

Why I Am Neither Jew Nor Muslim

K J Cronin

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 and Lamentations. 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 Judaea. 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 Judaea, Jerusalem and even the Temple. Because of this there

developed among Jews an acceptable rationale for the disaster that 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 details of what happened in the Holocaust are known to every well-educated person and so I will not repeat them 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! 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. Needless to say, it has 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. Whatever about abandoning their religion, with some Jews tragically turning to pagan religions such as Christianity, it is a disaster when a person loses their belief in the existence of a Personal God.

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 the most important foundational belief 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 after the Holocaust in which Yahweh did nothing to deliver six million Jews from the clutches of the Nazis? I did not believe in divine intervention in human affairs before I considered the implications of the Holocaust and so nothing changed for me, but a lot has changed for Judaism. Despite this I did seriously consider converting to Judaism, mainly

because of Exodus 3:14, but I eventually decided that it made no sense to do so. It is one thing for a Jew to have serious misgivings about the fundamentals of their own religion but it is quite another for a would-be convert to have such misgivings and so I have decided not to convert to Judaism, that is even assuming they would have me after all that I have written.

So what about Islam? Beginning with their scripture, I have a different sort of problem. There is very little mention in the Qur'an of God intervening in human affairs and so it does not present a problem to the faithful or to the would-be convert. The only mentions of divine intervention in human affairs are in the accounts of a number of peoples who rejected their home-grown prophets and their message. These mentions were no doubt prompted by Muhammad's own experience of such 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.ⁱ Muhammad in each case relates what God did to punish these obstinate peoples. However, although these punishments are mentioned on numerous occasions in the Qur'an, they do not collectively constitute an important Islamic belief and so do not present a problem for the sceptical believer (if there is such a thing in Islam) or the would-be convert.

The message of the Qur'an is a very 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. It is repeated over and over again but that is basically it. Muhammad could therefore have eloquently articulated the whole

of the message contained in the 114 surahs of the Qur'an in one medium-length surah, which would have saved would-be converts like me from losing interest while reading it. And it is not just the repetition, including the copious use of stock phrases, that I have a problem with. It is the very sameness of it all. I feel like I am reading the same thing over and over again even when I am not because it all sounds and feels the same, no doubt because it is all from one man and so is all in the one voice. There is none of the richness and diversity of the Jewish Bible, which speaks with many voices. 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 can be very beautiful.ⁱⁱ However, these are aesthetic considerations and are of far less importance than the meaning that is being communicated. 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 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 that, there is very little in the Qur'an that I object to. I do not believe there is any such thing as hell because that would be contrary to God's perfection, but I don't object to anyone else believing it.ⁱⁱⁱ I would say that this is a minor disagreement were it not for the fact that Muhammad mentions it scores of times and so it was clearly important to him and he was clearly convinced of it. However, I get the impression that Muhammad was not a man who was greatly given to theological reflection. But anyway, that alone would do nothing to dissuade me from converting to Islam.

I have also read quite a number of the Hadith and have found that I am not interested in them and so this second tier of Islamic scripture would neither incline me nor disincline me to convert.^{iv}

So overall I am bound to say that I find the Qur'an repetitive, samey and lacking in interesting content and that it consequently does not hold my interest; I find the Hadith uninteresting; and I find the Quranic insistence on the existence of hell only mildly perturbing. 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 greatly appreciate, I would not trade a single one for the entire Qur'an, and there would never be a time when I would prefer

to read the Qur'an than the Jewish Bible, which is not ideal for a would-be convert 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 think it is an understatement to say that in Islam original or 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.

That concludes my thoughts on converting to Judaism or Islam. I must say that I am very disappointed that neither of them is for me because I would very much like to have the experience of sharing my faith and they are the only religions that could theoretically afford me that experience. However, I will continue to have my confident monotheistic faith and I will continue to read and enjoy the Jewish Bible every day of the rest of my life and I will be content with that.

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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 Hadith was in Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim.