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978-1-009-51717-1 — The Abrahamic Vernacular
Rebecca Scharbach Wollenberg
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1 How This Element Works

1.1 Abrahamic

Before we begin the essay proper, we should briefly explore some of the presuppositions that undergird this Element. Let us begin by unpacking the title. The word "Abrahamic" has become a loaded term in the current moment. In popular parlance, the term Abrahamic religions is often used to emphasize the commonalities between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam for the purposes of interfaith work and community building. But in scholarly circles, the designation Abrahamic is frequently maligned for the way in which it evokes a shared mythic ancestor to create an *illusion* of commonality grounded in a theological or essentialist approach to the study of religion. (The reader can learn more about these concerns below in Section 2.2). This Element acknowledges that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are not tied together by a historical figure of Abraham – or any other essential theological continuity. Yet we will use the term "Abrahamic" to capture how not only Abraham but also *all* of the scriptural figures shared between these three traditions have served to invite continual imaginative engagement between practitioners of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as they sought (sometimes competitively and sometimes collaboratively) to cultivate scriptural and religious landscapes that exceeded the boundaries of their particular written revelations. In other words, the term Abrahamic is adopted in this Element to conjure the many ways in which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have *become* similar over the centuries because they evolved facing each other over shared scriptural tropes.

1.2 Vernacular

Now to the second word in the title. This Element focuses on "vernacular" religion in the sense of "religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it" (Primiano 1995, 44). (The reader can learn more about the category of vernacular religion below in Section 4.2). This essay argues that the three Abrahamic traditions have become subtly intertwined by their histories of shared lived religion in different times and places. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim practitioners living in close quarters have often participated in overlapping forms of vernacular local religion, so that the conceptions and practices of each community co-evolved in a common cultural religious landscape infused with shared presuppositions about categories such as revelation, scripture, and the divine. This is, of course, true of many different kinds of religious practitioners living in close proximity. But this Element argues that the dynamic has been particularly strong among practitioners of the Abrahamic traditions because they also share a scriptural vernacular. Which

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is to say, the vernacular religious traditions fostered by practitioners of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are often constructed around common scriptural figures and narratives. Like speakers of distinctive dialects of the same language, local practitioners rooted in different Abrahamic traditions have inflected this shared scriptural vernacular in distinct (and even competing) ways. Yet many of these local religious dialects were ultimately reabsorbed into the broader traditions of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. As a result, this Element argues, an ever-changing kaleidoscope of vernacular Abrahamic entwinements has left indelible marks of religious common sense on these three traditions.

1.3 Timeline, Geographic Scope, and Structure

This Element draws examples from nearly two thousand years of religious history and analyzes Abrahamic vernaculars that emerged in far flung geographical locations from Iraq to northern Europe. These diverse examples are then arranged not by historical chronology or geographic region but by theme. In any given section, the reader will thus encounter illustrations of a particular phenomenon or pattern from many different historical contexts – sometimes separated by as many as a dozen centuries or thousands of miles. This wide-ranging thematic structure was chosen to counteract a tendency we see in many works on Jewish, Christian, and Muslim relations in which a particular century in a particular geographic region is hailed as a golden age of intercommunal harmony, while all other historical contexts are treated as times of natural strife between competing traditions. This Element seeks to demonstrate that certain recurring patterns in intercommunal relations have drawn practitioners of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam into shared religious vernaculars in many different times and places. In other words, this Element is structured to demonstrate that the existence of a shared Abrahamic Vernacular has been a fundamental and recurring facet of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim relations throughout many centuries and geographic regions.

2 What Is an Abrahamic Monotheism?

2.1 The Question

What is an Abrahamic monotheism? Or to pose a more radical version of this question: Is there such a thing as Abrahamic monotheism? In the past decade, we have arrived at a strange impasse in the collective study of Judaism(s), Christianit(ies), and Islam(s). We live in a moment when many scholars of religion insist that the historical movements identified with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam cannot be grouped together into any sort of meaningful analytic category. At the same time, scholars of religion are producing more

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comparative work than ever on the overlaps and intersections between local iterations of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in various historical periods. As a field, it sometimes seems that we are frantically studying a phenomenon that we claim does not exist.

In the past fifty years, researchers have proposed a succession of models to explain the perceived resemblance or relationship between the so-called Abrahamic traditions. But each new model has ultimately failed to account for at least one vital facet of a complex pattern. As a result, we have reached a point where many scholars insist that no satisfactory analytic category has been discovered because there is none. This Element proposes, in contrast, that we have not been able to produce a satisfactory account of Abrahamic monotheism as a category because we have been approaching the problem backward.

This Element argues that the phenomenon we perceive as Abrahamic monotheism has been produced by a relational constellation. We have been right to recognize a family resemblance between these traditions. But we have been searching for the source of that commonality in the wrong places. It is not structural similarities or theological affinities – or even shared origins – that have bound the Abrahamic monotheisms together into a perceptible category. Rather, it is the very existence of ongoing relational interactions that have ultimately bestowed common character traits on these three traditions.

In their centuries of rivalry over a shared imaginative space, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam evolved facing each other. As a result of this historical orientation toward rival traditions and their claims, practitioners of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have frequently developed shared local languages of religious imagination that led practitioners to develop overlapping (if sometimes competing) concepts and rituals. *The Abrahamic Vernacular* argues that this shifting kaleidoscope of different historical entanglements has left enduring traces of resemblance on these three traditions – and it is those residual commonalities that generate the category of Abrahamic monotheisms.

2.2 The History of a Category

There was a time when scholars simply referred to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as the three monotheisms – as if these were the only monotheisms that the human experience had ever produced (Stroumsa 2021).[1] This language certainly reproduces the revolutionary claims made by many historical practitioners of these traditions. But it does not fully reflect the complicated

[1] In order to make this Element a more accessible gateway to the topic, I have tried as much as possible to limit my citations of scholarly literature to a very small selection of easily available works in English. I have tried to select examples that contain a rich bibliography of their own – in hopes that readers will be able to pursue for themselves any avenue of inquiry that interests them.

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historical realities of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim conceptions of the supernatural, which have often strayed beyond the boundaries of the strictest definitions of monotheism (Ali 2010; Fredriksen 2022; MacDonald 2012; Schaefer 2020). More importantly, perhaps, this construction does not recognize the forms of monotheism that other religious traditions have embraced (Flood 2020; Harvey 2019; Mitchell and Van Nuffelen 2010).

When scholars realized that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam could not be differentiated from other religious traditions by their monotheism, many researchers sought to identify other kinds of structural similarities that distinguished these three traditions as a unique formula of religious expression. These scholars acknowledged that a variety of Greco-Roman and Eastern traditions have included forms of metaphysical monotheism, which posits an eternal divinity that sustains creation. But they maintained that only Judaism, Christianity, and Islam claim that this creator God has revealed his will directly to specific human communities and demanded particular forms of action from these human servants – a religious structure that has been designated by the varied terminologies, including ethical monotheism, prophetic monotheism, revelatory monotheism, and elective monotheism (Jaffee 2001). The types of truth claims made by these elective monotheisms, in turn, were thought to produce certain common categories of religious thought and practice, such as written scripture, revealed tradition, and petitionary prayer (Corrigan et al. 1998). While practitioners of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have obviously developed each of these categories very differently, proponents of this school of thought argued that the three Abrahamic traditions were nevertheless united by unique structures of religious life.

Critics of this phenomenological school objected that an abstracted vision of a pan-Abrahamic monotheism suppresses the uniqueness of each tradition by creating "a new religion that both encompasses these three and supersedes them" (Levenson 2012, 205). Researchers pointed out that the analogous concept of Judeo-Christian monotheism has long been acknowledged to use claims of a common tradition to overwrite and obscure Jewish difference – remaking diverse and variegated religious histories in the image of Protestant Christianity (Cohen 1969). In the same way, the urge to identify a single Abrahamic concept of revelation, prayer, or providence can serve to eclipse the particularities of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim approaches to common issues (Bakhos 2019, 8).

As definitional categories proved increasingly untenable, some researchers moved to uncover a history of shared origins to explain the aura of commonality within difference that continues to rest on the three Abrahamic traditions. Countless studies have sought to document the possibilities of common origins

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and identify the exact moments of divergence between these three traditions. When did Judaism and Christianity part ways? Does Islam have Jewish and Christian origins? Where did the various practices and beliefs of the Abrahamic monotheisms originate and how were they disseminated and developed differently in these three traditions? (Stroumsa 2015)

Detractors of the historical approach have argued that this interest in roots is also futile. The imagined origins of a common monotheism promoted by Abraham are beyond our grasp as scholars. Since no neutral historical Abraham can be recovered beyond the oldest limits of sacred history to serve as a check for the three traditions that claim him as founder, we are left instead with what amounts to three distinct Abrahams – three radically incompatible portraits of what it means to be a model servant of the one God (Bakhos 2014). But even if we restrict ourselves to the more modest project of documenting the shared historical origins of these three religious traditions, critics argue that the Abrahamic movements cannot be said to share any substantive common ground when the internecine history that gave birth to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as distinct traditions has been so often defined by supersessionism, exclusion, and persecution (Hughes 2013).[2] They argue that these traditions were born through difference not commonality.

This is the point at which the discussion has currently stalled. We have reached a moment when many academics are ready to abandon the notion that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam can be conceptualized as related phenomena. Yet what if we approached the current focus on historical conflict as an invitation rather than a closure? Recent theories have dismissed the ongoing history of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim polemic as empty of any true exchange. Because the historical interlocutors were often speaking past each other (debating a particular concept or figure with very different visions of the object in mind), we are tempted to disregard these interactions as meaningless.

Yet the very existence of a continuing history of rivalry, supersessionism, and polemic between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam tells us otherwise. These disputes should not be imagined as a single ongoing (and therefore inevitable) argument. Instead, these moments of polemic represent local phenomena that are continually recreated anew in different times and places. The fact that religious competition repeatedly emerges between these three traditions in different times and places should draw our attention to the fact the imaginary space between these three traditions has consistently been perceived by practitioners as meaningful territory worthy of dispute. The question we need to ask is

[2] Although Robert Erlewine argues that is ironically this very tendency to agonism that unites Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the discursive structure of Abrahamic monotheisms (Erlewine 2010, 10)

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why this disputed imaginal space between traditions has been so vital to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim interactions.

2.3 Abrahamic Monotheism as a Relational Constellation

We tend to naturalize the notion that Jews, Christians, and Muslims should tussle over who holds the rights to common intellectual property. But we have already noted that these so-called "Abrahamic" concepts do not have any preexisting substance of their own. There is, in fact, no agreed-upon Abrahamic legacy to dispute. Nor can these recurrent discussions be imagined as the inevitable result of communal proximity and daily friction. In some cases, the interlocutors in these apparent dialogues have no immediate contact at all. The turn toward this shared discursive space can occur even in the absence of any immediate challenge that needs to be addressed or redressed. Instead, that empty space between traditions appears to have some draw, some function, of its own.

What if we explored the possibility that this intersecting space between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – this central core of the Abrahamic experience – is a *floating signifier* (Levi Strauss 1987, 55–64)? That is, what if this central imaginary is an intellectual space that is named but sufficiently undefined that it can be ascribed different meanings by various interpreters without disrupting the sense that they are speaking of a single object? Or to put it another way, perhaps these three traditions are not bound together by shared mythical and ritual *content* in any substantial sense but are instead united by their shared mythical *signifiers*. In that case, it is less important what each of these three traditions says about Abraham than the formal fact that they all claim to reference the same historical-mythical figure. Similarly, it is not as important how each of these traditions imagines God as it is that these movements all insist that they give ear to a single divine being, the one God who revealed himself to humankind through a historical genealogy of Abraham and his inheritors. While Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have spun these common referents into radically different portraits of revelatory history, they are continuously oriented by them toward a shared discursive space.

Though practically speaking these referents may be empty signifiers, the history of religious conflict between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam has taken place against a backdrop of these shared referents. In the process, the backdrop itself has come to appear natural – even inevitable – to the interlocutors. That is, the very existence of shared referents amidst intercommunal polemic has often produced the impression that there is a neutral sacred history that stands beyond the possibility of dispute and disbelief. While contemporary

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scholars are quick to point out that Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thinkers paint markedly different (even incompatible) portraits of Moses, for instance, historical practitioners were more likely to conceive of this disconnect as disagreement about a *single* Moses. Through the very process of rivalry over his legacy, Moses's role as a mythical-historical figure within each tradition is naturalized and reinforced by the affirmations of rival traditions. Or to take another example, it is difficult to argue both about the contents of God's prophecy to Moses *and* what it means to receive a prophecy. In any given time and place, a dispute between two Abrahamic communities about the substance of a given prophecy simultaneously had the side effect of naturalizing the shared conceptions of prophecy that undergirded the exchange. After all, the interlocutors in question are doubly primed to speak in a shared religious language by their common historical context and by normative claims that they are speaking about the same phenomena. In such interactions, Abrahamic practitioners thus collectively participate in an imaginary in which both insiders and outsiders alike can be said to acknowledge the veracity of certain premises and histories. In other words, through their very use of shared terminology, the Abrahamic monotheisms acquired companion traditions that have acted not only as competitors but also as partners who obliquely strengthened the worldview of each by affirming an underlying sense of shared reality.

3 Centrifugal and Centripetal Models of Collective Monotheism

When it comes to analyzing historical exchanges between various Abrahamic communities, scholars have tended to reproduce the accounts of these interactions produced by historical practitioners themselves. That is, researchers have traditionally attempted to trace the development of religious differences through the history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as if they were biological lineages that spread, branched, and degenerated over time. In doing so, scholars are faithfully reproducing emic motifs widely adopted by the historical practitioners of these three traditions. The history of Jewish–Christian–Muslim polemic is positively littered with familial and biological images of theological family trees, broken branches, and misappropriated prophetic legacies. Many Jewish, Christian, and Muslim practitioners certainly envisioned their own entanglement through a centrifugal paradigm of genealogical growth and separation.

Yet I would argue that the theoretical importance of these emic tropes for our study is precisely the opposite of their own claims. For the most part, the authors of these biological genealogies had as little direct access to the historical origins of the Abrahamic monotheisms as modern academics – and quite possibly less. These portraits of Abrahamic origins must therefore be analyzed as testaments

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to the religious conceptions of their own time and place. As such, these accounts represent a fascinating window onto an ongoing relational constellation in which Jewish, Christian, and Muslim practitioners repeatedly reinscribed the notion that these three traditions shared the same (contested) prophecies, histories, and divinity. Ironically, these fictionalized tales of centrifugal origins are thus some of our best evidence of a centripetal model of the Abrahamic monotheisms. In this centripetal model, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are not intrinsically bound together so much as they are persistently brought into relationship with one another by historical practitioners who insist that these three traditions share a divinity, revelation, and mythical-historical reality.

3.1 Pluralistic Centripetal Models

There has been a great deal of pushback in recent years against overly romantic visions of premodern ecumenism or *convivencia* (Stroumsa 2006, 3–6). When I say that local iterations of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have often employed centripetal gestures, it certainly does not mean that historical practitioners embraced an egalitarian, ecumenical, or harmonious relationship. Yet we do occasionally encounter historical thinkers who sketched a shared history of the Abrahamic traditions in modes that were pluralistic or inclusive in very nearly a contemporary sense of those terms. That is, one does find historical practitioners who explicitly sought to imagine ways in which different Abrahamic communities could each authentically claim to represent the will of the same God by carefully coordinating the truth claims of multiple traditions in such a way that their diverse modes of religious life could plausibly be fit into a single account of sacred history.

Few progressive proponents of interfaith dialogue would take issue, for instance, with positions such as that expressed by the twelfth-century Yemenite Jewish thinker Natanel ibn al-Fayyumi[3] when he claimed that:

> Mohammed was a prophet to them [the Muslims] but not to those who preceded them in the knowledge of God [the Jews] . . . since [God] permitted to every people something which He forbade to others, and He forbade to them something which He permitted to others, for He knows what is best for his creatures and what is adapted to them even as a skilled physician understands his patients (Levine 1908, Judeo-Arabic 68, English 107)[4]

[3] I have tried to draw examples of these various patterns from as broad a historical and geographical area as possible because only a few specific periods and regions are generally known for these sorts of interactions – with the result that these well-known examples are frequently quarantined and dismissed as brief historical anomalies.

[4] In nearly every case, I direct the reader both to a copy of the source in the original language and an English language translation, so that students at every level of expertise can further explore each source if they wish. Wherever possible, I have taken English translations from full length translations of the primary source in question so that readers may read the quotation in its broader

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As al-Fayyumi glosses in the words of the Quran: "'He sends a prophet to every people according to their language'" (Quran 14.4) (Levine 1908, Judeo-Arabic 69, English 109). In this rendering of Abrahamic history, both Muslims and Jews possess a true version of scripture from a single God. The obvious differences between these two prophetic testimonies reflect the particular needs of the recipients rather than any imperfection in their respective access to divine truth. By imagining the God of Abraham as a physician who sends individualized guidance to his patients according to their needs, this vision of sacred history allows for radical practical pluralism without undermining the notion that Jews and Muslims participate in a single spiritual reality governed by a single divine being. Instead, it combines Jewish and Muslim accounts of prophetic history into a single extended account that allows the basic truth claims of each to remain intact by limiting their scope of application.

One also encounters the claim that revelation refracted differently for different Abrahamic communities in the work of Muslim authors such as the thirteenth-century Andalusian mystic Abū ʻAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn al-ʻArabī al-Ṭāʾī al-Ḥātimī (known as Ibn Arabi) who argued in his *Meccan Revelations* that each of the Abrahamic prophets and sages had been sent a version of revelation uniquely appropriate to his time and place:

> The article makes the word "religion" definite because all religion comes from God, even if some of the rulings are diverse. Everyone is commanded to perform the religion and to come together in it, that is, in the way upon which all agree. As for the rulings which are diverse, that is because of the Law which God assigned to each one of the messengers. He said, "To every one [of the prophets] We have appointed a Law and a way; and if God had willed, He would have made you one nation" (Qur'an 5:48). If He had done that, your revealed Laws would not be diverse (Arabic Yahia 1968, III.413; English Chittick 1989, 303)

Like al-Fayyumi, Ibn Arabi understood the diversity of revealed religion (both within Islam and among the other Abrahamic traditions) to reflect the needs of different communities at different moments. For Ibn Arabi, therefore, the revelations of Judaism and Christianity had neither been corrupted nor

context if they so choose. Where that was not practical because full translations were unavailable or difficult to access outside a specialized research university, I direct the reader to a translation from an accessible work of secondary literature that will serve as an introduction to the primary source. Where no translator is noted, I was forced to use my own translation. In the rare instance where no original source is cited, original language sources were in manuscript or preserved in limited run editions that are difficult to access outside the research university interlibrary loan system, and so not practical for classroom use. When these rare books are cited it is because they are freely available through Google books, archive.org, or Hathi Trust.

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abrogated in the sense that they were subsequently abolished or repealed. Their own continuing but provincial manifestation of divine truth had simply been eclipsed by the brighter light of the Quran. As Ibn al-Arabi opined elsewhere in his *Meccan Revelations*:

> All the revealed religions [*shara'i'*] are lights. Among these religions, the revealed religion of Muhammad is like the light of the sun among the lights of the stars. When the sun appears, the lights of the stars are hidden, and their lights are included in the light of the sun. Their being hidden is like the abrogation of the other revealed religions that takes place through Muhammad's revealed religion. Nevertheless, they do in fact exist, just as the existence of the light of the stars is actualized. This explains why we have been required in our all inclusive religion to have faith in the truth of all the messengers and all the revealed religions. They are not rendered null [*batil*] by abrogation – that is the opinion of the ignorant (Arabic Yahia 1968, III.53; English Chittick 1994, 125).

While Ibn Arabi certainly perceives a hierarchy of Abrahamic revelations – in which the Quran represents a brighter and more universal manifestation of God's truth than any of its predecessors – he simultaneously validates the truth value of diverse Abrahamic teachings and the unique ability of each to shed light on a particular facet of the divine.

Others were willing to acknowledge the truth value of other Abrahamic traditions without necessarily affirming their revelations. In his eighth-century Syriac work *Apology of Timothy the Patriarch Before the Caliph Mahdi,* for instance, the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I offers the following account of the prophet Mohammad:

> Muhammad is worthy of all praise, by all reasonable people . . . He walked in the path of the prophets and trod in the track of the lovers of God. All the prophets taught the doctrine of one God, and since Muhammad taught the doctrine of the unity of God, he walked, therefore, in the path of the prophets. Further, all the prophets drove men away from bad works, and brought them nearer to good works, and since Muhammad drove his people away from bad works and brought them nearer to the good ones, he walked, therefore, in the path of the prophets. Again, all the prophets separated men from idolatry and polytheism, and attached them to God and to His cult, and since Muhammad separated his people from idolatry and polytheism and attached them to the cult and the knowledge of one God, beside whom there is no other God, it is obvious that he walked in the path of the prophets. Finally, Muhammad taught about God, His Word, and His Spirit, Muhammad walked, therefore, in the path of all the prophets.
>
> Who will not praise, honor, and exalt the one who not only fought for God in words, but showed also his zeal for Him in the sword? As Moses did with the Children of Israel when he saw that they had fashioned a golden calf

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