

REVISITING MONOTHEISM (*TAWHID*) AND JESUS (*ISA*), THE JEW

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PREAMBLE:

Monothism is fundamental to the Semitic traditions representing one of the largest global populations of believers. Belief in One God is strictly adhered to in monotheism and some social anthropologists as well as historians of religion are of the view that the belief in the oneness of God is a high point in the history and development of human beliefs. However, in the history of religious thought and development, one cannot overlook the teaching of the Persian prophet in the person of Zarathustra¹ who preached on the notion of the highest good in *Ahura Mazda* in constant conflict with *Angra Mainyu*². This notion either predates or is juxtaposed with the notion and the nuances behind the Hebrew concept of *Adonai*³ or *Yahweh*⁴. Some scholars say that monotheism is not necessarily a Hebro-Jewish construct exclusively but part of the Indo-Persian religious background, which is identified with the Persian prophet Zarathustra, his historical period his life and work is disputed⁵.

Jesus hails from the stock of Jesse⁶, going back to David, Moses and to Abraham. It is in the patriarch Abraham's tradition that scholars find the common lineage through Isaac and Ishmael who are also part of the monotheistic traditions of the Semitic cultures. Being born into an ordinary

1. There is a separate reference of Zoroastrian view in the main text later. There is no scholarly evidence when he lived. Some scholars still date him in the 7th and 6th century BCE as a near-contemporary of Cyrus the great and Darius.

2. These two concepts are explained later in the main text with a separate footnote.

3. The name of God most often used in the Hebrew Bible is *Yeloim*. *Adonai* literally means 'my Lord'

4. According to Jewish law, Jews are forbidden to say the name of God (YAHWEH). Instead of saying it as it is written, Jews are commanded to replace it with the word *adonai* which means Lord.

5. See. <https://www.history.com/topics/religion/zoroastriaism>

6. In the Old Testament, the father of David. Jesse was the son of *Ohed*, and the grandson of Boaz and Ruth. He was a farmer and sheep breeder in Bethlehem. David was the youngest of Jesse's eight sons. The biblical reference to the (root of Jesse, stump of Jesse or stock of Jesse) in (Is. 11:1), It's one of the Jewish Messianic texts in the book of Isaiah.

Jewish family, going through the rite of circumcision and other customs, Jesus embraces his Jewish religious heritage even though he became increasingly aware of the plight of his people and of a land subjugated by the Roman rule⁷.

Monotheism was not discussed during his time as it was deeply linked to the religio-cultural habitat he was born into whose religious formation was under a rabbinate that was institutionally and historically central in the life of a Jewish family. However, the emperor Augustus was divinized⁸ and

7. The first key text that is worth examining is the story surrounding the birth of Jesus. Luke, the historian, medical doctor-evangelist's birth narrative is perhaps the text that directly makes reference to the Roman Empire. However, Luke's detailed accounts of certain miracles and descriptive illnesses in this narrative are being show that he could have been a physician. Scholars do not agree on this inference. The Caesar, Augustus had issued a decree that the whole world would be counted. This was so that the emperor would be able to tax the people with greater accuracy. Emperor Augustus would have used the money to fund his military, for building expansion projects, and for overall imperial control. Taxation was part of a system designed to maintain the security of *Pax Romana* - Peace of Rome. This systemic taxation made those in Judea and surrounding areas find themselves either as part of the morally compromised, colluding aristocracy, or in poverty. This is the world in which Jesus was born. An illuminating exegesis of Colossians, rooted in solid knowledge of the Old Testament background and the first-century Roman imperial context of the New Testament, is extrapolated by Walsh and Keesmaat for our discussion here. Cf. Brian J. Walsh & Sylvia. C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2004).

8. It has already been established that Caesar Augustus was called the 'son of god' who in the first century, Rome had complete dominion over Israel. In 63 BCE, after much turmoil and civil war within Israel, the Romans invaded and conquered Jerusalem, their holiest city. In order to keep control over the Galilean and Judean people, Julius Caesar and the Senate installed Herod the great as king. It would take Herod three years to finally gain control over the still hostile Jews. He eventually became one of Augustus' favorite military leaders, and was admired by the new emperor. Not only did Herod expand the Temple in Jerusalem to be more grandiose and Hellenistic-Roman in style, but also imposed a sacrifice that the priests would offer on behalf of Rome and the emperor which to a Jewish mind was a complete abomination. Additionally, Herod had whole cities named to give reverence to Caesar as well as imperial temples and fortresses to reinforce Roman control. The great building campaigns were not possible without taxing the peoples of Galilee, Samaria, and Judea greatly; leaving the majority in poverty. Any attempt to oppose the empire was welcomed by the desperate masses. Rebellions were frequent, and Jesus was seen as one such manifestation. His role as an itinerant preacher was in a hostile terrain. It was Herod Antipas the son of the celebrated Herod the great who headed the trial of Jesus. For detailed discussion, See. Christopher Bryan, *Render to Caesar: Jesus, the Early Church, and the Roman Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 25. Also see. John Dominic Crossan, "Roman Imperial Theology," in *The Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of*

celebrated in the empire and any compromise with the belief in one God⁹ in the Jewish territories was unacceptable and religiously repudiated in the Jewish mind.

Jesus was religiously part of this largely traditionalist Jewry and expressed his own displeasure at the rule imposed by the Romans and the harsh experience of occupation, subjugation and shameful taxation of the ordinary people. But his intense critique was primarily internal, self-critical and focused on renewal towards self-transformation, which was fundamental to his core preaching.

He was aware of the political radicalism against the Roman subjugation, evident in the politically motivated activities of the radical Zealots.¹⁰ In fact there was one close associate of Jesus among his twelve, who was sympathetic towards the 'zealot cause'. His acceptance of dissent even among his close companions was loud and clear in his preaching. The sense of containment and his inclusive attitude amid resentment and alienation attracted the multitude to his preaching but it obviously raised alarm in the political elite and the religious orthodoxy. The religious leadership as well as the political elites had a keen eye on the 'new preacher' who had appeared on the streets of Galilee. They wondered whether he might be a new phase of the 'zealot cause' or the Jewish Messianic utopia against Rome.

JESUS THE PREACHER

Faithful Resistance, (ed.), Richard A. Horsley (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

⁹. Jews traditionally do not pronounce the word but instead refer to God as *HaShem*, literally 'the Name'. *Adonai* means, my Lord' -*Kyrios* is the Greek counterpart, indicating the oneness of God. All these subtle meanings are to express the 'complete and absolute transcendence of God' even though the New Testament takes a different perspective in its theological development.

¹⁰. This word refers to members of an ancient Jewish sect aiming at a world Jewish theocracy and resisting the Romans until CE 70. However, now the word is used in English about a person who has very strong opinions about something and tries to convince other people about them.

Jesus' preaching was deeply imbedded in renewal and the freedom to believe, to be authentically human according to the will of the creator whom he believed to be the author of life. His association with his contemporaries and more significantly the marginalized people¹¹ alongside his radical teaching on the 'reign of God' made the authorities suspicious. The political and the religious leadership thought that he might have links with the Zealot movement, which according to them, was opposed to Rome and the emperor. This later became the central accusation for both the political and the religious camps to convict their common enemy on the basis that he 'violated their conduct and life-style and more assertively Rome and the rule of the emperor'. A mutually beneficial project to end a possible rebellion to both the political and the religious orthodoxy was in the making.

The New Testament inferences are clear that Jesus was called rabbi but was more popular as an itinerant teacher. This indicated the public acceptance of his erudition in the Torah (Teaching, also known as the Five Books of Moses), *Nevi'im* (Prophets) and *Ketuvim* (Writings) - hence TaNaKh (*Tenakah*). His understanding of his own Jewishness, innovative knowledge, insight into Jewish folklore, eschatology, Messianism and his cross-cultural competence made him a different kind of a teacher with a different message that was attractive to Jews and non-Jews alike. Hence, his preaching and life style remained controversial and was misunderstood by the religious authorities and other elements of his own society. He remained steadfast in his fundamental commitment to a renewed religious perspective and the practice of the ancient religion of his ancestor, the patriarch Abraham, the other patriarchs, prophets and the messianic movement itself. The fanatical Jewish listeners were focused on Jesus because they wanted to shape their own image of the messiah, an image that Jesus disowned very early in his preaching. People found a lucid

¹¹. There were as per the Gospel(s) and the Acts there are two Greek words used, 1. *Hoi Polloi*, 2. *Laos*. The first refers to the *multitude* that followed this new preacher in Palestine, some of them became his ardent followers and others considered him a good man, listened to him but went back to their own known worlds. The second group, *Laos* refers to people who took his preaching more seriously and opted to his WAY (which is what Christ's preaching was called during the time of Paul) of life.

preacher in Jesus. God was presented to them not as lawmaker but as a loving father (*Abba*)¹², which is described as the 'God experience' of Jesus. His famous prayer was a response to his disciples when they requested him to teach them how to pray¹³ in which his experience was enunciated vividly. It has become a prayer accepted by most Christians globally.

HEBREW *ADONAI* AND *ABBA*

It is historically and even theologically pertinent to explore whether Jesus was a monotheist. To investigate whether the Christian concept of God is in keeping with the monotheism of both Judaism and Islam, the two rival cousins of the Abrahamic stock¹⁴, is an important theological discussion. Judaism, Islam and their schools of thought have had a historical issue that Christian theology misrepresented the version of the monotheistic understanding of God by the interpretation of the concept of Messiah (for Jews) and the doctrine of Trinity (for Muslims and Jews). This is the theological bone of contention among these three traditions and perhaps is the reason why some tend to call them rival cousins. However, it is also a fact that Christians across the theological spectrum would disagree both with Judaism and Islam on the question of the place and the importance of the 'Jesus Event' and the person of himself within all of their catechesis, theology, preaching, liturgy and their modern institutions. The centrality of the risen Christ is the basis of their theology.

I am trying here to visualize some imaginative image of Jesus discussing and debating with 4th and 5th century CE scholars and theologians on the doctrine of God as Trinity and perhaps refusing to sign up to the Nicene Creed.¹⁵ He (*Arius*) might be taking the further step of agreeing with both

¹². Aramaic term to mean 'father', which seems to be the word used by Jesus (*Isa*) whose spoken language was Aramaic. His radical use of the word to address God was very un-Jewish but this was his approach to understand God's nature in his context and imagination.

¹³. See Mt. 6:9-13

¹⁴. This would mean a descendant, branch of the family or stock. The Messianic king was to be of the family of Jesse, the father of David. Paul quotes the Septuagint of Isaiah 11:10 in Romans 15:12. Jesus is a branch or descendant of the family of Jesse, as well as of David. In fact, it is the same stock of Jews, Christians and Muslims.

¹⁵ .*Arius* (250 or 256–336), native a Libyan presbyter and ascetic, and priest in *Baucalis* in Alexandria, Egypt. His teachings about the nature of the Godhead in

Jews and Muslims in later centuries to tell Christians that they have got the issue of monotheism twisted and embark on a more counterpointed understanding of God-self. I also wish to imagine the response of Jesus about him being made the second person of this complicated 'theological soup,' which he perhaps considers as under-developed and ill prepared as an article of faith and practice in history. However, it must be noted that it is not necessary for Jesus to have thought and spoken of himself in the same way as his followers and others thought and spoke about him in later decades after his eventful life and his violent death by crucifixion. This faith-based conviction of life, death and resurrection is affirmed by today's Christians in their savior-figure in the person of Jesus, which became a fully developed doctrine within the Christian theology of salvation (soteriology). It is not a contestable issue for the Christian story because it has been the foundation of the faith of Christians throughout the centuries and without this core Kerygma¹⁶ the Christian could fall apart.

But the question as to whether Jesus was a monotheist remains most intriguing and worthy of investigation. His Jewish credentials remain impeccable but introduce a new understanding of God and the view that the life of love was over and above the obligation to the law because God's magnanimity transcends all law. This is what Jesus preached, cherished and promoted as the reign of God.

This fundamental perspective in the life of Jesus is what sometimes made him a *persona non grata* (unacceptable) to the religious orthodoxy of his time and a political threat to the regime in power. He withstood both at the cost of his life because he dared to say what he did and put into practice

Christianity, Oneness of God emphasized God's uniqueness and Christ's subordination under the Father, and the Arian opposition to what would become the dominant Christology made him a primary topic of the first Council of Nicaea, which was convened by Emperor Constantine the great in 325.

¹⁶ *Kerygma*, (Gk. *kerugma*) meaning to preach or proclaim. See also (Luke 4:18-19, Romans 10:14, Matthew 3:1). The term is frequently used by 'kerygmatic' theologians like Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Barth to describe the act of preaching that calls for an existential faith in the meaning of Jesus.

what he preached (*yathavadi thathakari, thathavadi yathakari*/Pali equivalent in Buddhist scriptures).

For Christians, the end of life was not the death of their master because he rose from the dead so that others too may live. This witness was bold because Jesus believed that God always cherished life. Through Jesus, the God of life reaffirmed the supremacy of God over creation because the political and religious men could only put men and women to death. This became the Christian kerygma (proclamation of the Gospel/*injil*).

JESUS, SHEMA AND SHAHADA

The Gospels are clear about the monotheistic inclinations of Jesus as recorded by the Evangelists, especially the Hebrew-Jewish Shema (faith declaration/*Shahada*) on which Jesus often based his teaching, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength". Interestingly, according to the Evangelists, the 'Jesus formula' also includes the phrase from the Leviticus (19.18) "you shall love your neighbour as yourself" which is arguably central to his teaching but not reducible to the love ethic alone. For Jesus his Jewish Shema was normative for an orientation of life while the second command for him was evidently praxis and a touchstone for ethical behavior towards another. The two commands go together, the second is founded on the first, and the first is practiced in the second. Jesus reprimands Satan (in the synoptic Gospels) in the temptation narrative¹⁷ by saying that one should worship only "the Lord your God and serve only him". It indicates an unreserved monotheism in his pedagogy and orientation. No compromise is made on the question of monotheism. Jesus shows his Jewish characteristic and rejects Satan's proposition for deviant conduct. Satan, the tempter, is perplexed about Jesus' resilience and faith

¹⁷ . The synoptic Gospels (Mt. 4:1-11, Lk. 4:1-13) have the longest description while (Mk. 1:12-13) has just one reference to the story, because his concern about his protagonist, Jesus as a someone journeying from Galilee to Jerusalem with severe confrontations, witnessing to his option in life as man of God with an uncompromising monotheistic (*tawhid*) agenda.

in one God (*tawhid*) despite the lucrative power on offer with craving and indulgence (*tanha & abhramana*: Buddhist view). Jesus refuses the agenda of Satan, evil as it deviated from the Jewish heritage and *Shema/Shahada*.

There is another incident in the Gospel according to Mark (10:7-18), where one reads about Jesus' uninhibited rejection of a title bestowed on him. When he was addressed as "Good teacher", he seemed annoyed, "why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone". Jesus' argument is clear in both these incidents that for him God alone is worthy of worship and is the pinnacle of goodness. To make a shift in his faith (at the request of 'populism' in the mythic temptation narrative and the 'good teacher' title) would be to undermine the very core of his belief system, which he had inherited as a religious Jew. He did not desire to share the ineffability of Yahweh - the ultimate Goodness and the otherness of God is not and cannot be shared. Hence, he refused to comply with the view of a 'good teacher' ascribed to him.

MONOTHEISM (*TAWHID*) AND PROPHET ZARATHUSTRA

The centrality of God is a unique Jewish influence on the early Christian communities and also on Islam as it emerged out of the Arabian Peninsula centuries later. There are also scholars (Ninian Smart, Frank Reynolds and others) who argue that prior to the Hebrew-Judaic monotheism, the teaching of Zarathustra of Persia (as I referred in the preamble) proclaimed *Ahura Mazda*, the personification of Goodness in constant battle with *Angra Mainyu*, the manifestation of evil or the destructive spirit. It would be instructive for scholarship on monotheism to give some serious thought to the link between the rise of monotheistic faith and its theological development in Zoroastrianism. I am compelled to argue that all three Abrahamic traditions historically are driven back to Zoroastrian thought for their understanding of God as the highest good, the Victor over evil, even though each of the three faiths have revised and systematized their own understanding according to their own theological moorings. To reduce the theological development of monotheism to just the three Abrahamic traditions would undermine the rich religious heritage of humanity and

would limit biblical history to the hegemony of institutional interpretation. Monotheism does not belong solely to any single tradition but is an expression of the broad religious pursuit of humanity as legitimately articulated through specific religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). This particularity of the monotheistic understanding of the God-self might not fully and definitively absorb the universality of the 'Goodness of God'.

Another significant point is the response of Jesus when his disciples requested him to teach them to pray. The evangelists, Matthew and Luke tell us vividly about Jesus' Jewish liturgical orientation so the teaching is placed in a liturgical setting. It is evident that such a formula has a catechetical value expressed through liturgical needs. This surely was the form of worship adopted by the early Christians, especially the Diaspora communities founded by Paul and other elders. Jesus refers in his teaching about prayer to the 'Wholly Other' (Rudolf Otto) as his father (Abba, in Aramaic, endearing words like *Appa*, *Appachchi* or *Thaththa*, as used in Sri Lankan homes, and *abbu*, *walid* in Urdu and Hindi speaking homes) indicate a distinct relationship between a parent and a child. This could refer to a position of equal dignity but the reference to a shared transcendence is most unlikely in Jewish theological terms. The child's (son or daughter) equal dignity could be according to resemblance, qualities, or mannerisms with the child's father, but the father could not be equated with his child. This is both the Jewish and Islamic understanding of God.

Let 'God be God' is a Judeo-Islamic response¹⁸ to this poignant debate and in fact closer to the monotheism of Jesus than appears in the liturgy of Christians since Chalcedon. In all liturgy and worship and personal prayer the devotees or the worshippers take all theology and jurisdiction to their desired devotional plateau where only God would be the credible

¹⁸. It also has Calvinist (John) theological moorings, which Karl Barth, a protestant theologian himself rediscovered in his reading of Calvin while he was a pastor in Geneva. Cf. <https://hendricksonpublishers.blog/2017/05/10/letting-god-be-god-karl-barths-journey-with-john-calvin/> Here Barth goes into extensive discussion on the unparalleled, uncompromising, non-sharable otherness of 'Godhood' - Let God be God. Retrieved 12/07/2019.

respondent and the witness. All theology, jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and even the law itself are at the service of this encounter or perhaps made redundant before God and the devotee. The primacy of religious experience over religiously demarcated structures is the core of the practice of a devotee (*bhaktah/Skt.*).

LET GOD BE GOD

Jewish monotheism has not been compromised at least in the New Testament writings except in certain Pauline expressions in some epistles. Jesus makes no mistake in teaching his fundamental-faith-principle to his disciples. His first salutation reference in the popular Lord's Prayer is "hallowed be your name" - strikes the code of holiness according to rabbinic stipulations. That which belongs to God alone (*tawhid*) is not associated with any other. The Messiah is from God but would not be associated with God (*Adonai*). Jesus implies in the prayer that the Hebrew-Jewish 'otherness' of God and sanctity of this 'set-apartness' of Transcendence is incomparable and uncompromising. As a disciplined rabbi, Jesus gives priority to this 'wholly otherness' of *Yahweh/Adonai* and any attempt to compromise is a deviation from the primary belief in the oneness of God (*tawhid*). Any tendency towards a human understanding is idolatry and Jesus in the Gospel (*injil*) is also uncompromisingly Jewish about his ardent rootedness in the 'otherness of the *Abba* father'.

The next supplication in the Lord's prayer- "may your kingdom come"- (some theologians would describe it as the reign of God, (*basileía tou theóu* Gk.) was central to the 'Jesus formula' and was the most challenging to the contemporary political structures under which he and his people had to live with heavy taxation, violence and counter-violence. There could not be any other kingdom or reign than that of the Roman emperor. Jesus' radical teaching on the reign of God was an expression of his subtle political critique of the Roman Empire and it once again affirmed his uncompromised monotheism in a society where the emperor was considered godly and supremely powerful over nations. In the reign of God, it is God who rules and God alone deserves loyalty and obedience

and in such a reign while the poor and the marginalized will sit together with all those who think that they are righteous and holy. Jesus went on preaching this one single paradigm of the reign of God in parables, which was the most powerful tool he deployed to teach.

One of the most interesting questions posed to him was on the question of taxation and his politically savvy response was to ask for a physical coin in circulation. His next question to those present was to mention to him the symbols on the coin. All they could do was to declare that the Roman coin displayed the encrypted head of Caesar. Jesus' response was sharp and diplomatic even though politically volatile: "give what is due to Caesar and to God, what God deserves". What continued to be uppermost in his mind was that oneness of God (*tawhid*) could not and would not be compromised for worldly power. In the audience on this occasion were men from the military, Pharisees, lawyers, religious teachers, and the ordinary people who were mesmerized by his intellectual honesty, spiritual rootedness and political awareness. Some in the audience would have thought of him as just a parable teller but, on this occasion, Jesus publicly proclaimed his theological position regarding monotheism, namely, that Caesar and God were incomparable and affirmed that religious principles had the capacity to promote ethical governance and value-laden leadership for nation building and reconciliation. His cross-cultural competence and his interdisciplinary approach was evident to his hears. Such pointed social interactions and political critique quietly but definitively became counted as evidence for his trial as a conspirator against the State, an anti-Roman instigator and violator of the ancient Jewish law. Jesus became a victim of a well-planned conspiracy, but his costly witness to a brutal treatment evoked a WAY that later became Christianity, a tradition built on love, forgiveness and martyrdom. The early Christians, both Jews and non-Jews, understood that Jesus had built the strongest church that could withstand every persecution. Paul of Tarsus alongside the surviving apostles of Jesus

became the signifiers of the alternative power - the reign of God that their master and the Lord preached and for which he gave his life as a witness.

PAUL AND GOD

Paul's adamant but penetrating theological discourse in Athens with his contemporaries of high intellectual caliber was about the unknown God. I am convinced that Paul in this instance was more Jewish than in other preaching or writings and was defending monotheism without any fear of contradiction. Paul would have found it impossible to preach to the erudite Athenians that God's transcendence was to be shared with the 'risen Christ' - who was 'Son of God' as per his belief. His careful choice of words is a good example of his astute display of Jewishness before the Greek world. In typical Pauline fashion, he reclaimed the God of history, whom he now considered as the God of Jesus - to be the unknown God in the Greek world. He became the most devoted missionary to the Greek intellectual world, even though his Greek counterparts in the text were not very convinced of the religio-cultural shift of a hardcore villain to a sober dialoguer and that such conversions were possible as in the case of *Chandaśoka*¹⁹ and *Duttagamini*²⁰ (in the respective dynasties of India and Sri Lanka).

¹⁹. Buddhist legends state that *Aśoka* was bad-tempered and of a wicked and cruel nature. He built *Aśoka's Hell*, an elaborate torture chamber described as a "Paradisal Hell" due to the contrast between its beautiful exterior and the acts carried out within by his appointed executioner, *Girikaa*. This earned him the name of (*Caṇḍa Aśoka*) meaning "*Aśoka the Fierce*" in Sanskrit. Charles Drekmeier cautions that the Buddhist legends tend to dramatize the change that Buddhism brought in him, and therefore, exaggerate *Aśoka's* past wickedness and his piousness after the conversion. There is possibility of change, in fact he became *Dharma Aśoka* (righteous *Aśoka*). See https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php/story_fbid. (Also see Unofficial Topper, the fb name for reference). This link refers to a long description of this Mauryan emperor on the aspect of his conversion to righteousness.

²⁰. The Sinhala *Mahavamsa* (great chronicle of Sri Lanka) one could trace several chapters dedicated to *Duttagamini* (*Gamini*, the wicked) and draw a parallel between his life and that of *Chanda Aśoka* (undisciplined *Asoka*, see footnote 17 above). It is known that *Duttagamini* too underwent the same experience of the utter futility of wonton destruction and war he waged. He became a pious ruler through remorse and repentance. The chronicler portrays an *Aśokan* model in the person of *Duttagamini* as a more humane and believable Sinhala ruler compatible with the *Dhamma*. See. Hettiarachchi, S., *Faithing the Native Soil: dilemmas and aspirations of postcolonial Buddhists and Christians in Sri Lanka* (author publication, Colombo 2012) p. 5 & 6.

Paul (previously known as Saul, the worrier-persecutor of Christians) shows that change is possible all through life. For him, Jesus was everything (“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me,” Gal. 2:20) after his ‘wow’ religious experience on the road to Damascus (as recorded by Luke in the Acts). Space does not permit me to ascertain who Paul’s God really was and which God he had in his mind when he preached and wrote the most influential writings in the history of Christianity. Was he a Trinitarian or a Christo-centric theologian, obsessively focused on ‘Jesus the preacher’ and ‘Christ the Lord’?

His reprimands and the catechetical warnings to the early Christians indicate that to embrace the ‘Christ Event’ is paramount to living as a Christian. Paul, though Jewish by heritage, was more exposed to Jewish culture than Jesus. Paul, who was born in Tarsus (modern South central Turkey) and studied under an esteemed teacher such as Gamaliel, certainly had a very Jewish understanding of God. More research on Pauline monotheism, not necessarily his Christology, would be an interesting area of Christian theology. Paul’s understanding of God with the encounter of the Christ of faith seemed expanded and displayed a stern counterpoint to the deified-emperor paradigm: for him it’s also a psychological battle with his conversion (*metanoia*/change of direction). There was no other Lord for Paul except the Lordship of Christ, which leads someone like Dominic Crossan to interpret the New Testament narrative as the most programmatic alternative to the decaying empire of Rome. However, by the 4th century CE, the rise of Christendom emerged as yet another empire until its counterpoint appeared with the rise of Islam in the Bedouin world of the 7th century CE. The rest is history.

SEVEN-POINTER CONCLUSION

Was Jesus a monotheist? is an intriguing question to which this paper responds positively. However, whether he was proposing a project with and beyond the Jewish religious tradition is yet another area for which the Gospel (*injil*) is a clear witness. Jesus, being part of a strict monotheistic society of the Hebrew-Jewish tradition, is the specific area that I have

examined in this paper in order to evoke an appropriate discussion among different circles. This discussion could proceed with some reference to Zoroastrianism arguably as one tradition that dwelled on monotheism both pre Christian and pre Islamic periods.

Firstly, ordinary Christians will have an opportunity without the wrappings of different church dogmas of history and painful schisms to better understand the central figure of their faith and practice.

Secondly, Christian scholars and theologians are requested to revisit the subject of their scholarship and research anew in the forgotten or erased Jewishness of Jesus in their writings and theological thinking.

Thirdly, it is noticeable that Christian literature basically has bypassed this single significance of Jesus' Jewishness in the history of anti-Semitic polemics and, therefore, they could revisit, revise and tender a fresh reading of Jesus, the monotheist Jew.

Fourthly, the paper also suggests that Jewish and Muslim readers reconsider their idea of Jesus in the context of their own monotheistic religious views. Neither tradition could bypass Jesus for the obvious reasons that their history and the textual traditions are full of Jesus, the Jew and a prophet.

Fifthly, there could be areas where some theologians and scholars of all three traditions may wish to recommence reflection on the role and place of Jesus, the Jew (for Jews), Jesus the servant-Lord (for Christians) and Isa, a prophet in the Qur'an (for Muslims). It would be an interesting discussion in a new attempt to pursue Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations as in the spirit and the words of the peace declaration, 'human fraternity',²¹ signed by Pope Francis and the grand imam of Al Azhar, Cairo, Ahmed el-Tayeb.

²¹. I quote here the final paragraph of the declaration "this Declaration may be a sign of the closeness between East and West, between North and South and between all who believe that God has created us to understand one another, cooperate with one another and live as brothers and sisters who love one another". Signed on 4 February 2019, Abu Dhabi. This in

Sixthly, the non-Semitic believers of other world religious traditions may have an opportunity to view Jesus as a religious figure of history as part of the global religious landscape, just like their own savior-figures so that they sit not in opposition but in solidarity for the 'common good'. It might also be of interest and value to study the personality of Jesus and his counterparts in the religious persons of Zarathustra, Moses, the Buddha, Mahaveera, Confucius, Lao Tsu, Krsna, the Prophet of Islam, Guru Nanak, Bahá'u'lláh and many other sages and spiritual animators.

Lastly, the people of other convictions with no definitive religious tradition can ascertain why these spiritual figures remain central to different life styles and the interests of various people. They could also compare notes as to how their own varying convictions might synchronize or remain contrary to those of the sages and what they think of them in their own non-religious world, because some of them refuse to be religious, yet claim that they are spiritual. What does it mean to be spiritual without being religious is also an interesting discussion that has been with us for sometime now.

A CONCLUDING STROKE

Jesus the Jew in this essay attempted to explore in the context of the strict monotheism of his Jewishness, yet countered by the divinized Augustus Caesar. Jesus' response to the empire and his own religious elite that disowned him is remarkable with his life witness. This paper argues that to place Jesus in the context of other religious figures of history indicates that monotheism remains a significant pursuit of humanity, yet non-theism and other convictions have also nourished the human pursuit of happiness and meaning. Humans have found many ways to seek happiness and fulfillment and religions remain significant means while others have found different convictions to fulfill their objectives in life. So Jesus as a young man, with his alternative view and way of life within his Jewish tradition,

fact could be considered an extension of '*A Common Word between Us and You*', an open letter dated 13 October 2007, from leaders of the Islamic world from most different schools of thought to their counterparts in the global Christian traditions. Both remain global attempts to promote Christian-Muslim relations.

promoted the view that the 'love ethic' was a far better option than any abiding 'law suits'. Although law suits may be necessary from time to time, he taught that without love all would end in misery and unhappiness. For Jesus, the joy of life was rooted in the Abba relationship and the love of others and the world. His radical compassion flowed from this unique way of relating - and this was surely what was distinct in the life of Jesus (*Isa*), presenting a life-paradigm central to the history of religious thought.