

Triangulating the Abrahamic faiths – measuring the closeness of Judaism, Christianity and Islam

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1. Introduction

It is always a shock when you regard something as self-evident and then come across someone who believes the opposite. It forces you to analyse your belief -- you can no longer take the mathematician's refuge of saying "it's obvious!"

Five years ago, I drafted the membership leaflet for the Muslim Jewish Forum of Greater Manchester. The content is repeated on the Forum's website in the section "[Why this Forum was created](#)", and amongst other things it states: "*Islam and Judaism are closer to each other than any other two religions.*" Accordingly, when I had lunch a couple of years ago with a senior Anglican cleric, I was astonished to find that he regarded Christianity and Judaism as very close while both being quite far away from Islam.

2. How the three faiths see each other

Before trying to measure their relative closeness, it is worth stepping back to summarise how the three religions see each other.

2.1. What their holy books say

Here chronology dictates everything.

2.1.1. Judaism

Written first, Judaism's holy book (my copy is "The Holy Scriptures according to the Masoretic text" from the Jewish Publications Society of America) says nothing of either Christianity or Islam.

In this context, it is not necessary to consider Christian and Muslim views that Jesus and Muhammad (peace be upon them and upon all the other prophets mentioned in this article) respectively are both prefigured in the Jewish Holy Scriptures. What matters in this context is how the Jewish Holy Scriptures are understood by Jews.

2.1.2. Christianity

All of the first Christians were Jews, and the Christian Bible contains the entire text of the Jewish Holy Scriptures albeit re-sequenced. Conversely, the Christian Bible says nothing about Islam.

To condense an immensely complex issue into one sentence, the Christian Bible contains language which has often been used to contend that the Old Covenant made between God and the Hebrews at Mount Sinai has been superseded by the New

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Covenant mediated through Jesus. This doctrine is known as "[Supersessionism](#)" or "Replacement theology."

Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one; for Moses, when he was about to erect the tent, was warned, "See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain."

But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one. God finds fault with them when he says: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors, on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in my covenant, and so I had no concern for them, says the Lord. This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach one another or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." In speaking of "a new covenant," he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear.

Hebrews 8, New Revised Standard Version

2.1.3. Islam

The last in the sequence to be revealed, the Quran acknowledges the existence of both the Jewish and the Christian Scriptures. The Quran recognises that non-Muslims can achieve salvation.

VERILY, those who have attained to faith [in this divine writ], as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians - all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds - shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve. (Quran 2.62.)

This and all other Quran quotations in this piece are from "The Message of the Quran" translated by Muhammad Asad.

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The Quran states that the previous Scriptures have been tampered with, but without giving details of where they are now incorrect and where the text we have is still correct.

AND, INDEED, God accepted a [similar] solemn pledge from the children of Israel when We caused twelve of their leaders to be sent [to Canaan as spies]. And God said: "Behold, I shall be with you! If you are constant in prayer, and spend in charity, and believe in My apostles and aid them, and offer up unto God a goodly loan, I will surely efface your bad deeds and bring you into gardens through which running waters flow. But he from among you who, after this, denies the truth, will indeed have strayed from the right path!"

Then, for having broken their solemn pledge, We rejected them and caused their hearts to harden - [so that now] they distort the meaning of the [revealed] words, taking them out of their context; and they have forgotten much of what they had been told to bear in mind; and from all but a few of them thou wilt always experience treachery. But pardon them, and forbear: verily, God loves the doers of good.

And [likewise,] from those who say, "Behold, we are Christians." We have accepted a solemn pledge: and they, too, have forgotten much of what they had been told to bear in mind - wherefore We have given rise among them to enmity and hatred, [to last] until Resurrection Day: and in time God will cause them to understand what they have contrived. O followers of the Bible! Now there has come unto you Our Apostle, to make clear unto you much of what you have been concealing [from yourselves] of the Bible, and to pardon much. Now there has come unto you from God a light, and a clear divine writ, through which God shows unto all that seek His goodly acceptance the paths leading to salvation and, by His grace, brings them out of the depths of darkness into the light and guides them onto a straight way.

Quran 5.12 – 5.16

The Quran is also very critical of Trinitarianism.

Indeed, the truth deny they who say, "Behold, God is the Christ, son of Mary" - seeing that the Christ [himself] said, "O children of Israel! Worship God [alone], who is my Sustainer as well as your Sustainer." Behold, whoever ascribes divinity to any being beside God, unto him will God deny paradise, and his goal shall be the fire: and such evildoers will have none to succour them!

Indeed, the truth deny they who say, "Behold, God is the third of a trinity" - seeing that there is no deity whatever save the One God. And unless they desist from this their assertion, grievous suffering is bound to befall such of them as are bent on denying the truth. Will they not, then, turn towards God in repentance, and ask His forgiveness? For God is much forgiving, a dispenser of grace.

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The Christ, son of Mary, was but an apostle: all [other] apostles had passed away before him; and his mother was one who never deviated from the truth; and they both ate food [like other mortals]. Behold how clear We make these messages unto them: and then behold how perverted are their minds! Say: "Would you worship, beside God, aught that has no power either to harm or to benefit you - when God alone is all-hearing, all-knowing?"

Say: "O followers of the Gospel! Do not overstep the bounds [of truth] in your religious beliefs; and do not follow the errant views of people who have gone astray aforetime, and have led many [others] astray, and are still straying from the right path."

Quran 5.72 – 5.77

2.2. What the religious authorities say about other religions

2.2.1. Judaism

The journal Judaism in its summer 1993 edition carried a fascinating short article "[Islam and the halakhah](#)" by Marc B. Shapiro. (Halakhah is Jewish law.) It reviews the comments of many rabbis over the ages and show that views have varied from rabbi to rabbi. At the risk of oversimplifying, I would summarise the consensus as follows:

- Christians were seen as polytheists, due to the doctrine of the Trinity. In the last few hundred years, rabbis have moderated this view slightly, but they still do not regard Christians as being fully monotheistic in the same manner as Jews or Muslims.
- Muslims were acknowledged as monotheists.
- Since Christians believed in the Old Testament, Maimonides considered it permissible to teach them the Torah. However as Muslims did not regard the Old Testament as completely true, it was not permissible to teach the Torah to Muslims.
- It was permissible for a Jew to enter a mosque, but not permissible for him to enter a church as that was seen as a house of idolatry.
- Much of the halakhic discussion revolves around wine. Maimonides concluded that a Jew may not benefit from wine handled by a Christian, but may benefit from wine handled by a Muslim although the Jew may not drink such wine.

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2.2.2. Christianity

As explained below, in this article I use the Roman Catholic Church as the reference point for Christianity. The Church has always considered that "*Outside the Church there is no salvation*". Accordingly, both Judaism and Islam were rejected as being in error.

The extract below is from the [Vatican website archives](#). On that page, scroll down to 846.

"[Outside the Church there is no salvation](#)"

846 How are we to understand this affirmation, often repeated by the Church Fathers? Re-formulated positively, it means that all salvation comes from Christ the Head through the Church which is his Body:

Basing itself on Scripture and Tradition, the Council teaches that the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation: the one Christ is the mediator and the way of salvation; he is present to us in his body which is the Church. He himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and Baptism, and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter through Baptism as through a door. Hence they could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it or to remain in it.

847 This affirmation is not aimed at those who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and his Church:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience - those too may achieve eternal salvation.

848 "Although in ways known to himself God can lead those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the Gospel, to that faith without which it is impossible to please him, the Church still has the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelize all men."

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The Church's language has been moderated in recent times following Vatican 2.

On 28 October 1965 Pope Paul VI proclaimed the "[Declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions Nostra Aetate.](#)" Of non-Christian religions generally, it says "*The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions.*"

It says of Muslims:

The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all- powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.

Nostra Aetate says more about Judaism, and for brevity I have selected just a few quotes below:

The Church keeps ever in mind the words of the Apostle about his kinsmen: "theirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises; theirs are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:4-5).

As Holy Scripture testifies, Jerusalem did not recognize the time of her visitation, nor did the Jews in large number, accept the Gospel; indeed not a few opposed its spreading. Nevertheless, God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues-such is the witness of the Apostle.

True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures.

However, on a close reading of Nostra Aetate, it appears to duck the key question. Is a devout practitioner of Judaism or Islam, who knows of the existence of Christianity but rejects it, saved or not saved? It would have taken only a sentence to address the point, but the entire document fails to do so.

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2.2.3. Islam

Islam regards itself as the confirmation of what is accurate in both Judaism and Christianity and as their completion.

Now this Qur'an could not possibly have been devised by anyone save God: nay indeed, it confirms the truth of whatever there still remains [of earlier revelations] and clearly spells out the revelation [which comes] - let there be no doubt about it - from the Sustainer of all the worlds. And yet, they [who are bent on denying the truth] assert, "[Muhammad] has invented it!" Say [unto them]: "Produce, then, a surah of similar merit; and [to this end] call to your aid whomever you can, other than God, if what you say is true!(Quran 10.37 – 10.38)

And now that We replace one message by another - since God is fully aware of what He bestows from on high, step by step - they [who deny the truth] are wont to say, "Thou but inventest it!" Nay, but most of them do not understand it! (Quran 16.101)

As the Quran itself has so much to say on Judaism and Christianity, as illustrated by the brief extracts above, I have not spent any time seeking the views of Muslim scholars.

3. How would you measure closeness?

As with most things in life, there are at least two different ways of looking at religion's closeness.

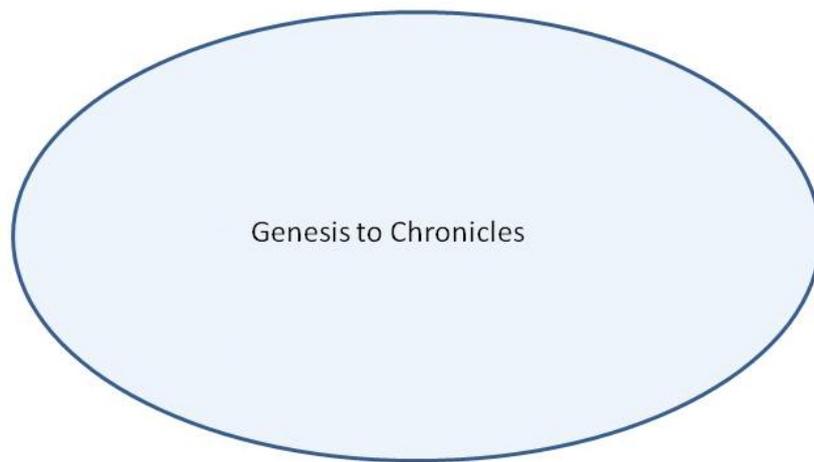
3.1. Quantitative

The most natural thing is to find something that you can count. One possibility is counting pages of scripture.

The scripture used in Judaism is titled in English "The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text" with the most common edition being that published by the Jewish Print Society in 1917.

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Judaism – Holy texts

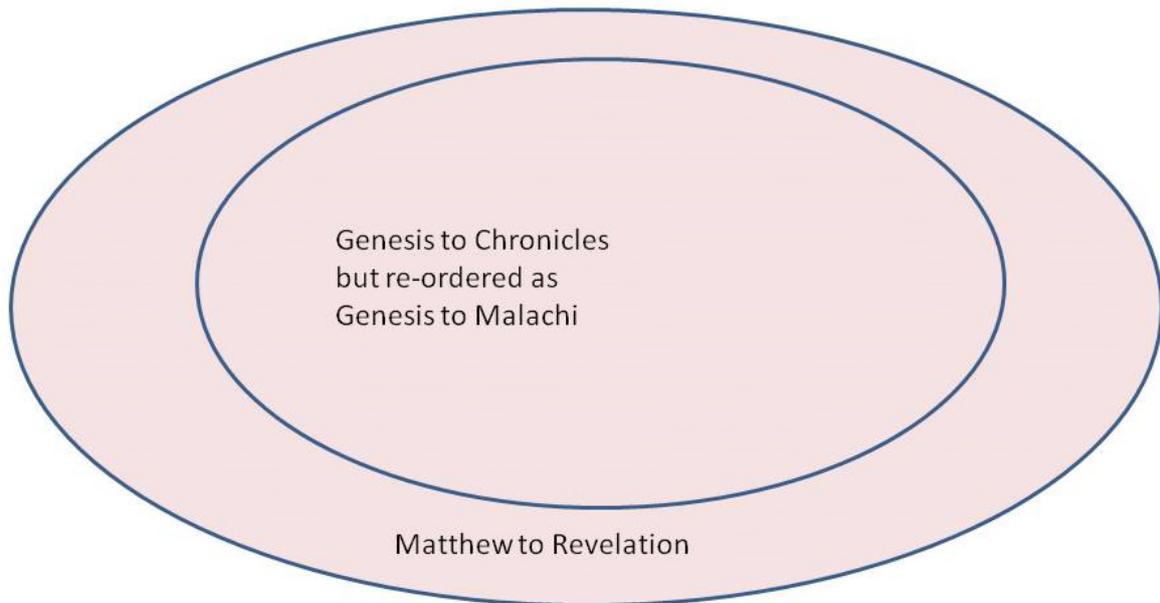


While there may be minor textual differences from the Biblical Old Testament, all of the books in the Masoretic Text appear in the Biblical Old Testament and vice versa. The Bible used by Christians therefore consists of the same material used by Jews along with some additional material in the form of the New Testament. Indeed, the majority of the Christian Bible consists of the Old Testament.

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Judaism and Christianity – Holy texts



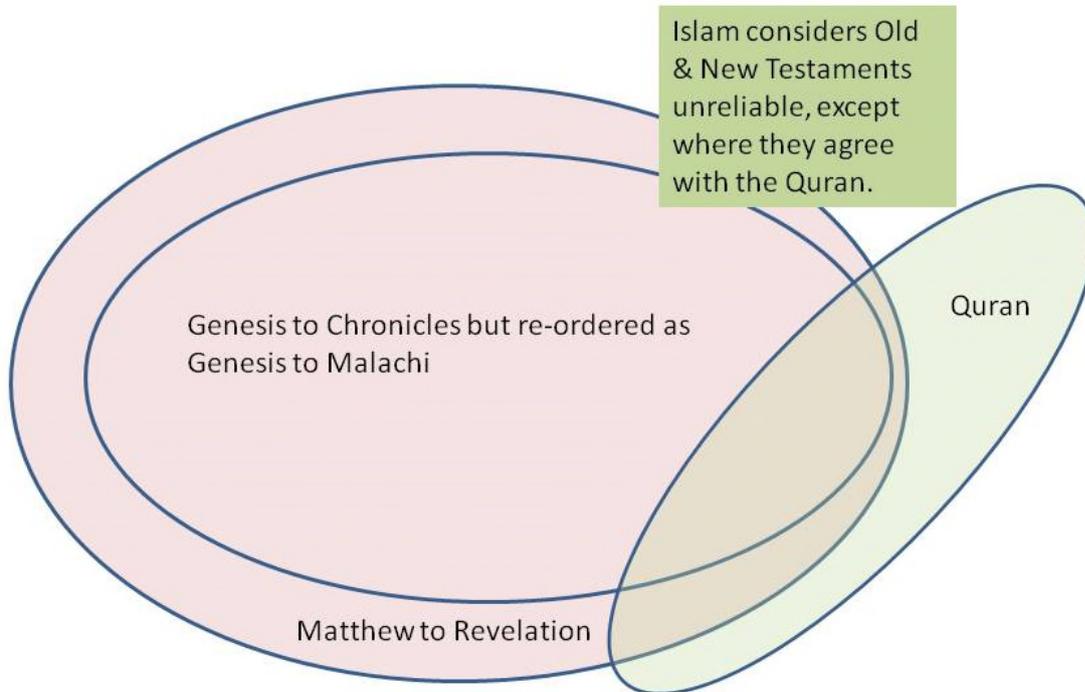
However, neither Jews nor Christians accept the Quran as a divinely inspired document, regardless of how worthy they may consider its content.

Conversely Muslims believe the Quran to be the direct word of God. While they also believe that God gave mankind the Old Testament and the New Testament, they consider both texts to have been corrupted and therefore unreliable. In comparison the Quran has is preserved exactly as it was revealed to the prophet Muhammad. The basic approach of Islam is that the Old and New Testaments can only be relied upon where they agree with what is in the Quran.

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Judaism, Christianity and Islam – Holy texts

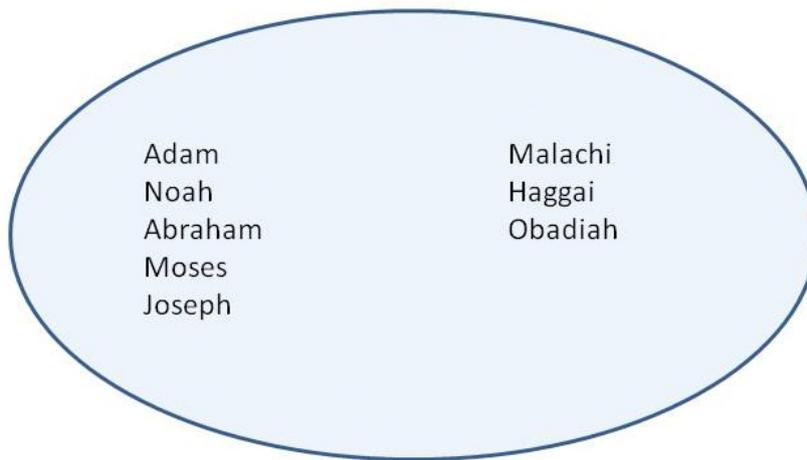


Accordingly, scriptural page counting leads to the conclusion that Christianity and Judaism are very close to each other and far away from Islam.

One can also try counting prophets. The prophets recognised by the Jews are all named in the Old Testament. In the diagram below, only some of the Old Testament prophets are named to save space.

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Judaism – Selected prophets

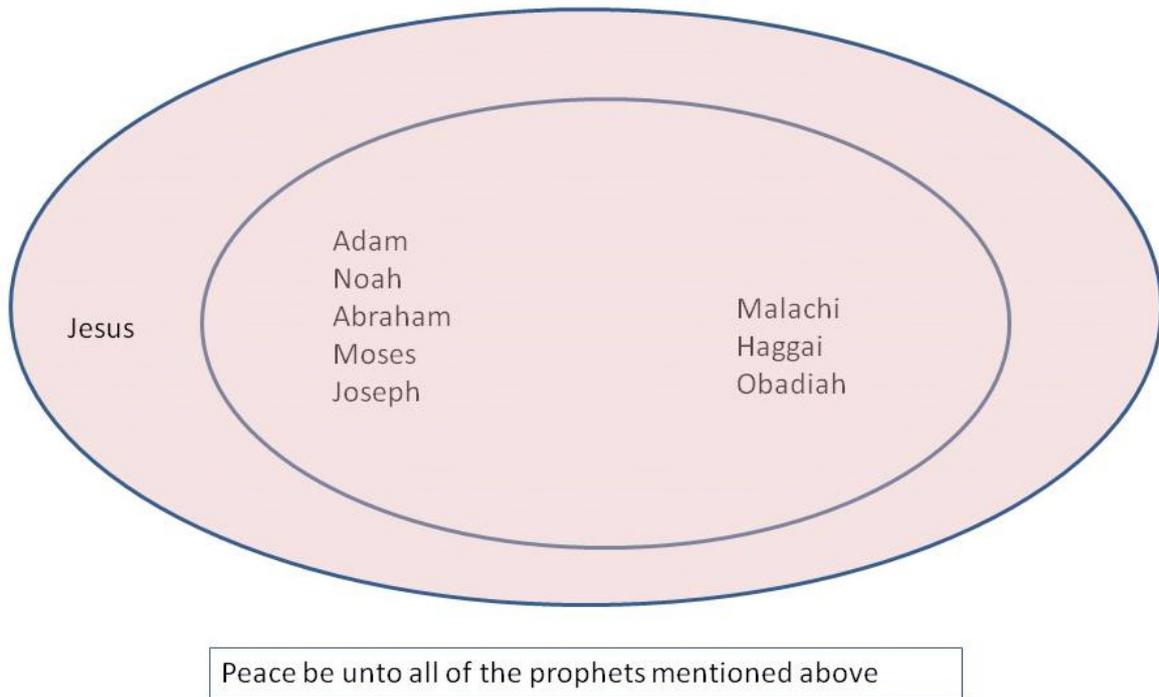


Peace be unto all of the prophets mentioned above

Christians acknowledge every one of them as prophets and also add Jesus in the New Testament. (Of course, Christianity deviates significantly from Judaism by giving divine attributes to Jesus, whereas Judaism regards all of the Old Testament prophets as purely human.) This is shown by the following diagram.

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Judaism and Christianity – Selected prophets

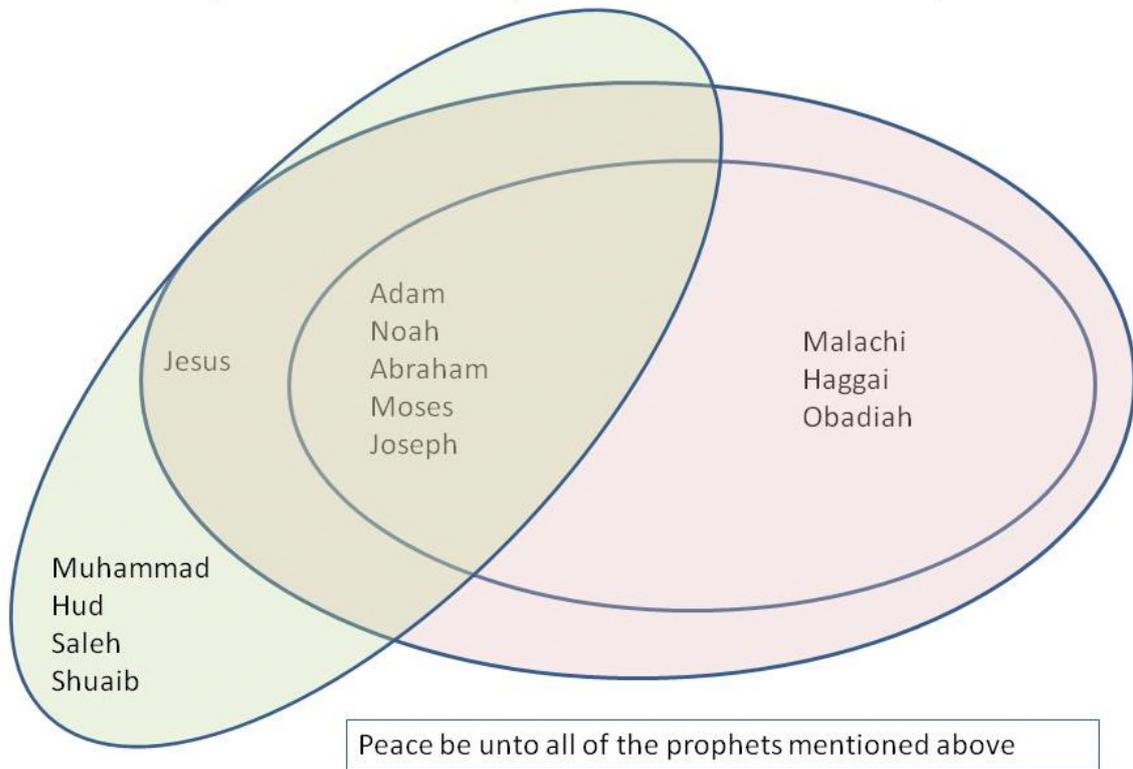


The Quran names 25 prophets. While the names are in Arabic, most such as Abraham, Moses and Solomon can be readily mapped to their Old Testament names. Others such as Hud, Saleh and Shuaib cannot, although the commentators appear to disagree at times. The Quran also contains detailed coverage of Jesus. However, the Quran does not name all of the prophets mentioned in the Old Testament. This leads to the following diagram (again only some of the prophets are shown on the diagram):

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Judaism, Christianity and Islam - Prophets



Counting prophets would also lead one to conclude that Judaism and Christianity are much closer to each other than they are to Islam, since Christianity and Judaism agree on the identity of all of the prophets except one, namely Jesus, but have many divergences from Islam.

When you look at the religions in this way, it is quite easy to see why an Anglican cleric would regard Christianity and Judaism as much closer to each other than they are to Islam.

3.2. Qualitative

There is however something profoundly unsatisfactory about comparing religions by counting pages of scripture or counting prophets. Religion is not an academic collection of historical texts. Nor is the essence of religion found in a biographical encyclopaedia

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of the lives of prophets. In its essence, religion is about the nature of God, man's relationship with God and the path to salvation.

Accordingly, to compare religions you need to see what they say about these fundamental issues. Since each religion actually has a spread of religious views, before making any comparisons you must first decide what is to be taken as the theological view of each religion.

Christianity - I have used the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, the largest Christian denomination, and used the following website: [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) This appears to be an official Vatican website, so one cannot get more authoritative!

Judaism - I have used Orthodox Judaism as set out on the following website: [My Jewish Learning: Doctrine & Dogma](#) The page sets out the classic summary of the faith by Maimonides.

Islam - I have used the following website: [Islam 101: Theology: Islamic Faith: Fundamental Articles of Faith](#) Islam is the opposite of Roman Catholicism; there is no organisational source of authority you can go to, only scholars of greater or lesser levels of learning. While I cannot vouch for the origins of this site, the Fundamental Articles of Faith as written there are consistent with my own beliefs which is the reason I have linked to that site.

4. Under this qualitative approach, what do the religions have to say?

4.1. The nature of God

Both Judaism and Islam are crystal clear. God has always existed, always will exist and is unique; there is only one God.

The Roman Catholic Church has a different view. It talks of God the Father and also of God the Son referring to Jesus Christ whom it regards as both a man and as divine at the same time. Furthermore, it speaks of God the Holy Spirit. All three are regarded as having pre-existed for all time.

While it is not conceptually impossible for God to be one and three at the same time (after all experimental physics shows that light has the characteristics of both particles and waves simultaneously) it is clear that the nature of God as understood by Roman Catholicism is fundamentally different from the strict monotheism of both Judaism and Islam. While Christians call themselves monotheists, Jews and Muslims do not regard Christians as being monotheistic in the same manner as Jews and Muslims.

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4.2. The nature of man

Islam is quite clear that man is born in a state of innocence although may although he may commit evil deeds later on. This also appears to be the position of Judaism in that I am not aware of any Jewish concept of original sin.

Roman Catholicism is fundamentally different; man is born with original sin and from birth is in need of redemption.

4.3. The path to salvation

Islam and Judaism require man to acknowledge God, to worship him, and to live his life in accordance with God's law, doing good deeds and avoiding evil deeds. If you do this to a sufficient extent then God will grant you a place in Paradise.

While agreeing that Christians should live a good life instead of doing evil, Roman Catholicism regards the doctrine of salvation through good deeds alone as a heresy. Instead, [man's salvation](#) comes solely from the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

4.4. Religious practice

Religious belief leads to religious practice. Looking at the practices of the religions, Islam and Judaism have more in common with each other than either does with Christianity.

Some examples are:

- Both Islam and Judaism regard circumcision of male babies as religiously mandated. Christianity does not, even though circumcision occurs frequently amongst some Christian societies, eg with American men.
- Both Islam and Judaism have strict dietary laws prescribing what is halal or kosher respectively. These laws are very similar although not identical. Conversely Christianity (in this paper exemplified by the Roman Catholic Church) regards religiously mandated dietary laws as having been abolished during the period covered by the Book of Acts in the Bible.
- Islam and Judaism have similar rituals regarding death, prescribing rapid burial in the ground and objecting to post-mortems. Conversely Christianity permits cremation.

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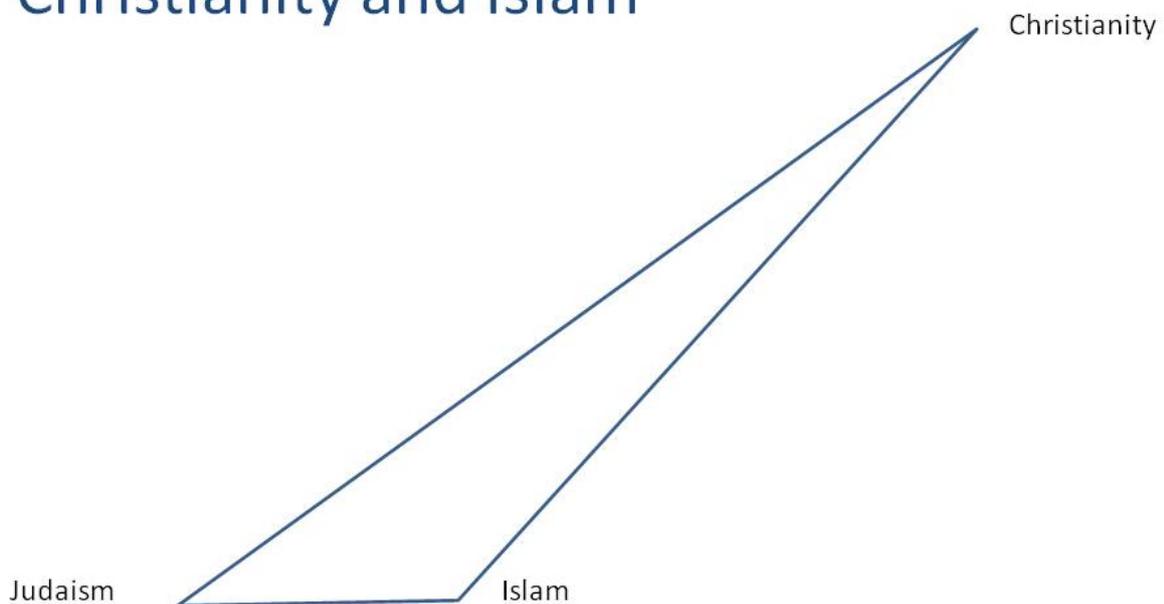
5. Summary

The above qualitative issues go to the heart of each religion. From these, Islam and Judaism are very close to each other. As a Muslim, I experience this in practice when I attend a synagogue as an invited guest or for a funeral - the prayer book gives me almost no theological difficulties.

When I attend a Christian service, I'm happy to sing along with most of the hymns but at times fall silent because as a Muslim I fundamentally disagree with the theology in some of the hymns and prayers.

The relationship between the three religions can in my view be represented by a triangle. Islam and Judaism are very close to each other. Christianity is a long way from both, but I regard it as marginally nearer to Islam than it is to Judaism since Judaism ignores Jesus. Conversely the Quran gives him a great deal of coverage, even though Muslims and Christians have fundamental theological divergences about the nature of Jesus.

Relative closeness of Judaism, Christianity and Islam



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6. Does any of this matter?

In my view these issues are of crucial importance. Many talk about Europe as a Christian continent or talk about Western civilisation (meaning Europe and North America) as Christian or as Judeo-Christian; using the words Judeo-Christian expressly excludes Islam as something foreign.

The reality is that the civilisation of Europe and North America owes an enormous debt to pagans such as the ancient Greeks and Romans as well as to all three of the Abrahamic faiths. Many beliefs that are referred to incorrectly as Judeo-Christian (for example belief in religious freedom, rationality and tolerance) are as deeply rooted in Islam as they are in Christianity, if not more deeply. Contrast for example Christianity's 2,000-year record of religious intolerance and persecution with the religious tolerance shown by Muslims throughout most of their history.

In particular, understanding the closeness of Judaism and Islam can help us overcome many of the divisions that we see in the world today arising from a territorial land dispute over Palestine.

Mohammed Amin