial*, like biology, psychology, sociology, etc....— meaning of life.

*Code* of behavior, or ethics, includes all the rules and customs of action—what we should or should not do—that follow from the Creed.

*Cult* means all the ritual activities that relate the follower to the *Transcendent*, either directly, like prayer or meditation, or indirectly, like behavior toward representatives of the *Transcendent*, such as priests, rabbis....

*Community-structure* refers to the relationships among the followers; this can vary widely, from an egalitarian relationship, as among Quakers (no clergy— all members are equal), through a “republican” structure as Presbyterians have (representative presbyters or elders make the decisions), to a monarchical one (wherein one person finally makes the decisions), as Catholics have with a bishop in each diocese and the pope overall.

The *Transcendent*, as the roots of the word indicate—Latin: *trans*, beyond; *scend*, to go, as in ascend or descend—means “that which goes beyond” the every-day, the ordinary experience of reality. It can mean spirits, gods, a Personal God, an Impersonal God, Emptiness, etc., etc.

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We should, however, also recognize that in the contemporary world there have been developed *explanations of the ultimate meaning of life, and how to live accordingly* which are *not* based on a notion of the Transcendent, e.g., atheistic Marxism or secular humanism. They claim that there is nothing at all beyond this world: “What you see is what you get!” Although in every respect these “explanations” function in life as religions do, because the Transcendent plays such a central role in religion, but not in these “explanations,” they usually are called “ideologies” rather than religions.

Just a bit more about how people describe religions: Our term “religion” in fact is a European word, most probably from the Latin *religare*, meaning “to bind.” Ever since the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe and America we have tended to make a clear distinction between religion and the rest of life because, starting with the American *Bill of Rights* in 1789, more and more people throughout the world have wanted to claim “freedom of religion and belief,” as the United Nations stated it in its 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and again in its 1983 *Declaration on Freedom of Religion and Belief*. That meant that the state could not insist on any religion.

## 1.2 The Way

Outside of the “West,” however, some people around the world often use an even broader term than “religion” as we are using it. They use the term “The Way.” As we have seen, religion is more than just an explanation of the ultimate meaning of life. Religion is also “how to live according” to that explanation. It is a “Way” of living, of life. This is reflected in the interesting fact that most of the major religions of the world have the very term “Way,” or some variation of it, at the heart of their self-understanding.

For example, in the three “Abrahamic,” (each religion claims Abraham as its spiritual grandfather) Religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—all the following key terms mean the “Way”:

Central to Judaism, the Hebrew *Halacha*, “the Way,” came to mean in the teachings of the Rabbis their “legal” decisions to be followed, in order to lead a godly life.

At the beginning of Christianity the followers of Jesus were not called Christians, but followers of “the Way” (*Hodos*, in the Greek of the New Testament) Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22) “Rabbi” Jesus taught and exemplified.

In Islam the traditional way to live a correct life was to follow the *Shari’a*, an Arabic term for “the Way”; it also, analogous to *Halacha* in Judaism, came to mean the myriad “legal” decisions

that should be followed by the devout Muslim.

Much the same is also true for the major religions from India—Hinduism and Buddhism:

In Hinduism there are three major “Ways,” *Margas* in Sanskrit, to attain the goal in life: the Way or *Marga* of knowledge (*Jnana*), the *Marga* of works (*Karma*), and the *Marga* of devotion (*Bhakti*).

In Buddhism the key term meaning “Way” is *Magga*, in Pali, and refers to the Noble Eightfold *Path* (the fourth of Gautama’s fundamental “Four Noble Truths”) to be followed in order to reach *Nirvana*, the goal of life. Moreover, Gautama himself in his first, fundamental, sermon, and Buddhism after him, described his way as the Middle Way (*Majjhima Patipada* in Pali) between harsh asceticism and loose sensuality, which will lead to the goal of life.

For the Religions of the Far East too, the term the *Way* was central: The very name of Chinese *Taoism* places the Way, *Tao*, at the center of the entire religion, the goal of which was to discern the Way, the *Tao*, of the universe and live in harmony with it.

This notion of the Way, the *Tao*, was also central to the doctrine of Confucius, who taught that “The Way of Humanity” (*Ren-Tao*) is to follow the “Way of Heaven” (*T’ien-Tao*).

Japan’s native Religion, Shinto, likewise has embedded in its very name the term “the Way,” namely, *To* (a “compressed” Japanese word version of the Chinese *Tao*), “The Way of the Gods,” *Shin-To*. The term was taken from the Chinese with the same meaning, *Shen-Tao*, to distinguish this original Japanese Religion from that Religion of India, Buddhism, which came to Japan by way of China through Korea, also known in Chinese as “the Way of Buddha,” *Butsu-Tao*.

So, whether we use the older, world-wide term, “The Way” of life, or the Western term we are more used to, “Religion,” they both entail “an explanation of the ultimate meaning of life, *and* how to live accordingly, based on some notion of the Transcendent.”

### 1.3 Contemporary Dimensions of Religion

There are manifold dimensions to Religion, some of which have been

stressed more than others at various times and places. Much of the time and for vast numbers of people Religion has concentrated on life other than here, because life on Earth for many was, as Hobbes put it: “Short, nasty, and brutish.” However, in recent decades Religion—and especially the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—has been increasingly profiling three positive elements from their traditions: 1) a turn toward this world, 2) an emphasis on human freedom, and hence also responsibility, and 3) an embrace of dialogue. This latter shift is so foundational that it will deserve a separate section below.

### **(1) Turn toward this world**

The renowned scholar of religion Robert Bellah famously traced the history of Religion in its various stages. He wrote of the period of the millennium before the Common Era as what he designated as “Historic Religion.” This is when the great world religions arose: Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Greek philosophy. This also is the same period that the German psychologist/philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) referred to as the “Axial Period.”

Bellah noted a major shift in the attitude toward the world exhibited by the historic religions. Where in primal religion men and women understood themselves solely as part of the community, of nature, in historic religion a transcendent world beyond this one was discerned; the transcendent world was seen as so vastly superior to this world that one learned to disdain this world, to distance oneself from it, in order to better attain the transcendent world. This breaking with the cosmological unity of their earlier primitive and archaic stages and sharing a common transcendentalism among the historic religions made them all dualistic in the sense that there were two overarching realities, the this-worldly and the other-worldly or transcendental.

What was sought was not so much to be in harmony with the society and world about oneself, as in primal religion, nor to placate the gods through sacrifice, as in archaic religion. Rather, what was sought was “salvation” from “a basic flaw far more serious than those conceived of by earlier religions,” whether from “clinging” (*tanha*) to what is essentially fleeting (*anicca*), namely, this world, in Buddhism, from “ignorance” of ultimate reality in Hinduism (*avidya*) and Socratic religion (*agnoia*), or from a turning away from God (*hamartia*, sin) in Judaism.

For the masses, the new dualism was “expressed in the difference between this world and the life after death. Religious concern, focused on this life in primitive and archaic religions, now tended to focus on life in the other realm,” the other-worldly reality. Thus “the religious goal of salvation (or enlightenment, release and so forth) was for the first time the central religious preoccupation.” Until very recently the term “salvation” was understood exclusively to mean

going to heaven after death; its root meaning from the Latin *salus* of a “full, healthy life” was largely lost in Christianity after the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Hence, Marx was not far from the mark when he claimed that Christianity (and Religion in general) was mainly concerned about “pie in the sky bye and bye.”

But that focus began to shift in the wake of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment in Europe. There were launched in Europe great movements toward social justice, whether concerning slaves, workers, women, or others in the name of religion, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish. This turn to this world moved even more rapidly and radically with the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church (Vatican II, 1962-65) and afterward, especially as reflected in that Council’s document “The Church in the Modern World,” which in effect launched Liberation Theology world-wide. Catholic Liberation Theology in turn religiously inspired Women’s Liberation, Black Liberation, Minjung theology, Socially Concerned Buddhism....

## (2) **Emphasis on human freedom/responsibility**

We now are increasingly learning that not only is freedom at the very heart of humanity, but that a radical freedom, an indeterminacy, is at the very core of the universe itself. Already in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we learned of the “Heisenberg Principle of Indeterminacy.” This may seem quite uninteresting to the non-physicist, but it has huge implications. It means that at the very foundation of our physical reality there is a radical freedom. Hence, when we humans *experience* or *feel* a radical freedom at the heart of *our* being, it is not some anomaly, not something strange. Our human sense of radical freedom—despite all the restraining limitations we may also experience—is something that is very much in sync with the very physical foundation of our bodies—and the whole universe.

We humans have, of course, always been radically free, but in much of the history of humanity, most women and men were told that for the most part they were not free and physically were prevented from exercising most of their freedom. Only a very few elite humans—mostly males—were relatively fully free. Vast numbers of humans were “unfree.”

In the theological sphere, nobody *really* follows those theologians who taught determinism, predestination. What preacher gets up in the pulpit on a Sunday morning and tells his congregation that there is nothing they can do about whether they are going to go to heaven or not; God decided that when he created them? The obvious conclusion by the congregation, if they believed him, would be to save their money by firing him and closing the church! No, no Christian preacher really seems to believe that we humans are not radically free, and hence share in responsibility for our “salvation,” despite his sometimes confusing and self-contradictory teaching—not if he hopes to keep his job.

Something new, however, burst upon the world in the European 18<sup>th</sup>

century Enlightenment with its lifting up human critical thinking, sense of history and change, and, most of all, human freedom—and hence world-wide democracy. This incredible revolution was unleashed over two centuries ago in Western Europe, but has long since become global, and is sweeping forward with astonishingly increasing acceleration. For millennia the vast majority of persons in the world were subjects, indeed, largely abject subjects, of both of secular and religious authorities. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau not long before the French Revolution remarked, “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.”

When the inner core of human freedom finally began to break through to a tipping point of freedom it became unstoppable. Everybody wanted to exercise her/his radical human freedom, even though almost all the civil and religious forces resisted viciously the expansion of human freedom. Nevertheless, even the Catholic Church—which in the person of Pope Gregory XVI in 1832 condemned freedom of conscience as madness, *deliramentum*—eventually relented and totally reversed itself (without admitting it, of course) in the 1965 *Declaration of Religious Freedom* at Vatican II, insisting that religious liberty and freedom of conscience were at the heart of the Catholic tradition! In its magisterial document, *The Church in the Modern World*, that same Vatican II stated: “Man as an individual and as a member of society craves a life that is full, autonomous, and worthy of his nature as a human being.... [Man has] the need to exercise his freedom in a more mature and personal way.... It is, however, only in freedom that man can turn himself toward what is good.... Man’s dignity therefore requires him to act out of conscious and free choice.” (Nos. 5, 6, 17)

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we are increasingly aware that on the one hand we are capable not only of causing immeasurable suffering and destruction, can even destroy the earth, make it uninhabitable! On the other hand, we are also aware that we can feed and educate the entire world population—if we put our creativity and energy to that end. The 2006 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Muhammad Yunus credibly declared the year 2030 as when poverty will have been eliminated from the world—and he is well on the way to making it happen! We humans are responsible for the evil and the good in the world.

## 2. The Transformative Force of Dialogue

Dialogue is not just a conversation. It is a whole new way of thinking and living! Like the elevation of Freedom in the Enlightenment to the level of an unstoppable revolution sweeping the world, so too Dialogue is now also an unstoppable revolution in the emerging Age of Global Dialogue.

### 2.1 Cosmic Dance of Dialogue

Indeed, Dialogue is at the very heart of the Universe, of which we humans are the highest expression: From the basic dialogic interaction of *Matter and*

*Energy*, to the creative interaction of *Protons and Electrons* in every atom, to the vital symbiosis of *Body and Spirit* in every human, through the creative dialogue between *Woman and Man*, to the dynamic relationship between *Individual and Society*. Thus, the very essence of our humanity is dialogical, and a fulfilled human life is the highest expression of the *Cosmic Dance of Dialogue*.

In the early millennia of the history of humanity as we spread outward from our starting point in central Africa, the forces of *Divergence* were dominant. However, because we live on a globe, in our frenetic divergence we eventually began to encounter each other more and more frequently. Now the forces of stunning *Convergence* are becoming increasingly dominant.

In the past, during the *Age of Divergence*, we could live in isolation from each other; we could ignore each other. Now, in the *Age of Convergence*, we are forced to live in One World. We increasingly live in a Global Village. We cannot ignore the Other, the Different. Too often in the past we have tried to make over the Other into a likeness of ourselves, often by violence. But this is the very opposite of dialogue. This egocentric arrogance is in fundamental opposition to the *Cosmic Dance of Dialogue*. It is not creative; it is destructive. Hence, we humans today have a stark choice: Dialogue, or Death!

For us humans there are four main dimensions to dialogue, the four H's corresponding to the structure of our humanness: Dialogue of the Head, Dialogue of the Hands, Dialogue of the Heart, Dialogue of (W)Holiness.

### **(1) The Cognitive or Intellectual: Seeking the Truth**

In the *Dialogue of the Head* we mentally reach out to the Other to learn from those who think differently from us. We try to understand how they see the world and why they act as they do. The world is far too complicated for any of us to understand alone; we can increasingly understand reality only with the help of the Other, in dialogue. This is very important, because how we *understand* the world, determines how we *act* in the world.

### **(2) The Illative or Ethical: Seeking the Good**

In the *Dialogue of the Hands* we join together with Others to work to make the world a better place in which we all must live together. Since we can no longer live separately in this One World, we must work jointly to make it not just a house, but a home for all of us to live in. Stated other, we join hands with the Other to heal the world. The world within us, and all around us, always is in need of healing, and our deepest wounds can be healed only together with the Other, only in dialogue.

### **(3) The Affective or Aesthetic: Seeking the Beautiful**

In the *Dialogue of the Heart* we open ourselves to receive the Beauty of

the Other. Because we humans are body and spirit, we give bodily-spiritual expression in all the Arts to our multifarious responses to life: Joy, sorrow, gratitude, anger...and most of all love. We try to express our inner feelings, which grasp reality in far deeper and higher ways than we are able to put into rational concepts and words; hence, we create poetry, music, dance, painting, architecture...the expressions of the Heart. All the world delights in beauty, and so it is here that we find the easiest encounter with the Other, the simplest door to dialogue.

#### (4) (W)Holiness: Seeking the One

We humans cannot long live a divided life. If we are to even survive, let alone flourish, we must “get it all together.” We must live a whole life. Indeed, this is what the Abrahamic religions mean when they say that we Humans should be Holy. We Humans can be truly Human, however, only if we bring our various parts together in Harmony, if we integrate our being Holistically. Therefore, we are authentically Human only when our multiple elements are in Dialogue with each other, and we in turn are in Dialogue with the Others around us. We must dance together the *Dialogue of the Head*, the *Dialogue of the Hands*, and the *Dialogue of the Heart* within the (W)Holy Cosmic Dance of Dialogue.

### 2.2 Contemporary Dialogue of the Head

Because how we perceive and understand the world determines how we act in the world, the “Dialogue of the Head” has a certain priority. Starting there, we need to ask ourselves how the word “dialogue” is being used today, especially in the area of religion.

The term dialogue comes from two Greek words, *dia*, “across,” and *logos*, “word,” and thus means “a word across.” Of course we use the term dialogue in many ways, as, for example, the lines actors on the stage speak, or in a novel, the lines various characters speak, which are different from descriptions and background that the author supplies. However, in the field of religion, starting in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “dialogue” is used in a special sense, perhaps best understood in opposition to “debate.” Here is a classic definition from my 1983 *Dialogue Decalogue*:

*Dialogue is a conversation on a common subject between two or more persons with differing views, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that s/he can change and grow.*

In the past, especially in the area of religion, we engaged in, not *dialogue*, but *monologue*. We always talked either with persons who thought as we

did—or *should!* Because we were convinced that we had all the truth, we never listened to those who thought differently from us; we only talked *at* them—a one-way conversation, *monologue*.

This all may seem obvious, and, hence, superfluous. But it isn't. Dialogue has become a faddish term, and is sometimes, like charity, used to "cover a multitude of sins." Sometimes, for example, it is used by those who are quite convinced that they have all the truth on a subject, but feel that in today's "dialogue" climate a less aggressive style will be more effective in communicating the truth they already possess to the ignorant. Hence, still relying on the older non-dialogue assumption—that they have all the truth—their less pushy approach will now be *called* "dialogue," though it really isn't. This is merely an opportunistic manipulation of the term dialogue.

Perhaps some of those who are convinced that they already hold all religious truth truly believe that they are engaging in dialogue when they employ such a "soft sell" approach: They encourage their conversation partners to also express their own views—even though it is assumed ahead of time, of course, that they are false—for such a "dialogue" will make the ignorant person more open to receiving the truth, which the first person knows he/she already has. In that situation, the "truth-holders" simply have a basic misunderstanding of the term dialogue and mistakenly call their softer "convert-making" "dialogue." Of course, it is the exact opposite since in dialogue I want to talk with those who think differently from me so *I can learn*, not so I can teach them!

At the same time, however, I cannot learn if my partner does not teach me what s/he thinks and why. So yes, if learning is to happen, then teaching must also take place. That is why the term *primarily* in the above definition of dialogue is vital. If I come first of all, primarily, to teach, then what will happen is resistance, argument, and not learning. My partner will tend to resent my insistence that s/he is mistaken because s/he doesn't think like me. Hence, s/he will not learn anything—and if there is no learning going on, there obviously also is no teaching, for teaching means the transfer of knowledge from one mind to another. After thousands of years of debate and argument wherein nobody learned anything, humanity is finally catching on that, just maybe, we were doing things backwards!

If authentic teaching is to go on, then learning must occur—and the way to make that happen is for me to come to the encounter primarily to learn! Again, I emphasize the critical term *primarily* because dialogue is a two-way street: Each of us comes to the encounter so each of us can learn. As I noted, I cannot learn unless my partner teaches me what and why s/he thinks, but s/he cannot learn either—and s/he also comes to dialogue in order to learn—unless I teach! So, it makes all the difference in the world whether I come to talk with those who think differently from me first of all so I can teach them the truth, which I already fully possess, or whether I come first of all, *primarily*, to learn,

and because my dialogue partner is doing the same, we both, *secondarily*, must teach.

One more critical point about dialogue needs to be laid out a little bit before we go on. In no field will anybody normally claim that s/he knows all the truth—except, astoundingly, in the most complicated field of all, religion! In biology we are focused on studying just living matter; in geology, just the Earth; in sociology, just the way groups interact, and on and on—each discipline focused on just one part of reality. However, in religion we try to provide an “explanation of the *ultimate*—the final, the most comprehensive, the most thoroughgoing—meaning of life.”

No one will claim s/he knows all about biology, geology, sociology..., for we realize that we are constantly learning new things in all fields of knowledge. Well, doesn't it follow *all the more* that we cannot possibly know everything about that field which claims not to be about only part of reality, but about the meaning of *all* reality!? My experience is that if people think about this, they tend to come to the same conclusion: “No, we by ourselves cannot possibly know everything about the ultimate meaning of life.” Frequently, however, people do not stop to *think* carefully about this vital matter. This is why critical-thinking is really the essential counterpart of dialogue: Dialogue and Critical-Thinking are the two sides of the single coin of humanity.

### 2.3 Dialogue among the Religions

Starting at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, the major religions of the world tentatively began to enter into conscious dialogue with each other. As with all paradigm shifts, there was great resistance, but it slowly, slowly gave way to increasing dialogue. Then a “great leap forward” was taken by the Catholic Church's authoritative commitment to interreligious dialogue at Vatican II (1962-65), pulling much of the Protestant world, and increasingly the non-Christian world as well, in its wake.

Let me give a personal testimony. My wife Arlene and I launched the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* already during Vatican II in 1964, and already in 1965, took on board our first non-Christian Associate Editor, and in 1978, I started the Dialogue Institute. In the forty-some years since then there have been millions of interreligious dialogues on all levels, from grass-roots encounters to scholarly and official leadership meetings. They surged even further with the collapse of the Soviet Union and its repressed satellites. I myself published fourteen books on interreligious dialogue in the years 1990-92!

For all of its destruction and violent aftermath to today, the tragedy of 9/11 has also unleashed a flood of Muslim scholars and leaders entering vigorously into interreligious dialogue. The International Scholars' Abrahamic Trialogue (ISAT), which we are continuing today and will be discussed later in this article, throughout a quarter of a century could find *in the whole world* only a dozen

Muslim scholars capable of and interested in interreligious dialogue! Now, there are hundreds and hundreds, with more appearing all the time. It seems that God writes straight with crooked lines.

### 3. What the Abrahamic Religions Have in Common

It is obvious that there are significant differences between the three religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is precisely the differences that have been stressed all the centuries of their existence. This nearly exclusive focus on the differences has produced Antisemitism and the Holocaust, Jihad, and the Crusades, all destructive of millions of lives. However, it is also obvious to anyone who looks with a clear eye at these three religions that there are massive commonalities among them. In fact, the commonalities vastly outstrip the differences. It is time that Jews, Christians, and Muslims build bridges rather than barriers between each other.

#### 3.1 Abraham, the Source of All Three Religions

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all claim Abraham as their spiritual “father.” We learn about Abraham from the Bible, according to which around 1750 B.C.E. he came from the city of Ur in the world’s oldest civilization, Sumer (present-day Iraq), and settled in Hebron (present-day Israel). Because at first his wife Sarah did not bear any children, according to the custom of the time Abraham had a son, Ismail, by her handmaid Hagar. Soon thereafter, however, Sarah also bore a son, Isaac.

Subsequently Isaac had a son Jacob (called Israel), who in turn had twelve sons, each of whom fathered what became the Twelve Tribes of Israel. After a centuries-long sojourn in Egypt, where the Tribes of Israel eventually sank into slavery, only to be led to freedom by Moses (the “Exodus,” the “going out”), they settled back where they had come from, in “the promised land,” present-day Israel. It was there in the homeland of Abraham where Jesus, a Jew (the name “Jew” comes from the name “Judah,” one of the sons of Israel), the “founder” of Christianity, was born. Further, according to the Muslim tradition, Abraham and his son Ismail built the Kaaba in present-day Mecca as a shrine to the one true God.

Although there are disputes among scholars about the historical basis of all these details, it is obvious that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all look back to Abraham as their historical source. Remembering the old saying that “blood is thicker than water,” claiming the same “father” necessarily draws these three descendent religions closer together.

#### 3.2 Ethical Monotheism

The Abrahamic religions are all monotheist religions. The term comes from the Greek *monos*, one, *theos*, god, and is most often distinguished from

polytheism (Greek *poly*, many). There is a debate among scholars about whether humans started out being polytheists and only slowly over many centuries developed into monotheists (the majority opinion), or they started out as monotheists, sank back into polytheism, and only later returned to monotheism (the minority opinion). Nevertheless, it is clear that all the earliest ancient civilizations (remember, as the word tells us—Latin *civis* means city—“civilization” means “citization”), which started before 2000 B.C.E., were polytheist. We are so used to the concept of *monotheism* today, however, that we do not realize what an extraordinary breakthrough this insight was in the history of humankind. It had massive immediate implications for how one related to all other human beings and all reality.

For example, if in ancient times I lived in a nation which had its own gods (and they all did), and all other nations also had their own gods, then the ethical rules that were developed by my god=s religion would not necessarily apply to persons and things living under other gods. There did not exist a single ethics, or rules of behavior, which was valid for all human beings and for all the earth—until it was claimed by the Hebrews that there was in fact one creator God, *Yahweh*, of all human beings and of all reality. For the Hebrews there was, then, both one God of all, and hence one ethics for all. Here is one of the great contributions of the Hebrew people to humanity—*ethical* monotheism, which in turn was ultimately one of the sources of the modern concept of Human Rights.

All three of the Abrahamic religions grew out of the ancient Hebrew religion, and thus all three Abrahamic traditions are religions of “ethical monotheism.” All three claim there is one, loving, just, God who is the Creator of all reality, and that all human beings, as images of God, are expected to live in love and justice toward God and God’s image, human beings, and all of God’s creation. In other words, belief in the one God has ethical consequences concerning oneself, other persons, and the world. If all people were created by the one true God, the same God-given principles of right and wrong were placed by God into every human person, and thus all humans must be treated similarly as creatures of God. In the ancient world of polytheism, as we saw, *my* people were treated according to the ethics of *my* god, but *other* people who were created by *other* gods did not merit the same ethical treatment as my people. Hence, they could be enslaved and otherwise treated as less than fully human.

Unfortunately, it took many centuries during which slavery flourished in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as among the other religions and cultures of the world, before that latter implication of the equal dignity of all humans rose in human consciousness. More about that below.

### 3.3 Historical Religions

The three Abrahamic traditions are historical religions, that is, they believe

that God acts through human history, communicates through historical events, through particular human persons, preeminently Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. Historical events, like the Exodus, Crucifixion, and *Hijrah* each radically changed the human condition from that point forward, according to each of the three religions. The Jewish people reckon their formation as a people by the Exodus from the slavery of Egypt under the God-designated leadership of Moses as a world-changing event. So too do Christians look upon the life-crucifixion-resurrection of Jesus as a world-changing event; everything was different afterward. The same is true for Muslims, who look to the revelations given to Mohammed as world-changing, and hence date their calendar by years A.H. (after *Hijrah*—Arabic for Mohammed’s *flight* to Medina), as Christians date their calendar by A.D. (*Anno Domini*, Latin for “in the year of the Lord”). Such a focus on historical world-changing events does not at all play the same central role in many other world religions, as, for example, in Hinduism and Taoism.

### 3.4 Religions of Revelation

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are religions of revelation, that is, they are convinced that God has communicated, revealed, something of God’s self and will in special ways through particular persons, not just for themselves, but for the salvation of all humankind. In all three religions this revelation has two special vehicles: prophets and scriptures.

Clearly in Judaism the men prophets Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah, and the women prophets Miriam and Huldah, etc. are outstanding “mouthpieces” of God (Greek, *pro-phetes*, “one who speaks for another”), and the greatest of all the prophets in Judaism is Moses. For Christianity Moses and the other prophets are God’s spokespersons—but also numbered among the Christian prophets are Anna (Lk. 2:36-8), and the two daughters of Philip (Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* III.31), and most of all Jesus—though Christians later came to claim something beyond prophethood for him. For Islam all these Jewish and Christian prophets are also authentic prophets, God’s revealing voice in the world— and to that list they add Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets.

For these three faiths God’s special revelation is also communicated in “The Book,” the “Bible.” For Jews the Holy Scriptures are the Hebrew Bible, for Christians it is the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and for Muslims it is those two, plus the Qur’an, which is corrective of and supplemental to the first two. For Muslims, the Jews and Christians have the special name: “People of the Book.”

There are many more things that the three Abrahamic faiths have in common, such as the importance of “covenant,” of “law and faith,” of the “community” (witness in the three traditions the central role of the terms “People,” “Church,” and “Ummah,” respectively). But just looking at the list of

commonalities here briefly spelled out provides us an initial set of fundamental reasons why serious, ongoing dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims is desperately needed!

#### 4. Trialogue in Action

As I mentioned earlier, my wife Arlene and I founded in 1964 the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies (JES)*, named the world's premier scholarly journal devoted to interreligious dialogue. An outreach arm of *JES* was launched in 1978—the *Dialogue Institute: Interreligious, Intercultural, International*—the first project of which was the launching of a Scholars' Trialogue. This was perhaps the first regular ongoing meeting of the same Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars of religion to discuss the full range of religious and related topics. In the first years it was a rather hermetically sealed group of scholars of a total of twenty Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars sponsored by the Kennedy Institute of Ethics (later part of Georgetown University), then directed by Sargent Shriver. It was organized by Eugene Fisher and myself in 1978 and ran until 1984, meeting twice a year for three days each time, then later annually.<sup>2</sup>

After 1984, and an intense search for other funding, I was able to restart in April, 1989, the Trialogue, this time international—hence the name *International Scholars Annual Trialogue, ISAT*. (It changed its name in January 2008, because of the shift in frequency, to *International Scholars Abrahamic Trialogue*, still retaining the same acronym *ISAT*). It was sponsored by the *JES* and the *National Conference of Christians and Jews*, and held its first, very successful, three-day meeting in April, 1989.

The effects of such a long-term “fundamental research and dialogue” approach to the interrelationship among the three “Semitic” religions are difficult to predict. We do know, however, that the long-term “fundamental research and dialogue” approach to the interrelationship between Protestantism and Catholicism in Germany in the 1950s had a profoundly positive effect on the revolutionary changes that Protestant-Catholic relations underwent since the early 1960s.<sup>3</sup> One cannot guarantee such positive results in the much more complex Jewish-Christian-Muslim relationship, but one can guarantee that without such a “fundamental research and dialogue” approach in a long-term manner, positive developments in their relationship will not come about.

ISAT has been composed of 27 scholars, nine from each of the three religious traditions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam. The composition of ISAT has remained basically the same, though different local participant-observers are invited to each Trialogue. Every effort is made to include representatives of the

<sup>2</sup> For a brief history of this earliest organized Trialogue, see the report by Eugene Fisher, “Kennedy Institute Jewish-Christian-Muslim Trialogue,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 19, 1 (Winter 1982), pp. 197-200.

<sup>3</sup> See Leonard Swidler, *The Ecumenical Vanguard* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1965).

major divisions of each of the three religions—women scholars as well as men scholars.

The importance of the same scholars meeting regularly is that only after certain basic understandings have been achieved and personal trust has been won can dialogue move beyond the superficial level. That is what has been happening in this interreligious “think tank.” “Basic research” is being done here. As in basic research in the physical sciences, immediate applicability is not the primary focus, but laying the necessary foundation for any future practical developments.

If authentic dialogue is to occur—that is, each partner comes to learn from the other—then it is imperative that those who are open to learning from others be the invited dialogue partners. This is all the more so in a dialogue entailing Jews, Christians and Muslims, for there are so many barriers among the three that is only the literally “ec-centric” members of each tradition who at first are likely to be able to engage in such a Trialogue. After the pioneers have laid the groundwork—over years—then the more centrist members of each tradition will feel it is safe to tread the path of Trialogue. We know, for example, that it took decades between 1918 and 1965 of dangerous and often repressed and condemned dialogue between Catholic and Protestant pioneers before the breakthrough of the “Decree on Ecumenism” of Vatican II made it safe for the Pope to venture forth on the ecumenical journey.

Over the years ISAT has met in Graz, Austria; Jerusalem; Jakarta, Indonesia (at the invitation of President Abdurrahman Wahid); Skopje, Macedonia (at the invitation of President Boris Trajkovski); Philadelphia, U.S.; and Amman, Jordan (at the invitation of Prince Hassan bin Talal). Let me lift up slightly the results of just the Trialogue in Macedonia as an example of what Dialogue can accomplish in practice.

Macedonia is the southernmost republic of the former Yugoslavia, and is made up of a large majority of mainly Slavic Orthodox Christians and a large minority of mainly Albanian Muslims. In 2000, the country was sliding into a hot civil war—and the religions were a part of the problem rather than of the solution! It was during our Trialogue in Indonesia in February, 2000, that my colleague and Co-Editor of *JES*, Paul Mojzes, received a call in our Jakarta hotel room from President Boris Trajkovski of Macedonia pleading with us to hold our next Trialogue in Skopje—they desperately needed help!

Paul and I subsequently traveled several times to Skopje, repeatedly going through labyrinthian discussions with the religious leaders, and eventually, amidst a shooting war, were able to get launched a Trialogue in Macedonia in May, 2002.

If the meetings to plan the Trialogue was literally *amazing*, the Trialogue itself with its experienced dialogue, which triggered unexpected late night meetings and commitments to interreligious cooperation, approached the

level of a minor miracle—especially when one recalls that just a few months prior, the drums of war were beating loudly, and religious leaders were doing little to muffle them.

Three firm, and quite revolutionary, commitments were at the end publicly made a closing large press conference, namely:

*(1) to establish a “Council on Interreligious Cooperation” appointed by the respective heads of the religious communities,*

*(2) for the heads of the religious communities, particularly the Orthodox and Islamic, to meet three-four times a year to discuss issues between the communities, and*

*(3) for the Orthodox and Islamic Theological Schools to begin cooperating in teaching students about each other’s religion.*

These commitments, and more, have in fact been successfully carried out since then, producing a quite stunning example of how Interreligious Dialogue can substantively contribute to religious harmony and cooperation, and world peace.