

“Teaching the Braided Histories of Judaism, Christianity and Islam”

Charles L. Cohen

Professor of History and Religious Studies, and
Director, Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions,
University of Wisconsin-Madison

presented at

The Tenth Annual Conference
of the
Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue

4115 Mosse Humanities Building
455 North Park Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53706-1405
United States

clcohen@wisc.edu

Moving from the academic study of religion to promoting interfaith understanding is not simple, for the two projects are discrepant enterprises calling for different methodologies and aiming at different goals. The academic project values analyzing a given phenomenon from the standpoint of "neutrality," a perspective designed to minimize the observer's impact on the phenomenon (to the degree that such a condition can ever be achieved) and to appreciate the object being studied as a thing-in-itself. Fortified by the Enlightenment's privileging of reason as the best—perhaps sole—instrument for apprehending knowledge, this technique—we can call it "scientific"—values empiricism, careful observation, critical reflection, and the rigorous testing of falsifiable propositions.¹ In the heat of research one may come to have positive feelings for the subject under glass, but gaining empathy, if it occurs, is considered an accidental byproduct of the process, neither a requisite result nor a prescribed outcome. Nor should one jettison a commitment to reason as the supreme arbiter of knowledge; religion may be a fit object of investigation, and a scholar should both duly acknowledge how its practitioners accept the validity of information bestowed by supernatural sources and report their accounts accurately, but s/he is under no obligation either to accept revelation as itself a fit means for obtaining knowledge or to extend oneself personally towards believers in an effort to establish a positive relationship.²

Interfaith understanding may draw upon academic study, but it constitutes a dissimilar endeavor. No universally agreed-upon definition of the term exists, as far as I know, and the conference organizers have judiciously refrained from proposing one, but I might render it as "the informed capacity to appreciate traditions other than one's own for the purpose of

¹ For a history of historians' thinking about objectivity, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

² Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

establishing mutually respectful relationships with practitioners of those traditions." The requirement that person undertaking interfaith activities be "informed" distinguishes this definition from a sense that one owes other religions equal status for legal or civic reasons, or from assertions that all religions merely quest for the same thing; an informed capacity requires an individual to have grappled with other religions' philosophical, liturgical, and lived dimensions, noting their sociohistorical contexts while appraising their theological claims. To this point, "interfaith understanding" does not differ much from academic knowledge, but my sense is that we in this venue are supposed to think of it as something more, as not only an academic exercise relying on cognitive and analytic skills but also as a program with a desired end in view: having informed oneself about other religions, the individual accepts at least the plausibility of their assertions and, most importantly, accords their believers respect in order to strengthen personal, social and civil bonds with them, even if one ultimately demurs from their premises and theological claims. If what we mean by "interfaith understanding" includes this moral dimension—the betterment of human relationships across the potentially fraught dividing lines of religious commitments—then it departs from what we in schools and colleges devoted to the Enlightenment epistemological tradition ordinarily teach in our classrooms. We may believe passionately in the importance of our disciplines, advocate for particular political or social causes, and even think that we are somehow making our students "better" (as well as "better informed") people, but we ordinarily do not pitch our classes towards improving relationships between religious believers, especially at public schools such as mine that prefer to banish religious discourse to the margins of campus life. In such circumstances, how might one foster interfaith understanding while employing the regnant academic epistemology?

I propose that one way to encourage interfaith understanding within an academic

framework is to essay the study of comparative religions—in this case, the major Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—in a way that cultivates certain habits of mind conducive to students’ gaining an interest in interfaith understanding as defined above. More specifically, I advocate teaching about Judaism, Christianity and Islam by braiding their histories, i.e., by devising a course in which students learn how interrelated and deeply engaged the traditions have been throughout their respective pasts. This tactic departs from the tendency common in introductory-level courses to treat religions as synchronic structures that comprise discrete, bounded entities, and to compare them across carefully demarcated boundaries. The “structuralist” approach does have virtues: it can effectively anatomize a religion, demonstrating how beliefs, liturgies, scriptures, rituals, and festive calendars cohere into a devotional body, as well as attempting comparisons across different religions; a student can readily compare and contrast, say, one cosmology with another. But it does carry the risk of essentializing its subject, minimizing differences within and between religions. Housed within silos, faith traditions appear disembodied, dissociated from the social and historical contexts from which they emerged. Because they are depicted as things in themselves, their interrelationships may appear abstract, products of taxonomic logic rather than organic connection. Students schooled in this fashion will certainly gain information about different religions, but they are unlikely to learn how they might further translate that knowledge into interfaith understanding. Those already disposed to gain interfaith understanding will probably find their interest in that area stimulated, but there is little to urge those not already so inclined to explore realms of interfaith understanding beyond academics as usual.

In contrast, my proposal is unabashedly diachronic. Historical inquiry takes as its brief the charge to explain change over time. Its method may be less effective at conveying structures

and less adept at effecting formal comparisons than synchronic ones, since the contents of the categories being compared—indeed, the categories themselves—are constantly in flux, but its primal inclination to contextualize any subject within contingent circumstances grounds an approach to covering multiple religions that is comparative processually rather than formally, and that invites a treatment of the Abrahamic religions which places them in historical contact. This perspective emphasizes how each of these traditions has come to be what it is in significant measure because of its interactions with the others; it offers, I believe, a way of translating academic knowledge into interfaith understanding.

Thus, rather than regard the Abrahamic religions as separate, albeit similar, entities conventionally catalogued as "monotheistic religions," this curriculum stresses their ongoing interactivity, jumping back and forth between them while charting their unique historical trajectories. It aims to create an intellectual perspective on religion that will predispose students to value interfaith understanding. While one objective is to impart content about the religions, the more primary goal is to establish among students the reflexive habit of thinking across the traditions and, concomitantly, instilling a sense of curiosity about them derived from the realization that one better understands any single tradition (including one's own) by parsing it against another. This habit constitutes a skill that can be developed by classroom training and that does not depend on an individual's prior attitudes towards the promotion of interfaith understanding. An instructor cannot assume that students entering a course on the Abrahamic religions do so for any more reason than increasing their knowledge, or, more cynically, because they need the distributional credits and a convenient class time. I suggest that braiding histories may catch just such students, along with those who may already be positively inclined toward interfaith understanding. In addition, it provides an intellectual framework that facilitates

transforming knowledge about the religions into interfaith understanding. Braiding histories creates a compound narrative that explicates each religion's independent evolution while simultaneously urging students to appreciate their connectedness.

To illustrate how this method might look in operation, I synopsise a course I originated in Fall, 2012, in the Religious Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.³ Covering Judaism, Christianity and Islam from 2000 BCE to 2000 CE, it emphasizes the traditions' constant historical interconnectedness, approaches their pasts critically, and underlines the contention that knowledge of each tradition alone is incomplete without comprehending its relationships to the others, in the process establishing intellectual habits that can cognitively ground interfaith understanding.

*

The course was taught under the existing rubric RS 271, misleadingly catalogued under an older title, "Religion in History and Culture: The West." As noted, the syllabus covers four millennia, from the approximate dates for the earliest stories about Abraham to contemporary events. No one can claim authority over such vast terrain, and, as a specialist in early Anglo-America, I certainly do not; rather, I tell students at the outset that I serve as a guide, not an expert. Throughout, I express my indebtedness to generations of scholars. Since the course is necessarily a survey, I do not make claims based on my own primary research (except for statements about religion in America), though I do try to introduce the latest scholarship and sketch out areas of controversy wherever possible. My greatest act of interpretation, I would hold, inheres in the course's structure rather than in any particular argument. Specialists will no doubt dispute many statements, as will people resistant to critical examination of supernatural

³ The course syllabus is available at: <http://faculty.history.wisc.edu/cohen/271syl.pdf>.

causality and religious truth claims, but the course operates within the standard university epistemology,⁴ and I stand by the practice of braiding histories. The full course includes discussion sections and intensive writing requirements, but here I will exposit only the lectures, which embed the logic and content of braiding.

At the outset I announce the leading proposition: Judaism, Christianity and Islam comprise a family of religious traditions with interlocked histories, an assumption implicitly at odds with the "conflict of civilization" thesis that posits an inevitable conflict between a "West" seen as rooted in the "Judeo-Christian" tradition and "Islam," which, however categorized, is nonetheless irreducibly Other.⁵ To claim that Islam belongs indefatigably to an Abrahamic family of religions and thus in a construct joining it to Judaism and Christianity on equal terms does not constitute an *ipso facto* apology for Islam (or for any of the other religions, for that matter), nor does it blunt the historian's obligation to judge the interactions among them candidly and according to the evidence, even when events took brutal turns. It does, however, insist—as the subsequent content is intended to demonstrate—that the Abrahamic religions are tied together by historical, cultural and theological links recognized in such locutions as "Peoples of the Book" or "the monotheistic faiths." Even more fundamentally, the religions themselves preserve a sense—contested in myriad particulars, to be sure—of cherishing a common revelation centered in their shared veneration for Abraham, discoverer of the One God.

The largest section of the course describes how the three religions constructed their theologies and worldviews both within specific sociopolitical contexts and in contact with each other. Chronology dictates that the opening lectures begin fashioning the earliest braid, Judaism,

⁴ I do tell students that they should feel comfortable in maintaining their own faith claims for themselves, and that the course deals with historical judgments, not theological truth, which a historian can neither establish nor confute.

⁵ The classic statement is Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

whose introduction lays out some necessary content and foundational motifs. Ancient Israel trumpeted its recognition of the One God who rules over the world and demonstrates an enduring interest in creation by constantly intervening in history. The progress of this discovery and its impact are recorded in the Hebrew scriptures, an anthology of stories, myths, poetry, history, liturgy, and religious law. Ancient Judaism took shape within a succession of polities—confederation, unified monarchy, divided kingdoms—and attending to the relationship between religion and state structures becomes one of the course's major interpretive schemes. In the Jewish case, political misfortune, especially the destruction of the two Temples, the scattering of Israel in the Diaspora and its subordination within imperial structures governed by other peoples played an incalculable role in the formation of Judaism and Jewish identity.

The Second Temple period witnessed the instantiation of ritual life to which later Judaism always harked back; it was also, especially in its latter stages, a time of widespread sectarianism. Against scholars who contend for the existence of a normative, "orthodox" Judaism against which all other manifestations are regarded as outliers, I side with those who argue for a diversity of Judaisms, recognizing a majority practice rooted around the Temple Cult surrounded by other movements, "reformist" in one or another sense but all revering the Temple and the Torah, albeit in different, sometimes antagonistic, ways. Asserting this position rehearses the course's "anti-essentialist" credo: there is no single Judaism or, for that matter, a monistic Christianity or Islam. Too, depicting Second Temple Judaism in terms of its sectarian diversity sets the stage for interpreting Christianity as originally a Jewish sect that became a distinct religion. The presentation of this contact also initiates the instillation of habits that can ground interfaith understanding: students learn to look at religions critically (facilitated by my own willingness to critique my own tradition) and to start imagining how their histories might

connect; for example, grounding in the Jewish idea of the Messiah and the ways in which Jews deployed it in different historical circumstances readies them to understand the Christian concept not as an isolate but as the reworking of an existent idea in its own historical context.

Analysis of Second Temple Judaism sets the stage for the emergence of Christianity. That early Christianity combined Greek and Jewish ways of thinking is a truism; for ages, though, controversy has swirled around how to assess each input's impact. I align with the scholarship that, at least for the early centuries, swings towards the importance of the Jewish background, a trend recognizable popularly in the movement of Christian churches (in the United States, at least) to heighten familiarity with the Jewish roots of their worship (the practice of holding Seders, albeit with heavily Christological trappings, is a major example), and academically with the willingness of a few scholars both to engage Jesus and the New Testament in non-apologetic terms and ponder their importance for Jewish tradition.⁶ From this perspective, Jesus emerges from Second Temple sectarian Judaism, though whether he represents a prophetic, revolutionary, apocalyptic, or some other kind of strain is best left to specialists. Noting that the New Testament collects an assortment of early Christian understandings about Jesus touches on the course's themes that the Abrahamic religions are internally multivocal, while underlining both its profound debt to and radical reinterpretation of the Tanakh certifies how Christianity might be apprehended simultaneously as both another Judaism and as a religion *sui generis*. Tracing how it ultimately declared its distinctiveness leads students to problematize how the "Jesus Cult" eventuated in the Christian Church; that trajectory was not teleological but involved a protracted process that, among other things, included abrasive relationships within synagogues between

⁶ Notably Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2006); Amy-Jill Levine, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Bible Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

Jews who recognized Jesus as Christ and those who did not. Examining these issues candidly gives students experience in examining both Jewish and Christian narratives about Christianity's origins while examining their connections. One cannot apprehend Christianity without appreciating the Jewish context from which it arose.

A similar principle holds true for understanding Rabbinic Judaism's development after 70 CE; a full picture necessarily juxtaposes it with the history of the early Church. One could treat them as proceeding along different tracks, dealing first with the emergence of Rabbinic Judaism from the ashes of the Second Temple and then backtracking to deal separately with the growth of the early Church. Parts of those stories must certainly be narrated separately, but there are also opportunities to show Judaism and Christianity evolving contrapuntally. For instance, Tanakh and the New Testament took their canonical forms in the context of the competition between Jews and Christians, which lead them systematically to identify and anthologize their sacred writings in order to distinguish themselves from and assert their claims against their rivals. The compilation of the Talmud can be seen as part of the same process, as can the controversies in the Church over Gnosticism and Marcionism, the majority's rejection of which set the normative Christian view of accepting the Old Testament, which meant retaining a Jewish scriptural substrate. Attention then moves to early Jewish-Christian relations in light of Christianity's achieved separation. Relationships between Jews and Christians were fluid and not uniformly hostile, though relations soured once Christianity—initially at odds with the Roman Empire—became the imperial religion in the fourth century and could muster state power to suppress opinions contrary to whatever passed for orthodoxy. Given the polemics that still mar Jewish-Christian relations, drawing attention to how interactions between the two groups changed markedly once the Church gained the emperor's ear makes the important point that conflict

between believers from different traditions occurs not only (or even primarily) because of intransigent theological stances but also because of political contingencies. Only after having set the early Church in a comparative context does the focus shift exclusively, if momentarily, to internal affairs like ecclesiology, Christology, and the widening splits between the Latin and Greek Churches, notice of which underlines once again the assertion that Christianity has never been monolithic.

Treating Judaism and Christianity interactively facilitates the introduction of Islam and the reasons for including it within the category of the Abrahamic religions. Islam issued in some degree from seventh-century Arabian "primitive monotheism," but Muhammad was nevertheless an undisputed interlocutor with contemporary Jews and Christians. One cannot make sense of the *Isra* and *Miraj* without considering these conversations and their biblical background.

Muhammad's assertion of having prayed—in Jerusalem—with Abraham, Moses and Jesus was hardly made at random; he clearly inserted himself into the prophetic tradition acknowledged by Jews and Christians in order to present himself as its culmination. Recognizing this association can also help students make sense of the Qur'an, whose non-linear presentation is at first glance notoriously difficult for people accustomed to the Bible's narrative strategies to construe.

Comparison with the Jewish prophetic books—themselves theologically charged and chronologically mongrel meditations on history—can make the Qur'an more accessible; although major portions of Tanakh and the New Testament take linear narrative form, the major prophetic books—like the Qur'an—compile asequential inspirations. This comparison also eases entry into the vexed questions of what can and cannot be known about the Qur'an's production. Prior exposure to the composition histories of Tanakh and the New Testament sets into relief Muhammad's claim to have received revelations directly from God, as well as highlighting the

Qur'an's relatively simple transmission history compared to those of its predecessors, which were compiled by multiple authors and redactors. From a historical perspective, the Qur'an owes itself primarily to a single source.

Against the background of how Judaism and Christianity developed in particular political contexts, the evolution of Islam as a sociopolitical phenomenon appears as a series of variations upon a familiar theme. Where Judaism was first fashioned over time in the context of independent polities but elaborated without Jews holding state power, and Christianity began as the religion of a persecuted sect that eventually took hold of the state, Islam from the outset constructed a religious community and a political carapace simultaneously. The Medinans, after all, welcomed Muhammad as a civil arbitrator, and it is a measure of his achievement that he combined in his own person the roles of prophet, law-giver, civil authority, and military chief, a constellation of authority that in the Jewish and Christian contexts was assumed by a number of people widely spaced in time: think, say, Moses, Joshua, and David on the Jewish side, Jesus, Paul, and Constantine on the Christian. That the *umma* was ensconced from the outset in a *polis* was foundational for Islam, for upon Muhammad's death the condition generated a succession problem that was political as well as religious in nature; from this matrix arose the caliphate and the Sunni-Shi'ite split, with incalculable consequences for the Islamic world. Tracing the political backdrop provides an entry into theological conversations and disagreement between adherents of the three faiths, e.g.: Muhammad's decision to pray facing Jerusalem and then, as relations with Medinah's Jews soured, to change the direction towards Mecca; the installation of Al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock on the old Temple Mount—al-Haram al-Sharif—after the Arab armies conquered Jerusalem in 638; and the triumphant proclamation inscribed across the Dome of the Rock—"Say not God is Three"—aimed at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

Delving into these matters touches sore nerves, to be sure, but it does continue the contrapuntal examination of the Abrahamic religions and provides opportunities for debating religious actions through historico-critical methodology without trying to score apologetic points in defense of one's own tradition. It also underlines a salient point: Islam is undeniably different from Judaism and Christianity (as of course they are also from each other), but it is emphatically not alien from them. This stance—critical but unpolemical engagement—is a *sine qua non* for interfaith understanding.

The long excursus on the formations of Judaism, Christianity and Islam culminates in a comparative exegesis of Abrahamic stories. In terms of content, this lecture might fit in a number of places, but by this point in the course students have gained familiarity with the different traditions as well as the habit of comparative analysis and hence should be well-prepared to grapple thoughtfully with how the different traditions handle these materials. The lecture exposts first some of the classic treatments of Abraham and his sons, and then how the traditions parse these stories to define who belongs to their particular religious communities. The comparative exegesis reads the *Akedah* (the Binding of Isaac) and other tales from Genesis over against stories from the *tafsir* and Qur'an along with Paul's allegorical treatment in Galatians, dropping the students quickly into interpretive tangles. In Tanakh, Isaac is the favored son and Jews descend from him; for Christians, Isaac is also the favorite son, but Paul alleges that Abraham's legacy passes through him to the Christians, not Jews; while, for Muslims, Isma'il is the favorite son, with whom Abraham built the Ka'aba and founded Islam. The commonalities are as important to note as the differences that flow from them. The three traditions concur on what Abraham taught: he revealed the existence and nature of the One God, whose being lies above nature and who cannot be represented by substantial forms like idols. But they also agree

that Abraham taught them to separate themselves from unbelievers, and this corollary has pregnant theo-sociological consequences for their collective self-definitions. Jews, Christians and Muslims all regard their communities as growing out of their interpretations of Abraham, but these constructions circumscribe mutually exclusive groups. Departing from their veneration of the figure who taught them to worship God, each tradition constructs its followers as the sole heirs and beneficiaries of Abraham's inheritance.⁷ By this point in the semester, students should have become sufficiently accustomed to the practice of examining braided histories that they have a good chance to engage potentially volatile scriptural material analytically rather than polemically. Perhaps no other unit of course content is better calculated to excite the tensions that anyone wishing to enter into interfaith conversations must confront and resolve, or to instill the habits requisite for interfaith understanding.

Having tracked the evolution of Judaism, Christianity and Islam through their "classic" forms, the course's emphasis shifts from imbricated theological and institutional developments to the historical interactions between adherents to the traditions and the contingent circumstances that shaped them. Two lectures cover medieval events: the militant confrontations of the Crusades, and the frequent, more mundane meetings that took place in mixed religious communities under either Christian or Muslim suzerainty. The lecture on the Crusades rehearses the theories of holy war and *jihad* deployed by each side but emphasizes that contingent political and religious self-interest, not unrelentingly antagonistic worldviews, pushed events. It also underscores the fact that the full range of Crusades was directed not just against Muslims but also against Jews and, for that matter, Christians like the Byzantines and the Albigensians. The following lecture surveys each tradition's experience of constituting a religious minority—the

⁷ See Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity & Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

normative position for Jews during the period, of course, but one that many Christians and Muslims experienced too. Although Muslims tended to treat their *dhimmi*s better than Christians did their minorities, there were numerous counterexamples. The practice of *convivencia* (living together) that sometimes characterized relationships in Al-Andalus figures prominently in the discussion, though I avoid romanticizing it; the intellectual and cultural exchanges between Jews, Christians and Muslims were myriad and important, but they also took place against a backdrop of both the rigorist Islam of the Moroccan dynasties and the inexorable southward advance of the *Reconquista*.⁸ These historical judgments contribute to forming habits of interfaith understanding by emphasizing that the qualities of these encounters, both friendly and hostile, occurred for complex reasons and cannot be reduced to the residual outcomes of implacable ideological hostility. Too, they challenge assertions buttressed either by a selective reading of the historical record or relying on *a priori* theological judgments that one or another tradition enjoys moral superiority by virtue of how its adherents treated those of other religions. The past indicts everyone.

A quick look at mysticism also fortifies habits of interfaith understanding, though in a very different way. Each religion has its own mystical tradition, but collectively they manifest some striking similarities, the result of intellectual borrowing and a common vision of experience that overruns each tradition's theological borders. Appropriated from Greek philosophy, Christian Neoplatonism informed both Jewish and Islamic mysticism, while Kabbalah, the most vivid (and most notorious) Jewish strain arose in the cultural furnaces of Al-Andalus, partaking not simply of earlier Jewish thinking but informing Islamic and Christian currents as well. The Abrahamic religions manifest a distinctly aniconic perspective; even within Christianity, whose

⁸ Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002) highlights the habits of *convivencia* (living together); for a less sanguine view, Richard Fletcher, *Moorish Spain* (London: Phoenix, 1994 ed.), 131-56.

Lord is incarnated in human flesh, mystical speculation denies that God can be reduced to corporeal form. Nevertheless, while characterizing God as the ultimate mystery of existence, Abrahamic mysticisms try to engage the deity intimately by visualizing what cannot be represented and articulating what cannot be said. Each religion's mystical streak displays distinctive emphases in the attributes they give God and the techniques they employ to achieve union with the divine, but they all strive to experience God intimately and, in so doing, transgress their own normative theological traditions, which hold the deity as an object infinitely distant from direct human apprehension. Through the common desire to achieve absorption into the Godhead and its effort to transcend kataphatic theology, mysticism becomes one of the fields in which the Abrahamic religions converge most closely—more so, ironically, than in their shared devotion of Abraham, which, as mentioned, has resulted in their establishing exclusionary communities of believers. Abrahamic mysticism, on the other hand, urges its adherents towards a common dissolution of self in God's being that transcends religious boundaries.

Events over the past half-millennium have shocked the epistemological world that gave rise to the Abrahamic religions as well as the political, social and cultural environments in which they were embedded. The Protestant Reformation challenged the hegemony over scriptural authority claimed by the Roman Catholic hierarchy and placed it in the lap of the informed individual conscience, with ramifications for received authorities in Judaism and Christianity as well. The Enlightenment exalted the individual's capacity to gain knowledge through the use of critical reason, corroding revelation's claim to make meaningful statements about the world at all. The rise of the European nation-state elevated the most primary aspect of personal identity to citizenship, classifying persons on the basis of their accessibility to political participation rather than by their membership in a particular religious or ethnic group. Finally, European

imperialism's march resulted in the colonization of huge swaths of the Americas, Africa and Asia, launching Christianity as a truly global religion and severely contracting the areas under Muslim rule. Alongside the myriad ways in which these developments changed life for Christians, they also catalyzed a variety of reform movements among Muslims and Jews. For Muslims, political decline and apparent moral decay spurred various efforts to recapture political power and revivify their tradition without giving up their core religious values: repristinization movements claiming to restore the primal purity of the seventh-century faith, modernist responses seeking to accommodate Islamic thought and mores to the Enlightenment, and cadres promoting a range of political Islams, some embracing nationalist solutions, others seeking to expel all infidels from *Dar al-Islam* and re-establish the caliphate. For Jews, the Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) and the willingness of European states to countenance them as citizens—to greater or lesser degrees—encouraged a liberal form of the religion that broke with religious law (*halakhah*); other Jews, in turn, reasserted the sanctity of tradition, with the result that contemporary Judaism displays greater sectarian division than at any time since the late Second Temple period. Simultaneously, persistent antisemitism and the inability of European nations to assimilate Jews completely lead to Zionism and the creation of the State of Israel, the first independent Jewish polity since Rome felled the Hasmonean monarchy in 63 BCE. The course ends with a discussion of how Jews and Muslims fit into the complex religious pluralism of the United States and notes recent theological initiatives intending to rethink the exclusivist claims of each tradition.

At every point, the readings and assignments intend to reinforce the habit of always considering one tradition in context of the others. For the first run-through, I used Karen Armstrong's *History of God* as a "textbook" because of its encyclopedic coverage of Jewish,

Christian and Islamic conceptions of God,⁹ but other books might serve as background equally well, notably the works of Francis Peters, in my opinion the "godfather of Abrahamic studies."¹⁰ Peters did the cause of facilitating interfaith understanding in an academic context an incalculable service by publishing a three-volume series of primary sources relating to Judaism, Christianity and Islam up to about 1500.¹¹ Primary sources are essential for teaching history, and a course as comprehensive as the one I just described would be infinitely poorer without the rich array of scriptural passages, chronicles, debates, letters, diaries, and other texts that Peters has made available in English. Divided into sections dealing with, for example, the origins of Jewish covenantalism, the life and teachings of Jesus and of Muhammad, the establishment of clerical orders, or mysticism, the selections document central theological, political, social and institutional aspects of the relationships between the Abrahamic religions. Even more noteworthy than these choices, however, is Peters' deliberate insertion of material from all of the traditions within each section, which forces students to read items from each of the traditions in context of the others on every subject. Thus, even the very first section of Volume One, which covers Ancient Israel and thus in a strict chronological rendering could have no documents contemporary with the Jewish sources, includes later Christian and Muslim. Week to week, students read what Jews, Christians and Muslims thought about their own traditions and about each other's. I cannot imagine a better sourcebook for cultivating the intellectual habits that can

⁹ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994 ed.). For a recent scholarly treatment of anthropomorphism within the traditions, see Zulfikar Ali Shah, *Anthropomorphic Depictions of God: The Concept of God in Judaic, Christian and Islamic Traditions: Representing the Unrepresentable* (London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2012).

¹⁰ F. E. Peters, *The Monotheists: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conflict and Competition*, vol. 1: *The Peoples of God* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); idem, *The Voice, The Word, The Book: The Sacred Scripture of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); idem, *The Children of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, Islam*, new ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004)

¹¹ F. E. Peters, *Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: The Classical Texts and Their Interpretation*, 3 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

ground interfaith understanding than Peters' volumes.

*

This paper has hypothesized that teaching the braided histories of Judaism, Christianity and Islam will create academic habits of mind that can conduce to interfaith understanding, which I have defined cognitively and morally as "the informed capacity to appreciate traditions other than one's own for the purpose of establishing mutually respectful relationships with practitioners of those traditions." The proposition is testable, though I have not had the opportunity to collect any experimental data. Anecdotal evidence is encouraging: students did like the course, and the evaluations were quite positive (4.58 on a 5.0 scale). Moreover, the work they submitted as the semester wore on displayed an increasing capacity to relate the traditions to each other in intellectually sophisticated ways. Nevertheless, confirmation of the hypothesis will have to await empirical proof. That said, I want to conclude by affirming that the course provides a means within academia for laying a groundwork for interfaith understanding. The approach developed above aims to teach students the habit of always situating their knowledge of one tradition within the context of what they might know about the others. Ideally, mention of some aspect of one tradition should, in students so trained, activate the inclination to study the topic at hand across the Abrahamic religions critically but non-judgmentally. At minimum, the class teaches the history of Judaism, Christianity and Islam without designating any of the traditions as the Other—an approach that should encourage a mindset eager to pursue interfaith understanding. More maximally, if I am right, this habit might prove an effective ground for transforming academic inquiry into the capacity for establishing respectful relationships with members of other religions.