

Why I Am Neither Jew Nor Muslim

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It is often said that there are only three truly monotheistic religions; Judaism, Islam and Christianity. However, if you have read my *Refutation of Christianity* then you will know that according to my understanding Christianity is not a truly monotheistic religion and so there are to my certain knowledge only two truly monotheistic religions. Having been born into Christianity, and raised and educated in it, I needed to convert to either Judaism or Islam if I was to have the experience of sharing my faith, and so I considered both.

First to Judaism, I will begin by saying that I love the Jewish Bible, some books more than others, and I look forward to reading some part of it every day for the rest of my life. It is beautiful, rich, diverse, moving, fascinating and profound and is a magnificent credit to Jews and their ancestors. It is everything that I want reading material to be. However, the Jewish Bible is also where Judaism's problem lies, and it is not a small problem. It is a very big problem indeed.

That problem is that in numerous places in the Jewish Bible you will find examples of God's actions in history and specifically His active involvement in Israelite and subsequently Jewish affairs. This is an important feature of the latter four books of the Torah and of the prophetic books but is also to be found in other books of the Bible such as Psalms, Lamentations and II Chronicles. Because of this I believe it is true to say that belief in God's active involvement in Jewish affairs is absolutely integral to the Jewish religion and to being a Jew. Indeed, it is explicit in the covenant that Jews allegedly have with Yahweh that if they obey His commandments and worship none but Him then Yahweh will in turn actively look after them.

In biblical times this belief in Yahweh's stewardship of Jews was sorely tested with the destruction of Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple in 586 BCE and the death or exile of the great majority of the population of Judah. However, the prophets of the time insisted that this disaster was brought about by God as punishment for pagan practices, which were apparently rife in Judah, Jerusalem and even the Temple. Because of this there developed among Jews an acceptable rationale for what had befallen them, and so Judaism survived the disaster of 586 BCE.

Move the calendar forward some 2,500 years and Jews suffer another disaster, this time at the hands of the Nazis. The broad outline of what happened in the Holocaust is known to every well-educated person and so I will not repeat it here. However, on this occasion there was no widespread pagan practice among the Jews of Germany and Eastern Europe. Indeed, the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe were the global standard bearers for Jewish practice, Jewish education and Jewish scholarship. There was simply no way to explain why Yahweh would inflict this cataclysm upon Eastern European Jews, unless of course you are an Orthodox Jew and allege that Yahweh was angry because of the secularism of many European Jews and so He had six million of them murdered! With a god like that on your side, who needs enemies? Let us just say that there was no way for the majority of Jews to reconcile themselves to this catastrophe, and despite the best efforts of their thinkers and rabbis this remains the case down to the present day.

The obvious conclusion that any right-thinking person will reach after the Holocaust is that God does not intervene in Jewish affairs and that the prophets were wrong to insist that He does, but such divine intervention was not only promulgated by the prophets; it was a fundamental belief of Judaism from the very start. Consider what is among the most important foundational beliefs in Judaism, which is that some 3,200 years ago Yahweh delivered the Israelites from the clutches of Pharaoh in the Exodus from Egypt by parting the Sea of Reeds, having already inflicted ten plagues on the Egyptians that culminated in the killing of all first-born Egyptians. What is Judaism without this belief? What is Judaism without Passover? And yet how can Jews believe the story of the Exodus from Egypt after the Holocaust in which Yahweh did nothing to deliver six million Jews from the clutches of the Nazis? And what can be done about it now, with so many mentions of the Exodus in the Jewish Bible? And what about all the other mentions in the Jewish Bible of God intervening in Jewish affairs, such as in the disaster of 586 BCE? What are Jews to think about them and what can be done about them now? It seems to me that Judaism has a very big problem.

As regards the beliefs of the various Jewish denominations, I can confirm that both Orthodox and Conservative Judaism do espouse belief in divine intervention in Jewish affairs and that Reconstructionist Judaism does not. As for Reform Judaism, I have thus far been unable to establish to my satisfaction what is their position on this issue but I have found the story of the Exodus without any caveat on a Reform Judaism website and so I must assume that they officially accept it as true and hence that they do espouse belief in divine intervention in Jewish affairs.

I really don't know how the average Jew feels about this issue today or if they think about it at all anymore. However, from what I have read on the subject, the Holocaust has historically caused much disquiet among believing Jews, prompting many to question the fundamentals of their religious beliefs, some to abandon their religion altogether and some to even question the existence of a Personal God. As for me, I firmly believe that God does not intervene in Jewish or indeed any human affairs because I believe that our affairs are our jobs in life to deal with as best we can to the end that our souls may grow with the effort we put in before we return to God. If God were to look after our difficult affairs, then what would be left for us to look after and then how would we grow? So it is that, for this reason, I cannot convert to Judaism.

The next issue that I feel very strongly about and that has contributed to my decision not to convert to Judaism is the prohibition of pronouncing or even writing the name Yahweh and the employment instead of surrogates such as Adonai, The Lord, Hashem or The Eternal, all of which I have come increasingly to dislike. One such surrogate took away substantially from my enjoyment of the Sabbath services and the siddur (prayer book) when I attended the synagogue and another continues to take away substantially from my enjoyment of an otherwise excellent English translation of the Jewish Bible.

There is so little said today about the prohibition of the name Yahweh that one could easily conclude that it must be a thing of little importance. However, that is not the case. To understand why the prohibition of the name is so important and indeed so damaging we need only to ponder its effect. Consider the four surrogates listed above, bearing in mind that Adonai is Hebrew for *Lord* and Hashem is Hebrew for *The Name*. The most important common feature of these surrogates is that they are all impersonal. Consequently, the effect they have when they are used to designate God is to de-emphasize His Personhood. They make God sound like a concept rather than The Perfect Person that He is. Conversely, using the name Yahweh to designate God impresses His Personhood upon both user and listener. When one considers that Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Judaism all espouse the belief that God is Personal, you would imagine that would be a desirable effect.

I pronounce the name Yahweh every day in all of my addresses to God and feel free to speak it and write it to others. In my experience, using the name Yahweh is far more impactful and spiritually satisfying than is the use of any surrogate. I believe this is because using the name Yahweh focuses my mind on Who it is that I am addressing or discussing and ensures

that none of my addresses to God or mentions of Him are ever spoken frivolously or by rote. To sample this experience, I would suggest that every believing Jew write out a psalm that contains multiple uses of one of the surrogates listed above (e.g., Psalm 145) and replace all of the surrogates with the name Yahweh. Then read it out loud and see how it feels, and rest assured that there is no biblical prohibition on using the name Yahweh in this way. All you are doing is returning the psalm to its original, intended form.

I am not sure that anyone knows for sure what was the original point or purpose of the prohibition. I'm sure its advocates today would say that it is out of respect for God or that it is to ensure that we do not use His name in vain. However, I am not being disrespectful to God when I use the name Yahweh and I am not using His name in vain. I am acknowledging His Personhood every time I use it and am impressing His Personal reality upon myself and others. Are today's Jews so disrespectful of God or so likely to take His name in vain that they must be forbidden from uttering His proper name at all? A related phenomenon is evident on Jewish websites where the word God is often written G-d out of respect for God! How does this show respect for God? Surely Jews can be trusted to use the name Yahweh and the word God with proper respect for God.

I have no doubt that it is Yahweh's will that His proper name should be used freely and in perpetuity, as we are commanded to do in Exodus 3:15 and as evidenced by the fact that the name Yahweh is written 6,828 times in the Hebrew Bible. I also feel quite certain that Moses would never have sanctioned the prohibition of the name Yahweh and that he would be absolutely baffled to learn that such a prohibition has been an established feature of Judaism for more than 2,300 years, which is by far the greater part of the history of Judaism. So for this reason too, I cannot convert to Judaism.

Next, a selection of issues that I have with the Jewish Bible and hence with Judaism. To begin with, I do not believe that God parted the Sea of Reeds or the River Jordan. I do not believe that the theophany at Sinai ever happened or that the written and oral Torah was given to Moses by God at Sinai in the way that traditional Judaism alleges. Nor do I believe that Moses was given detailed instructions by God on how to construct a Tabernacle or that the Tabernacle was constructed at Sinai. On this last point I would simply ask, why go to all the trouble over a period of eight months to construct a portable Tabernacle when the anticipated journey to the Promised Land was a matter of eleven days (see Deuteronomy 1:2)? I do not believe that God conversed at length with Joshua and Samuel and with all and sundry in Judges

or that He gave tactical directions to David before a battle with the Philistines. Nor do I believe that Joshua made the sun stand still for a day. Most importantly, I do not believe that God conversed at length with Moses, simply because such things do not happen. I am willing to describe the words of Exodus 3:14a as revelation to distinguish them from ordinary inspiration and even more so from reason, but I don't know what the nature of this revelation was. I do not believe that it was a voice coming out of a burning bush. I could go on for some time in this vein but I think I have made my point, which is that I do not believe the supernatural content of the Jewish Bible. I don't know how many Jews can put their hand on their heart and say that they do believe all or indeed any of it but I do not. So for this reason too, I cannot convert to Judaism.

In addition to all of this, none of the denominations of Judaism has yet declared their acceptance of what I have written in relation to the meaning of the name in Exodus 3:14 or to the implications of that meaning, and so they and I are at odds over these very important understandings. And finally, I find the Talmud tedious, and so this second tier of Jewish scripture does not incline me to convert. All things considered, therefore, I have decided that I will not convert to Judaism.

So, what about Islam, and firstly its foremost feature; the Qur'an? I must say at the outset that I was completely willing to love the Qur'an when I set about reading it carefully and thoroughly for the first time. Even if it did not prompt me to convert, I had hoped that it would at least be a second monotheistic scripture that I could happily occupy myself with whenever I was not reading the Jewish Bible. Unfortunately, that has not turned out to be the case for the reasons stated below.

However, to begin with, and in relation to what is written above, I can say that there is very little mention in the Qur'an of God intervening in human affairs and so that at least does not present a problem to the faithful or to the would-be convert. The only significant mentions of divine intervention in human affairs are in the accounts of a number of peoples who rejected their prophets - some of them home grown - and their messages. These mentions were no doubt prompted by Muhammad's own experience of rejection by the likes of the Quraysh in Mecca and were presumably a way of reassuring his followers that what they were experiencing with their own brethren was to be expected and that it would all work out well in the end, which it did.¹ Muhammad in each case relates what God did to punish these obstinate peoples, but although these punishments are mentioned on numerous occasions they do not collectively

constitute an important Islamic belief and so do not present a problem to the sceptical believer (if there is such a thing in Islam) or to the would-be convert.

The message of the Qur'an is a simple one and can be summed up in the five pillars of Islam. These are: declaring that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is His messenger; saying regular prayers; giving in charity; fasting during Ramadan; and making pilgrimage to Mecca. That there is no god but God and that Muhammad is His messenger are stated on countless occasions in the Qur'an, in one form or another, as are the need for regular prayer and giving in charity. The Qur'an guarantees the faithful that those who accept faith and pray and give in charity and struggle in the cause of Allah will be rewarded with paradise in the afterlife, described in the Qur'an as gardens with rivers and sometimes mansions. Conversely, for those who do not accept faith there is the punishment of hell, which Muhammad describes in some detail but is basically eternal suffering in a fiery abyss. These two, paradise and hell, are the prime motivators to righteousness in Islam. That, in a nutshell, is the message of the Qur'an.

And so to the problems that I have with the Qur'an. Overall, I find it very disjointed and repetitive. It returns to the same assortment of themes again and again and most of the time reads like a bundling together of unrelated ideas and briefly-treated topics. I lose concentration often as Muhammad moves from one theme to another without any obvious continuity or identifiable link. I also do not find very much of the content especially interesting, memorable or profound and none of it very remarkable or unique. Moreover, I often feel like I am reading the same thing over and over again because it all sounds and feels the same, no doubt because it is all from one man and so is all spoken with one voice and reflects the content of one mind. There is none of the richness and diversity of the Jewish Bible, which speaks with many voices and reflects the content of many minds. Overall, therefore, I must say that I find the Qur'an to be a dissatisfying read by comparison with the Jewish Bible and unlike the Jewish Bible I do not look forward to reading the Qur'an never mind yearning to read it as I do the Jewish Bible. If the Qur'an were all that I had to read for the rest of my life, then I would not be a happy man.

Arabic speakers no doubt have a much superior experience of the Qur'an because they can read the original, which I believe is beautiful, and they can listen with understanding to recitations of the Qur'an, which I know can be very beautiful.ⁱⁱ However, these are aesthetic considerations and are of far less importance than the meaning that is being communicated. Mind you, that is not to say that translations of the Qur'an cannot be beautiful because in my

experience they can be (e.g., Abdullah Yusuf Ali's), but that beauty is mainly the aesthetic accomplishment of the translator and is anyway of secondary importance to the meaning being accurately communicated, and whereas I have no doubt that the beauty of the Qur'an cannot be faithfully reproduced in a translation, I am confident that the meaning of the Qur'an can.

Having said all that, there is very little in the Qur'an that I strongly object to. However, speaking as an independent monotheist, I find it highly regrettable that "most" Jews are branded "perverted transgressors" (3:110) and that Jews are repeatedly criticised for what Muhammad evidently believed were their transgressions against him. This more or less guarantees a certain degree of distrust and even hostility in perpetuity between the world's only two monotheistic religions, which is in my opinion highly regrettable and I wish that Muhammad had given these comments a little bit more thought before sealing them in perpetuity in the Qur'an. Nor do I believe that there is any such thing as hell because its existence would contradict God's perfection, but I don't object to anyone else believing it and of course many others do.ⁱⁱⁱ I would say that this should be a minor point of disagreement were it not for the fact that Muhammad mentions it on many occasions and so he was clearly convinced of it and it was clearly important to him. However, I get the impression that Muhammad was not a man who was greatly given to theological reflection. Witness for example his repeated endorsement of the Christian Gospels, which in common with everything else in Christianity are not monotheistic, and the fact that he does not even mention Exodus 3:14 or its contents in the whole of the Qur'an.

I do, mind you, take issue with the many narratives that are taken from the Jewish Bible, Talmud and Midrash, presumably to make his surahs seem more authoritative and interesting. Mostly the stories are not as related in any of these sources and sometimes they are blended, as in the story of Joseph (4:2 and p.52 of the Book of Legends by Bialik and Rawnitzki). I have no objection to Muhammad making use of this material in principle but they cannot be divinely revealed because God would not have made these numerous mistakes. And why use Midrashic material at all. Why not just go with the much more widely authoritative Bible stories. Examples of narratives taken from these sources include the following:

1. The story of Noah is related numerous times though not faithfully to the biblical original.

2. The story of Moses at the Burning Bush is related numerous times in the Quran though not faithfully to the biblical original and always missing the main point of that encounter, which was the revelation of the divine name. (20:9-97)
3. Abraham features on many occasions in the Quran. One such mention is in Surah 6:75 where it is briefly related how Abraham considered worshipping celestial bodies before coming to faith. This is an Aggadah that can be found on page 31:4 of the Book of Legends.
4. Another mention of Abraham is to be found in Surah 21:51-70, this one in the account of how he smashed the ancestral pagan idols and is then rescued by God from being burnt in a fire by his angry kinsmen. This is part of a much longer Aggadah that can be found on page 32:8 of the Book of Legends.
5. Next is a story about Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, which is related in Surah 27:20-44. The giveaway features are the mention of the Hoopoe bird and the Queen lifting her dress because she thought that a glass floor was water. This is part of a much longer Aggadah that can be found on page 127:119 of the Book of Legends.
6. In surah 28:6-8 Haman is identified as one of Pharaoh's associates. Haman is actually the archetypal anti-Jewish villain who is one of the main characters in the Book of Esther and has nothing to do with any Pharaoh never mind the Pharaoh at the time of Moses.
7. In surah 28:9 it is related that Pharaoh's wife rescues Moses from the bulrushes whereas according to the Bible it was Pharaoh's daughter (Exodus 2:5).
8. And finally, one example from the New Testament. Muhammad mixes up the stories of Mary and Elizabeth. He says that Zachariah was the husband of Mary whereas he was actually the husband of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. (Surah 19 section 1-2)

Now, you may say that Muhammad was only making a point to his brethren and that he wasn't trying to be accurate, but he claimed that his Qur'an is a message to all men and that it was bestowed upon him by God (27:6), so you'd think he would have made more of an effort with this material.

I also take issue with the passages in the Quran in which God is allegedly commanding Muhammad's followers not to overstay their welcome in his home and not to "annoy" him (33:53-57). Surely that would have been something that Muhammad could have taken care of by himself, like most other men. Moreover, verse 33:53 oddly reads that "Those

who annoy Allah and His messenger – Allah has cursed them in this world and in the hereafter, and has prepared for them a humiliating punishment.” Was annoying Muhammad really punishable by God in the hereafter? And does annoying any man really annoy God? I don’t believe so.

I have also read many of the Hadith and have found that I am not interested in them and so this second tier of Islamic scripture would not incline me to convert to Islam.^{iv}

So overall I am bound to say that I find the Qur’an disjointed, repetitive, samey and lacking in interesting content and that it consequently does not hold my interest; I also find various contents of the Qur’an mildly to moderately off-putting; and I find the Hadith uninteresting. There is also simply no comparison between the Qur’an and the Jewish Bible. Of those books in the Jewish Bible that I love or even only greatly appreciate, I would not trade a single one for the entire Qur’an, and there would never come a time when I would choose to read the Qur’an over the Jewish Bible, which is not ideal for one who is considering conversion to Islam. To add to this, I find that aside from the Qur’an and its commentaries, there is in Islam very little of interest to read, by contrast to the richness of Jewish writing, and I believe it is an understatement to say that in Islam original and critical religious and theological thinking and writing are not encouraged, which rules out my interests outside of the Jewish Bible. I have therefore decided not to convert to Islam.

There is one final point that I feel bound to mention, and that is that we can legitimately judge a religion by the societies that it spawns. So I ask you this: which one of you would want your daughters to grow up as Muslims in an Islamic society? I know that I would not. For this reason alone I would not convert to Islam, because to do so would have the effect of bringing closer yet another more or less misogynistic Islamic society.

That concludes my thoughts on converting to Judaism and Islam. I must say that I was disappointed that neither of them proved to be acceptable to me because I would very much like to have the experience of sharing my faith and they were until now the only religions that could theoretically offer me that experience. However, that situation is now changing, as there is in my opinion a clear need for a third truly monotheistic religion, one that can answer the needs of the many people who are looking for a simple, beautiful, rationally compelling and spiritually satisfying understanding of God and His creation in their religion, not all of which attributes are to be readily found in Judaism or Islam. For more on this, please read *Rational*

Monotheism – A New Monotheistic Religion on www.exodus-314.com and visit my Facebook or Instagram page where I introduce a new truly monotheistic religion; Rational Monotheism.

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Endnotes

ⁱ The various peoples mentioned and their respective prophets include Lot with the not-identified people of Sodom and Gomorrah and Moses with Pharaoh and his courtiers. Lot was of course not a prophet and the Bible does not mention any efforts on his part to convert anyone to belief in Yahweh, and Moses was not trying to convert Pharaoh and His courtiers to belief in Yahweh. These two were no doubt included to bolster the number of rejected prophets and so make a more compelling point.

ⁱⁱ For example, listen to Saad Al-Ghamdi, Surah #68 Al-Qalam at <https://qurancentral.com/audio/saad-al-ghamdi/>

ⁱⁱⁱ As regards the idea of Hell, I reject the idea that there is eternal suffering for any person after death. All we need to do is cast our minds back to the condition of existence before Creation when God was alone and was perfect in power, love and knowledge. Why would He have created a place of eternal suffering that He knew would come to be occupied by some of His creatures? Would that not contradict His perfect love for His creation and make Him a willing torturer? Would that not imply that God is imperfect? Why not instead believe that the justly condemned person ceases to exist when God withdraws His life from them? Such personal annihilation rather than eternal suffering is compatible with a God who is absolutely perfect and absolutely loving towards His creation, which is why I believe it. For further discussion of this point, see my paper, *The Afterlife*, published on this site.

^{iv} My reading of the Hadith was in Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim.