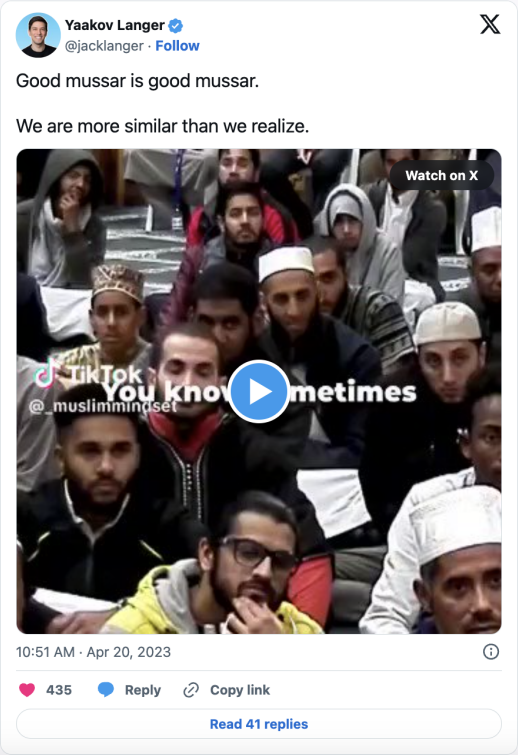
Shlomo Zuckier, 2023

Coproducing Halal, Ribba and Hypocrisy: From the Bible to TikTok



Judaism and Islam have a long and complex history of interaction, tracing back to the very beginnings of Islam itself, and continuing in the present day. Sometimes this history can be illuminated in surprising ways. This case study considers how a tweet can shed light on the history and continuing relevance of the relations between these two religions.

The Ramadhan Sermon

Earlier this year, Yaakov Langer, an Orthodox Jewish influencer, posted a short clip of a Ramadhan sermon, originally posted on TikTok by @_MUSLIMMINDSET, with the following header:

Good mussar is good mussar.

We are more similar than we realize.

> Good mussar is good mussar.
>
> We are more similar than we realize. pic.twitter.com/KFlgOsTWJH
>
> — Yaakov Langer (@jacklanger) April 20, 2023

The text of the video reads:

> You know, sometimes the Muslims are so obsessed with "Is the chicken *halal* or not? Who slaughtered it? Where did it come from? Was the blood drained properly? Let me see the certificate. Let me see the certificate of the certificate. Who signed the certificate? Let me find them! Tell me their shoe size! Tell me everything about them!" And that same guy who is so obsessed with how the chicken was slaughtered is okay with collecting *riba*. The same guy is not making payments, is lying about his taxes, cheating people, not giving his customer his due. That's *haram* too, bro! So if you get your *haram* money and buy *halal* chicken… that's still not *halal* chicken, you understand?

This sermon offers a critique of a particular strain of hypocrisy in religious life among contemporary Muslims. It trains its eye upon those who are overly focused on ritual eating laws, or *halal*, but pay insufficient attention to economic strictures of Islam, such as the prohibition against charging *riba*, or interest, among several other financial violations. The deliverer of this sermon, Nouman Ali Khan of the Bayyinah Institute for Arabic and Qur'anic Studies, argues to his enraptured crowd that this is equally prohibited, that using ill-gotten gains to purchase *halal* chicken is still *haram*, or prohibited.

In drawing attention to this teaching, Langer, who rarely engages other religious traditions on his platform, calls this sermon "good *mussar*," or Jewish ethical teaching, and argues that the quality of this teaching overcomes the inter-religious gap between Judaism and Islam. "We are more similar than we realize."

Coproduction by Tweet

Langer is on to something: this topic in particular highlights deep connections between the Jewish and Islamic traditions, including mutual borrowing going back millennia. This short sermon clip includes a variety of points of similarity and overlap between Jewish and Islamic teachings, and also recalls deep religious themes and long-term sites of interchange and polemic between Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. What insights into the history of Jewish-Islamic co-production can this tweet of a TikTok video offer?

We begin with some of the particular parallels that arise in the sermon.

Dietary Laws

Ritual dietary restrictions play major roles in Judaism and Islam, in the form of Kosher and Halal laws. Both systems prohibit the consumption of various animals, most famously pork. Animals that are Kosher or Halal need to be ritually slaughtered in order to be rendered suitable – a process known as *shehitah* for Jews, and *dhabihah* for Muslims – and both religions prohibit the consumption of blood, as well as other portions of the animal. There are, of course, many differences between the two sets of ritual laws.

Whether the origins of Halal lie in the Kosher laws is somewhat contested in scholarship, despite the many and abiding parallels and the close proximity between the newfound Muslims and their Jewish neighbors who kept Kosher (and some Christian neighbors who also followed ritual dietary laws based on the Bible). In fact, some of the original Halal laws in the Qur'an, while teaching some things that are very similar to Jewish Kosher laws, simultaneously polemicize against Jews and assert that the Halal laws are more lenient and therefore preferable, thus framing the differences in light of Jewish practice (e.g., Q6:145f.). Whatever the nature of the link between Kosher and Halal laws, today Jews and Muslims sometimes fight together against European prohibitions of religious slaughter.

There are longstanding debates in Islamic tradition as to whether or not Jewish slaughter qualifies as *dhabihah* and thus renders meat *halal*. Q 5:5 implies that, at least in theory, "People of the Book" such as Jews and Christians can successfully render meat *halal* by their slaughter. However, there are questions about whether the blessing recited by Jews at the first of a string of successive slaughters qualifies for the requirement of blessing Allah at each act of slaughter. This is why meat rendered under Kosher supervision is accepted by some but not all Muslims.

Khan indicates in his sermon that Muslims often focus on the details of what supervision can be relied upon, depending on who slaughters the animal, the proper draining of blood, and the religious certification that dictates *halal* status. Similar debates prevail in Jewish contexts: some groups will only eat meat slaughtered by a fellow Hasid, there are debates over some blood-draining procedures, and some Jews express differences of opinion about which Kosher supervisions can be relied upon for slaughter. (In the United States, Hebrew National Hot Dogs have a controversial status, while in Israel nearly every Kosher certification label has some group critiquing it as insufficiently rigorous.)

Usury

Prohibitions against usury also appear in both Jewish and Islamic traditions. Tracing back to the Bible at Exod. 22:24, Lev. 25:37 and Deut. 23:20 and to chapter 5 of Tractate Bava Metzia in the Talmud, Jewish tradition clearly prohibits charging interest from other Jews. Such a practice is known as *ribbit*, stemming from the root meaning "to increase." Similarly, the Qur'an at Q2:275-280 decries those who take usury, which is dubbed *riba*, drawing from the same Semitic root and meaning. Christian and various Western legal systems have also incorporated prohibitions against charging usury, as well.

Not only are there significant parallels between these religious traditions in their prohibitions, but each has extensive workarounds and financial "solutions" for religious practitioners who need to function within a credit economy while still following at least the letter of their legal traditions. Historians have written about how, in some cases, Jewish law seems to have adapted creative financial instruments from their Islamic neighbors. Alternatively, other solutions to the challenges posed by this prohibition can involve the utilization of members of another religion to do the moral "dirty work" of providing the necessary financial credit. Jews often served as usurers for Christian communities – and faced violence when markets went south.

The Qur'an itself includes a critique of the ambient Jews for violating their own prohibitions against usury (Q 4:160-61):

> Wherefore for the iniquity of those who are Jews did, we disallow to them the good things which had been made lawful for them and for their hindering many (people) from Allah's way.
>
> And their taking usury though indeed they were forbidden it and their devouring the property of people falsely, and We have prepared for the unbelievers from among them a painful chastisement.

Hypocrisy

Even more than the specific parallels between ritual legal systems in Judaism and Islam that are invoked in this sermon, there is a deeper parallel that runs through the very message of the sermon. This Ramadhan lesson decried the hyper-focus on ritual law when it came alongside an abandonment of the moral and financial practices expected of Muslims. Piety cannot include only rituals oriented towards God when social justice and basic interpersonal morality are neglected.

As it turns out, this teaching has a storied history within the Abrahamic religions.

As early as the Hebrew Bible, prophets have called out a hyper-focus on ritual expressions of faith when it comes at the expense of relating properly to one's neighbors and ensuring social justice. As Amos famously put it (Amos 5:21-24):

21 I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.

23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

24 But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Numerous other biblical prophets offer a similar message. Notably, these approaches are not rejecting ritual sacrifice or other expressions of piety per se; they reject only an undue focus on these practices when they come at the expense of treating one's fellow well. The biblical prophets also critiqued the taking of usury (among other unsavory financial practices); see Ezek. 18:5-20 and 22:12. It is possible that the Qur'an drew its critique of Jewish usury-taking at Q 4:160-61 from these passages. Accounts of Jesus's prophetic teachings in the gospels channel the critique of hyper-ritual practice in light of insufficient moral conduct, as well. These writings label those guilty of this inconsistency as "hypocrites" (ὑποκριταί). Witness, for example, Matthew 23:23:

23 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former."

The Pharisees – seen as the forerunners of the rabbis – are prime targets for this hypocrisy critique, which Christianity later directs at Jews more broadly as continuing the way of their ancestors.

While classical Islamic texts do not generally participate in this particular polemic against hypocrisy (*munafiqun* literature generally focuses on insufficient commitment and disloyalty rather than a hypocritical focus on the wrong sorts of piety), this sermon seems to have adapted that idea. It insists that an observant Muslim not fall prey to a hyper-focus on ritual at the expense of interpersonal righteousness.

Conclusion

Reading this tweet with an eye to historical instances of coproduction is thus exceptionally fruitful. We see here a contemporary Jewish thinker and influencer citing a contemporary Islamic sermon and referring to it as effectively teaching Jewish mussar. The sermon itself participates in both ritual details and an overall message with deep Jewish roots, and touches upon a history of co-production between those religions and Christianity as well. From ritual dietary restrictions to prohibitions against usury and other immoral business practices, Judaism and Islam have parallel structures, with Islam presumably borrowing from Jewish sources, and Jews borrowing back various workarounds and financial implements. Even more deeply, this sermon centers the failing of religious hypocrisy, of focusing on ritual at the expense of social justice. This is a teaching that draws from the Hebrew Bible's prophets, was challenged by Jesus in prophetic mode, and has been adapted here by an Islamic thinker, as well.

From the Bible to TikTok, and with much religious tradition in between, the lens of religious coproduction illuminates the interrelated constructions and deployments of these important religious ideas.

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