



Religious Co-Production and Its Potentials for History and Theology
or
What Theology and History Can Offer Each Other when Thinking Together
about Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

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Theology within a given religious tradition is often pursued with the idea of improving the tradition or at least adapting it to present need. The critical-constructive engagement with the past is then often aimed at unfolding the best a given tradition has to offer, or at purifying it of elements that the theologian considers not being part of the ‘essence’ of their own religion. The guiding paradigm of historical thinking within a specific religious tradition is in many cases development, genealogy, purification, and improvement through continuous engagement with the past.

Modern historical research on religions generally questions such narratives of teleological development, pointing to the diverse and even contradictory nature of the many and varied forms of life and thought within a given religious tradition. Such research has primarily served as an invaluable form of critique vis-à-vis historically formulated claims for the justification of normative theological thinking. In recent decades interest in interactions between Jews, Christians, and Muslims over the course of their entangled histories has provided yet another challenge to traditional narratives of development in which each tradition appears, after some initial “parting of the ways,” to flow through time independently of the others.

But the constructive potentials of historical research for theology have rarely been articulated or pursued by modern academic historians. Even more rarely does anyone—whether academic historian or theologian—ask what potentials the shared and competing history of Judaism, Christianity and Islam can offer contemporary religious thought, not least at a time (modernity and post-modernity) when comprehensive conceptions of salvation history have become questionable within each religious tradition. There have certainly been numerous efforts toward interreligious understanding. But these often manifest a desire either to leave behind a past understood as conflict-laden, or to uncover a less-conflictual past that can be anointed as normative. Both approaches, however well-intentioned, seem to us profoundly a-historical.

We offer here a simultaneously critical and constructive view of what history and theology can mutually offer each other when thinking together about Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as co-produced religions. By co-produced religions we mean that these faiths, in all their sectarian variety, have always formed, reformed, and transformed themselves through interacting with, thinking about and imagining each other, and continue to do so.¹ This enduring co-dependence derives from two basic facts. The first is their shared reservoir and competing canon of prophetic claims, scriptures, and narratives. The second, more often forgotten, is that the historical as a mode of knowledge has itself proven fundamental to each of the three religions not only at their origins, but in every moment of their existence.

Among the few modern academic historians to suggest that the proximity of history and theology could be a fruitful one was the Islamicist Marshall Hodgson, who spoke of “the ‘kerygmatic’ life-orientational traditions – those that call for ultimate commitment on the plane of the historical.”² By this he meant that in these traditions, what happens in a particular moment understood as historical—the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, the crucifixion of Jesus or the conquest of Jerusalem, the Battle of the Ditch or of Karbala, but potentially also every action by an individual—transforms the possibilities for the orientation of life in every future moment, and that every act or event or world image that is produced by or responds to such ultimate commitment will be irreversibly relevant in the ultimate future of the Last Judgement.

Hodgson held that it was the Israelites who had invented this sense of the historical, and that of these three religions in the Middle Ages, it was Islam that developed the strongest sense of the historical. We are skeptical of these specific views, nor do we find helpful the (implicitly Christian) vocabulary of kerygma.³ But we sympathize with his central claim that “the study of history may turn out to be essential in helping us to work through, in this dimension of our

¹ See Katharina Heyden and David Nirenberg, “Co-produced religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam,” *Harvard Theological Review* (2024: forthcoming).

² Marshall Hodgson, “The Historian as Theologian,” transcript of a lecture given at a Wednesday evening seminar on religion in the intellectual life in Chicago, January 18th, 1967: Hodgson, Marshall G. S. Papers, Box 1, Folder 18, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, here p. 2. Hodgson defined the historian as someone who “studies persons’ responses to commitments in cultural traditions,» and the theologian as «studies a particular tradition of commitment to ultimate life orientation (I am using this phrase because it is more convenient even if it may not be intelligible) so as to criticize, in perspective, any individual efforts made to express that tradition; and ultimately so as to refine the tradition of life-orientation itself—increasing self-awareness within that tradition.» (pp. 1-2). Compare pp. 24-25: “The *theologian* studies a particular tradition of commitment to ultimate life-orientation (that is, normally, his own), so as to criticize in broader perspective any individual efforts that are made to express that tradition itself; and so he increases the self-awareness of that tradition.” “The historian studies traditions of cultural commitment generally and so criticizes and refines our awareness of their implications; and so, in this respect, he contributes to the self-awareness not just of one tradition but of all the traditions that he is dealing with; or, collectively, the historians contribute to the self-awareness of all traditions. This is largely a collective work....”

³ Here is how Hodgson in “The Historian as Theologian” describes the ‘kerygmatic mode’: “when, in response to revelatory moment, the environment, particularly historical society as it is and is about to be, is seen as radically other than what it appears, and the individual is challenged to find fresh ways to respond to its reality” (p. 28). On the use of kerygma in the 1960s see Claude H. Thompson, *Theology of the Kerygma; a Study in Primitive Preaching* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 2, who defined it as a situation in which sacral and historical time are conflated and “the past is contemporized.” Hodgson adopts the term in *The Venture of Islam*. He defined it as a piety “focused on history,” and asserted that medieval “Islamic piety reflected a strong historical consciousness that was becoming rare then in non-Muslim traditions.” (vol. 1, 362)

spiritual life, to something more adequate than we have been able to discover so far.”⁴ We would go further: one need not possess a spiritual life or consider oneself a believer to recognize that the study of the past of these three faiths (history) has potential to shape present and future thinking about God in these faiths (theology). At its simplest, our argument is that *nolens volens*, historical research creates constructive theological potentials as well as “de-constructive” critical ones, and that historians and theologians both should cultivate an awareness of those potentials.

Indeed among the things that such cultivation can teach us is that philosophies of history are not independent of theologies, a point we can illustrate through Hodgson himself. He insisted that one of the central attributes of these three religions was a sense of the “irreversibility of one’s acts”, a position he understood as having conquered the world and which he seems to have taken as his own. We would rather understand his sense of the “irreversibility” of history as itself the product of teleological ideas that were co-produced among these three religions. We maintain instead that the relationship between the interpretation of the past and what can be thought in the present and future is better understood as an ever-present possibility of mutual transformation than as a relentlessly directional development. This is precisely why the historian and the theologian are so powerfully related and have much to learn from each other. Every present transforms the past (re-interpretation), and re-interpretation of the past transforms the possibilities of life in every present and future. Many revolutions in these faiths presented themselves as the product of a “better” reading of divine teachings (theology) on historical or philological grounds. And each of these revolutions transformed the future possibilities for both theology and history.

Religious thinkers too, philosophers as well as theologians, have emphasized the constitutive importance of history for theological reflection in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Think, for example, of Wolfhart Pannenberg's theological program "Revelation as history,"⁵ or of such different, even contradictory approaches to the past as those of Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig.⁶ Yet it is precisely this constant re-formation and re-interpretation of the past and the re-evaluation of previous claims to revelation that lead to contradictions within and between these three religious traditions. The many normative claims to represent the rediscovered "true", "original", or even "purified" meaning of revelation in the past not only foster religious diversity and differentiation, but also provoke conflicts within and between Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

For both historians and theologians, in their respective claims to the past, this factual diversity within each and across all these communities provokes the normative question: What is Christianity, what is Islam, what is Judaism?

An example: in his book *What is Islam?*, the late Shahab Ahmed set out to demonstrate “the *prolific scale* of contradiction between the ideas, values, and practices that claim normative affiliation with ‘Islam,’ which poses the demanding problem of how to locate *the coherence of*

⁴ Hodgson, “The Historian as Theologian,” p. 34 (compare p. 3).

⁵ First in 1961: Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Dogmatische Thesen zur Lehre der Offenbarung,” in *Offenbarung als Geschichte. Religionsgeschichte als Programm*, ed. by Wolfhart Pannenberg (Kerygma und Dogma. Beiheft 1, 1961): 91-114.

⁶ See Myriam Bienenstock, *Cohen und Rosenzweig: Ihre Auseinandersetzung mit dem deutschen Idealismus* (Karl Aber Verlag, 2018).

*an internally-contradictory phenomenon.*⁷ Problem posed, he sought to solve it, not by dismissing one pole of a contradiction as either peripheral to Islam or as downright “un-Islamic,” but rather by formulating “a conceptualization of Islam as theoretical object that, by identifying the coherent dynamic of internal contradiction, enables us to comprehend the integrity and identity of the historical and human phenomenon at play.”⁸

Ahmed’s Islam cannot be located in any specific normative content – not law, not the five pillars, not even the Islamic “creed,” or *shahada*. And yet he also insists that “out there in the world beyond the individual Muslim is something that this Muslim recognizes as Islam,” and that the two—individual Muslim and Islam “out there”—are “*co-constitutive*.”⁹

Where then, if not in normative content, does this Islam reside? Ahmed’s answer turns out to be profoundly historical: Islam is the sum of everything that has ever been lived or experienced as Islamic. It is the hugely diverse aggregate of all previous Islamic experiences. It is through this vast archive of Islam past that every possible Islamic engagement with revelation gains meaning in every moment in time, every present and every future. What we call “archive” Ahmed called the “Con-Text” within which the meaning of any possible Islam is produced: “*that whole field or complex or vocabulary of meanings of Revelation that have been produced in the course of human and historical hermeneutical engagement with Revelation, and which are thus already present as Islam*” in any given moment.¹⁰

Thus far Ahmed. We would add that the same is also true for Christianity and Judaism: they too are the sum of everything that has ever been lived or thought or claimed to be Jewish or Christian. What Christianity, Judaism and Islam are is defined by what any Christians, Jews and Muslims have at any point claimed to be (or experienced as) Muslim, Jewish, or Christian. That might already strike some as a radical claim.

And yet we are suggesting something even more radical. The history of these three faiths is a conjoint one, insofar as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have since their beginnings distinguished (and approximated) themselves from (and to) each other by making rival claims to what they understand to be a common prophetic origin and historical past. Across time they have (sometimes) interacted with and (more often) imagined each other, while continuing to produce and transform themselves by thinking about their claims to the past. The entirety of that dynamic and ongoing process we call “co-production.” And it too constitutes an archive, one that has not only made historical hermeneutics a potent instrument of sectarian formation for communities *within* a given tradition, but also a powerful tool in polemic and apologetics *across* them.¹¹

⁷ Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 109.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 102.

¹⁰ Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 356.

¹¹ Despite the huge sectarian variety within the Muslim, Jewish and Christian realms, a shared idea emerges in from the co-produced archive of not only what each of these individual traditions as such – Judaism, Christianity, Islam – might be on its own, but also of their commonalities and interdependencies, even if all attempts to get to the heart of the common ground and express it in one word (such as ‘Abrahamic’, ‘monotheistic’, or ‘scriptural’ religions) have their specific difficulties.

If within Islam, or Judaism, or Christianity, the archive of historical commitments constitutes an inexhaustible archive of possibilities that gives these religions the capacity for constant transformation of both past and present, the same is true across them. The archive of all past historical commitments and imaginings through which these traditions in all their variety have co-produced each other—the vast majority of which have undoubtedly vanished without trace—constitutes an ocean to be explored not only by the historian who seeks to understand how Muslims, Christians, and Jews have thought about or experienced each other in the past, but also by the theologian “co-producing” Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the present and future.

Focusing on that second possibility, we want to ask: Can historical theology take place within the combined archive of the three traditions? What impact could the exploration of the co-produced histories and hermeneutics have on theology within Islam, Christianity, and Judaism? At the very least, awareness of the historical co-production of these faiths should challenge segregated approaches to their histories and their hermeneutics, and suggest that within these three traditions, theological thinking pursued without an awareness of the other two is partial and impoverished.

If it is true that Jews, Christians, and Muslims could scarcely think about God and revelation without also thinking about each other in the past, then this means that even in the present and the future, theology can scarcely be produced within one of these traditions without an imagining of the others. We should want to cultivate an awareness of that imagining. In other words: to think historically within the three religions implies attention not only to the development of one’s own tradition, but also to the permanent entanglement of the three. Within each of the religious traditions, theologians make use *nolens volens* of the shared historical and hermeneutic archive in their thinking about God, the relationship of humans to God, the nature and meaning of revelation, and of the historical.

We would go so far as to say that Jews, Muslims, and Christians cannot understand their own religious tradition without taking into account how it has been shaped by the other two, real or imagined, in the manifold moments of their co-produced history. The many competing and often polemical adaptations and appropriations within and across Judaism, Islam and Christianity can only be understood as such if we become aware of what has been incorporated and transformed into our own religious tradition. And vice versa, what has been adopted and transformed by others may also have provoked repercussions in one’s own tradition. For example: Christian salvation history was very much shaped by the idea that the destruction of temple in Jerusalem by the Romans was a divine punishment for the rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. Since late antiquity, Christian authors used the *Jewish War* of the Jewish historian Josephus to prove their supercessionist claims with that historical event. In the 10th century, a Jewish author in Southern Italy produced the *Sefer Yosippon*, a rewritten translation of the Christianized Josephus in order to regain the Jewish historian for a Jewish historical narrative of God’s story with his people. This work found its way to Muslim and then also Christian communities in Northern Africa in Judeo-Arabic, Arabic, Coptic and Ethiopic languages, providing possibilities for interpretations of world history for each of those communities. In modern times, an English translation of the *Sefer Yosippon* was the first book ever printed in the United States of America, and it remains a bestseller in Israel.¹² In

¹² English text and introduction: Steven B. Bowman, *Sefer Yosippon. A tenth-century History of Ancient Israel* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2023).

appropriating, expropriating and re-appropriating this narrative, all three traditions have used the historical event of the destruction of the temple for their own theological interpretation of religious history and in doing so have repeatedly produced new opportunities for appropriation, expropriation and re-appropriation by the other two. These dynamics are present when Jews, Muslims or Christians think about the theological significance of the Jerusalem Temple today, regardless of whether or not they know the interwoven history of Josephus' work. In this sense, exploring religious co-production serves the formation, re-formation and trans-formation of one's own religious thinking and identity.

If Judaism, Christianity and Islam are understood as co-produced at their core and if co-production is a never-ending dynamic in their shared history, then every moment of the past has the potential to be put to theological work within the three religions, whether in the name of peace and love, or of conflict and violence. 'Gratitude' and 'guilt' are both proximate potentials within this shared archive, and difficult (perhaps impossible) for the historian or the theologian to separate from one another.

This point is important. Enlarging the archives of (inter)religious history does not reduce the possibilities for conflict or contempt within and between the traditions. It may even expand them. Because adherents of the three religions, in all their competing variety, have often used the historical for polemical and apologetic purposes, these archives contain countless instances of opposition, supercessionism, separation, even extermination –many more, perhaps, than moments of appreciation, recognition, toleration, or merely indifference.

But again, this historical co-production is not irreversible. The relationship between the interpretation of the past and possibilities for thought in the present and future contains the possibility that the present might transform the past (re-interpretation), and that the re-interpretation of the past might transform the possibilities of life in the future. If that seems too strong, consider that within these historical faiths every believer has been and is called upon to commit at least tacitly to some sense of how the historical, the lived present, and the eternal relate to each other. Those commitments have vastly varied not only over time, space, and sect, but even within one individual (even the faith of a saint is built upon sands of time and fissures of psyche). The sum of all these past commitments—the vast majority of which have undoubtedly vanished without trace—constitutes an archive of possibilities not only for historians of religion, but for all who seek to relate time and the historical to the divine and eternal. Hence we insist that historical religions contain within themselves, precisely insofar as they are historical, the capacity for constant transformation of both past and present. Within these religions norms are created in the name of the historical, and challenged, even shattered, in the same name. In other words, when as historians we discover new meaning in the past, we may simultaneously be offering a powerful resource (the echo with *resourcement* is deliberate) to future theologians.

This understanding of historical momentum as a co-incidence of the historical, the present, and the eternal resonates with certain theological thinking about revelation. Thinkers in all three religions have formulated the idea that God's eternity cannot be grasped in a single moment of revelation in time, nor as a developing line that stretches from the past over the present to the future, but that eternity must be understood as the fullness of time. According to Franz Rosenzweig this was what Judaism and Christianity shared in their understanding of revelation: «Revelation is in the present, and indeed it is the present par excellence. It looks

back to the past in the moment where it would like to give its present actuality the form of statement, but it sees this past only by shining into it the light of the present; it is only in this backward glance that the past reveals itself to be the foundation and portent of the presently lived experience housed in the I.”¹³ Strikingly, Rosenzweig used (his imagination of) Islam as a negative mirror to form this idea of Judaism and Christianity as historical religions.¹⁴ «Mohammed found and took over the idea of Revelation as one picks up something found, that is to say without producing it from out of its presuppositions. The Koran is a ‘Talmud’ that is not based on a ‘Scripture’; it is a ‘New Testament’ without the ‘Old’. Islam has only Revelation, and not prophecy.”¹⁵ Islam is thus separated from Judaism and Christianity as lacking the sense of the theological potential of history. Our discussion of Hodgson and Ahmed should make clear that we do not agree with this presentation of Islam. In fact we see Rosenzweig’s treatment of Islam as yet another co-production, indeed as an example of a strategy of co-production utilized in all three traditions that we call “the excluded third,” in which similarities between two traditions are stressed in order to define themselves against the third.

We’ve suggested that the existential significance of every specific moment in time, the potential coincidence of the historical and the eternal in every given present, is central to the understanding of revelation in the mainstream of all three religions. From this, we would also derive the answer to the question of what theology can offer history: the awareness that for the Jewish, Muslim and Christian believers whose actions and thoughts historians seeks to explore, each moment in time, as profane and contingent as it may seem from afar, was and is pregnant with potential theological significance in the co-production of the historical, the present and the eternal.

From this we derive specific responsibilities for both historians and theologians.

Historians of religion, regardless of whether they understand themselves as believers, have the responsibility to recognize this emic awareness of the interdependence of past, present and eternal, thereby not only discovering new potentials for theology, but also more adequately understanding the objects of their interest. Theologians have the responsibility to perceive the contextual circumstances and specific possibilities of each realization of revelation in a given moment in time.

¹³ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*. In translation by Barbara E. Galli, Wisconsin 2004, p. 200 = *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag 1921/1988), 207: “Die Offenbarung ist gegenwärtig, ja ist das Gegenwärtigsein selber. Die Vergangenheit, in die auch sie zurücksieht in dem Augenblick, wo sie ihrer Gegenwärtigkeit die Form der Aussage geben möchte, wird ihr nur sichtbar, indem sie mit dem Licht der Gegenwart in sie hineinleuchtet: erst in diesem Blick rückwärts erweist sich die Vergangenheit als Grund und Voraussage des gegenwärtigen, im Ich behausten Erlebens.” Cf. Myriam Bienenstock, “Recalling the Past in Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption*,” *Modern Judaism - A Journal of Jewish Ideas and Experience* 23 (2003): 226–242.

¹⁴ On Rosenzweig’s critique of Islam see Matthias Lehmann, “Franz Rosenzweigs Kritik des Islam im ‘Stern der Erlösung’,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 1 (1993/94): 340-361; Zohar Mihaely, “Rosenzweig’s Critique of Islam and its value today,” *Roczniki Kulturoznawcze* 11 (2022): 5-34.

¹⁵ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, transl. Galli, Wisconsin 2004, 127 = *Der Stern der Erlösung*, 129: “Muhammed hat den Gedanken der Offenbarung vorgefunden und übernommen, wie man ein Vorgefundenes zu erzeugen. Der Koran ist ein ‘Talmud’, ein ‘Neues Testament’, dem kein ‘Altes’ zugrunde liegt. Der Islam hat nur die Offenbarung, nicht die Weissagung.” (Galli has “a find” instead of “something found” for “ein Vorgefundenes”; and “prediction” instead of “prophecy” for “Weissagung”).

Historians can continue to teach theologians that no idea about God developed by necessity, but at best with a particular plausibility that can be explained by contemporary circumstances, power relations, restrictions or extensions of knowledge, etc., while also realizing and emphasizing the constructive potentials of that contingency.

As historians, theologians, believers, or students of the past, we can draw on this co-produced archive to discover or promote “positive” or “peace-promoting” potentials of these religious traditions and put them to constructive theological work in the present. But we will also discover destructive potentials in the archive, and in every one of the traditions. We don’t get to say—if we want to be historical—that one is true to the archive and another is not. But it is our decision, and indeed our responsibility as historians and theologians to decide which of these ambivalent potentials, co-produced in an infinite number of moments in the past, we activate today in historical and theological writing, teaching, preaching, and pastoral care.