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The Abrahamic faiths? Continuity and discontinuity in Christian and Islamic doctrine

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I. Introduction

'Abrahamic faiths' or 'religions of Abraham' is a popular designation for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, emphasising their common heritage. It denotes a 'family likeness' and a certain commonality in theology between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For these reasons it is a popular term in inter-faith dialogue, where the agenda is often, for good reasons, to stress the continuity between religions whilst overlooking the sometimes significant discontinuity.¹ The term 'Abrahamic faiths' is enjoying widespread and often indiscriminate use amongst newspaper columnists, politicians, academics, and religious leaders alike. There are now various websites devoted to the Abrahamic faiths including one based at Cambridge University.² Abrahamic faiths groups have started to spring up across the Western world including in my own university of Otago, New Zealand. Such groups have as their aims promoting education and understanding of other religions, mutual respect and tolerance, and cooperation toward common goals. Although necessary and important in religiously pluralist societies, my concern is not with these important instances of inter-faith dialogue, but of what I argue to be the unexamined use of the term 'Abrahamic faiths' or the 'religions of Abraham'.³ It is remarkable that the term has yet to be subjected to theological scrutiny in published scholarly work. This, then, is the purpose of the paper.

1 Three works that prioritise continuity over discontinuity are K-J. Kuschel, *Abraham: A Symbol of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims* (London: SCM Press, 1995); L. J. Swidler (Ed.), *Death or Dialogue? From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue* (London: SCM Press, 1990); J. Hick and P. F. Knitter (eds.) *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (London: SCM Press, 1987).

2 <http://www.woolfinstitute.cam.ac.uk/>

3 For the purposes of this paper I understand these terms 'Abrahamic faiths', 'Abrahamic religions', the 'religions of Abraham' and 'Abrahamic traditions' as synonyms. For consistency and clarity my practice will be to only use 'Abrahamic faiths' except where following the citation of specific sources.

What exactly does 'Abrahamic faiths' mean? Is it simply a useful designation for the three religions that trace lineage to the patriarch/prophet Abraham and which have a certain 'family likeness', or is it claiming something more; namely, that the three religions are expressions of the same faith and worship the same God? In other words, what amount of theological weight can the term 'Abrahamic faiths' bear?

My overall aim is to evaluate what 'Abrahamic faiths' might mean and therefore ascertain the suitability of the term and to provide guidelines should the term be used. Testing the viability of 'Abrahamic faiths' across three enormous religious traditions is simply too large a task requiring book-length attention. Accordingly, for reasons of space and expertise, this paper will focus on Christianity and Islam. In Section II I shall examine three recent 'levels' of scholarly uses of 'Abrahamic faiths' which place different theological weight on the term. In Section III I shall assess the strengths of the term 'Abrahamic faiths' considering areas of general theological continuity between Christianity and Islam. In Section IV I shall sharpen the focus of the inquiry by comparing Christian and Muslim doctrine vis-à-vis four central Christian⁴ dogmas: (1) the person of Jesus Christ; (2) the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ; (3) the Bible; and (4) the Triune God. This should yield significant data regarding the doctrinal continuity and discontinuity of Christianity and Islam. In Section V I shall discuss the suitability of the term 'Abrahamic faiths' in the light of Sections III and IV of this study, briefly discussing the related subject of the identity of the God of Christianity and Islam. Finally, in Section VI I shall look at the implications of this study for Christian-Muslim inter-faith dialogue, drawing particularly on W. T. Dickens' article 'Frank Conversations: Promoting Peace among the Abrahamic Traditions through Interreligious Dialogue.'⁵ The term 'Abrahamic faiths' can and should be evaluated from many other perspectives but this paper shall confine itself to the task already stated.

II. Scholarly use of the term 'Abrahamic faiths'

I shall proceed by examining three recent 'levels' of uses of the term 'Abrahamic faiths' in academic discourse that use the term in a progressively stronger sense. First, in his recent article 'Frank Conversations' Dickens uses the term 'Abrahamic traditions' in the first sentence, and from his third sentence it is clear he is referring to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Dickens attempts no further definition or clarification throughout the article. In this first level and most basic us-

4 J. E. L. Newbigin said, 'We cannot avoid speaking of any subject from a certain standpoint. There is not available to us a standpoint which is above all standpoints.' 'The Finality of Christ within a Plurality of Faiths', *Dialogue* 24 (1972), 15. I have no doubt of the benefits of conducting a similar investigation from an Islamic perspective, indeed I touch on this myself, but for reasons of faith commitment and proficiency my distinctive contribution is primarily from a Christian theological perspective.

5 *JRE* 34 no. 3 (2006), 397-420.

age Dickens appears to use the term as a convenient shorthand way of referring to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Dickens asks no more of the term than this. His use of the term is primarily functional rather than theological.

Second, John Polkinghorne in his book *Belief in God in an Age of Science* first uses the term in the context of saying that future scientific and theological dialogue ‘must broaden beyond the Abrahamic faiths to include all religious traditions.’⁶ Here Polkinghorne appears to be using the term much as Dickens had, as convenient shorthand for Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Later in his book Polkinghorne writes, ‘The Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam – share a number of common features stemming from their interlaced histories. They are surely seeking to speak of the same God, even though they make many different assertions about the divine nature.’⁷ Here Polkinghorne uses the term in a second-level and more specialised sense, conveying historical and theological commonality, though the extent of this commonality is carefully nuanced and open-ended. Reference is also made to Jews, Christians and Muslims ‘seeking to speak of the same God’. Polkinghorne immediately acknowledges the discontinuities in the three religions’ respective doctrines of God, yet the issue is still raised indirectly; do Jews, Christians and Muslims worship the same God? Polkinghorne clearly makes no attempt to address this question as his book does not concern the theology of religions and his references to ‘Abrahamic faiths’ are incidental. This, I contend, is symptomatic of the term’s widespread and undefined usage and of its becoming part of acceptable academic vocabulary.

Additionally, the thirty-eight Muslim scholars, representing all eight schools of Islamic thought and jurisprudence, who wrote the ‘Open Letter To His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI’ in response to the Pope’s controversial lecture at the University of Regensburg, Germany, on September 12th 2006 use ‘Abrahamic faiths’ in this second-level sense. Speaking in the context of the importance of Christian-Muslim inter-faith dialogue they write that they ‘hope to continue to build peaceful and friendly relationships based upon mutual respect, justice, and what is common in essence in our shared Abrahamic tradition, particularly “the two greatest commandments” in Mark 12:29-31...’⁸ Once again, ‘Abrahamic faiths’ here is used in a second-level sense to carry some unspecified amount of historical and theological weight, though differences are also acknowledged. Furthermore, the inclusion of the term in an open letter signed by thirty-eight senior Muslim scholars from twenty-five different European, African, Middle-Eastern Asian and North American countries demonstrates the increasing prevalence of the term, particularly in Muslim-Christian dialogue.

Numerous instances of a third-level use of ‘Abrahamic faiths’ can be found in the papers presented in the 1979 *Trialogue of the Abrahamic Faiths* meetings held

6 J. Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science* (The Terry Lectures; New York: Yale University Press, 1998), xiii.

7 Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science*, 111.

8 <http://www.islamicamagazine.com/letter/index.html>, 4, accessed 9 October 2007.

at the American Academy of Religion annual conference. Mahmud 'Awan says, 'as adherents of their faiths, Jews, Christians and Muslims stand under one and the same God Whom they all acknowledge. This, after all, is the foundation of the Abrahamic faith to which they subscribe.'⁹ Seymour Siegel says, 'Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They all worship the same God; revere the same historical personalities; and claim the same revelation.'¹⁰ In the keynote address for those historic meetings Sergio Cardinal Pignedoli says, 'these religions, united as they are in their acceptance of Abrahamic faith', and 'the corner-stone of our religious encounter to be Abrahamic faith in the One God.'¹¹ In making the significant transition between 'Abrahamic *faiths*' – plural – to 'Abrahamic *faith*' – singular, Pignedoli & 'Awan have made explicit their belief, with Siegel, that to some extent Jews, Christians and Muslims share the same faith and therefore worship the same God. Pignedoli explains 'the faith of Abraham' as follows:

we profess one God, a God who is personal, the Creator of the world, provident, active in history but separated from it by an infinite gulf, the judge of men's actions, and who has spoken to men through the prophets. The Sacred Books and the traditions of our three religions admit no shadow of doubt on this fundamental point. This basic unity of faith is of such importance that it allows us to consider our differences with serenity and with a sense of perspective: it does not mean that we minimize these differences and still less that we renounce the points that separate us. But it does mean that we can speak together in an atmosphere of understanding and friendship, because we are all "believers in the same God!"¹²

This third usage of 'Abrahamic faiths' asserts such a degree of continuity that the plural is removed so that there is one Abrahamic *faith*, or faith of Abraham, expressed through three historic communities. Here 'Abrahamic faiths' connotes a unity of faith to the extent that it connotes belief in the same God. One ought to be grateful to the scholars of that 1979 *Dialogue of the Abrahamic Faiths* for attempting a clear definition of the term, even if its contents are not undisputed.

Although not specifically using the term, Douglas Pratt's theology lends support to this third-level usage of 'Abrahamic faiths' in viewing predominant continuity between Christianity and Islam. Whilst aware of historical differences he advises that instead one ought to focus on the reality of the one and only God who authors both biblical and Qur'anic revelation, since 'The source of revela-

9 M. 'Awan, 'The Faith Community and World Order in the Perspective of Islam' in I. R. al Faruqi (ed.), *Dialogue of the Abrahamic Faiths, Papers Presented to the Islamic Studies Group of American Academy of Religion*, 1995, 87.

10 S. Siegel, 'The Nation State and Social Order in the Perspective of Judaism' in al Faruqi (ed.), *Dialogue of the Abrahamic Faiths*, 38.

11 Cardinal S. Pignedoli, 'The Catholic Church and the Jewish and Muslim Faiths: Dialogue of the Three Abrahamic Faiths' in al Faruqi (ed.), *Dialogue of the Abrahamic Faiths*, 1, 4.

12 Pignedoli, 'The Catholic Church', 2.

tion is universal... and the message of God, is eternal.’¹³ For Pratt revelation is the activity of God, therefore ‘Allah [which he uses synonymously with God] is the author of the message. Jesus and Mohammad are different historic personalities, who lived in different times and different situations, and who were – and are still – differently understood; yet they are equally bearers of revelation, equally messengers of God.’¹⁴

To recap, a first-level usage of ‘Abrahamic faiths’ is simply shorthand for Judaism, Christianity and Islam, nothing more. The second-level usage acknowledges significant theological and historical continuity and discontinuity between Christianity and Islam. A third-level usage goes distinctly further; it identifies Christian and Islamic revelation as both from the one true God therefore asserting substantial continuity between these two faiths. Having briefly outlined three levels of uses of ‘Abrahamic faiths’ we shall proceed to assess the strengths of the term.

III. General theological continuity between Christianity and Islam

Prima facie, Jews, Christians and Muslims all look to the patriarch/prophet Abraham as one of the greatest models of faith. Furthermore, Jews, Christians and Muslims all – to some extent – claim lineal descent from Abraham. Jews state that they descend from Abraham through his son Isaac, whose son Jacob fathered the twelve tribes of Israel. In the first chapter of the New Testament Matthew traces Jesus’ ancestry back to Abraham; and the twelve apostles, being Jewish, all likewise profess to descend from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob. Muslims maintain Abraham’s son Ishmael fathered twelve sons from whom descended the peoples of Arabia, including the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁵ Interestingly however, the three religions do not all claim lineage from Abraham in the same way. Jews, with the exception of Gentile converts to Judaism, all claim to descend physically from Abraham,¹⁶ but this is not so for Christians and Mus-

13 D. Pratt, ‘Islam: A Challenge to Christianity’, 2-9, *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice* Vol. 15 Issue 2 (May 2007, Masterton: Stimulus), 8.

14 Pratt, ‘Islam’, 8.

15 F. E. Peters questions this claim: ‘Muhammad strongly emphasized that the Islam being promulgated in the Quran was nothing other than the “religion of Abraham” and that the earlier activity of Abraham – and Ishmael – in Mecca was crucial to this enterprise. But nowhere is it suggested or even hinted that Muhammad was aware that Ishmael was widely recognized elsewhere as the Arabs’ ancestor. Nor is it ever asserted that Islam’s claim to be the new version of the true faith was based on the Arabs’ blood descent from Abraham through Ishmael, as the Jews’ was by their descent through Isaac and Jacob. Muslims are *not*, in any event, the “Children of Ishmael.”’ *The Monotheists: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conflict and Competition: Vol. 1 – The Peoples of God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 7 emphasis original.

16 In addition to lineal descent Jews are physically connected to Abraham through the ritual of circumcision known as *berith Avraham*, the covenant of Abraham.

lims. As the majority of Christians are not of Jewish ancestry, and most Muslims are not ethnically Arab, Abraham's primary role for these religions is as an example of godly faith, particularly in relation to his rejection of the polytheism of his kin and culture, and his obedience to the divine command.¹⁷ This likewise remains true for Judaism.

In briefly recounting the prominence of Abraham in the three religious traditions that claim to be his heirs, one can immediately see both elements of continuity and discontinuity between these religions. Emphasising the former first, 'Abrahamic faiths' clearly connotes some measure of religious commonality and is used in the taxonomy of religions. For scholars of religion such as Lesslie Newbigin,

It is customary to make a sharp distinction between historical religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam which depend crucially on events in the past which can be specified as to date and place, and religions such as those which have their origins in the Indian subcontinent and which – while revering teachers in the past – depend not on the authority of these founding teachers, such as Gautama or Guru Nanak, but on what is held to be accessible to every human being apart from reference to any particular events in the past.¹⁸

Whilst conceding that all religions have historical traditions Newbigin nevertheless upholds the distinction as real. He explains,

The truths which Buddhism teaches would (as Buddhists understand them) be true whether or not Gautama had discovered and promulgated them. But the whole of Christian teaching would fall to the ground if it were the case that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were not events in real history but stories told to illustrate truths which are valid apart from these happenings.¹⁹

This is equally true for Islam.

This historical grounding of Christianity and Islam leads to continuity in a number of ways, two of which will be mentioned. First, both Christianity and Islam share an ideology of oneness; that is, they hold to an ideal that the total corpus of believers should express their faith in a single historic community. In Islam it is the idea of the *Ummah*, which refers to the community originally formed in Medina but now includes all Muslims worldwide. Christians have an

17 There are other important connections with Abraham, such as cult of the Ka'ba and the rituals surrounding the Hajj, but these lie beyond the scope of this paper.

18 J. E. L. Newbigin, *The Gospel In a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), 66.

19 Newbigin, *The Gospel In a Pluralist Society*, 66. Keith Ward distinguishes between Semitic religion (Ward's preferred term analogous to 'Abrahamic faiths') with its notions of God the Creator and of human beings living unique lives, with Indian religion with its notions of moral entail (*karma*) and cosmic law (*dharma*) and of human beings undergoing a cycle of rebirth. Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 331.

idea of a single united community using such terms as ‘the Body of Christ’ or the Church (*ekklesia*). Although for both religions this ideal has a more fractured historic existence, nevertheless the ideal remains powerful.²⁰

Second, Christianity and Islam both share the conviction that ‘... there is one God and... all must finally come under his rule...’;²¹ not in an otherworldly sense but concretely in time and space. This has quite controversial implications. Speaking of the Church Newbigin observes how in Britain Muslims have raised ‘very sharp questions... [concerning] our cosy co-habitation with the secular society: Do you believe that God is Lord over the public life of society, its economics, its politics, its culture? Or do you believe that his rule is limited to the Church and the home?’²² Christians and Muslims are committed to God’s rule in the actual historical process which brings them into a direct collision-course with modern secularism with its canon of the privatisation of religion. Hence Christian leaders such as Lesslie Newbigin see ‘Islam and Christianity as being in a sense partners in the coming century as from our different standpoints we wrestle with the future of Western culture.’²³

Although ‘To summarise is necessarily to do some injustice...’²⁴ it is still worthwhile to attempt a summary of the doctrinal commonality of Christianity and Islam. Necessarily this is indicative not definitive. Both religions affirm one personal eternal God who created a contingent universe, who providentially rules history, who sends prophetic and angelic messengers and who reveals the divine will through inspired Scriptures. Both religions affirm that obedience to this creator God is to be lived out historically, and both religions affirm that one day God will unilaterally intervene in human history on the day of judgement and will determine for all humanity their eternal destinies of heaven or hell based upon a person’s beliefs and actions. This theological continuity between Christianity and Islam is profound, especially given that the great religions of Eastern Asia, the dominant schools of Greek philosophy, modernity and post-modernity, in short almost all other religious and philosophical systems, cannot claim anything close to this level of doctrinal continuity.

With this in mind it seems entirely reasonable to understand the term ‘Abrahamic faiths’ as meaning a certain family likeness between Christianity and Islam. Their overall view of reality is extremely similar in the face of the afore-

20 Pratt, ‘Islam’, 3.

21 J. E. L. Newbigin, *Living Hope in a Changing World* (London: Alpha International, 2003), 79.

22 J. E. L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in Today’s Global City* (Birmingham: Selly Oak Colleges, 1997), 5.

23 J. E. L. Newbigin, ‘Face to Face with Ultimate Reality’, *Third Way* 17 (March 1998), no page numbers.

24 J. E. L. Newbigin, *Christian Freedom in the Modern World* (London: SCM Press, 1937), 15. This summary paragraph is necessarily generalised and does not attempt to give voice to important minority opinions and subtle nuances of the myriad different traditions and schools of thought in Christianity and Islam.

mentioned principal alternative worldviews. This justifies the use of 'Abrahamic faiths' in the study of religion both as shorthand for Christianity and Islam – level one – and as conveying some amount of theological continuity – level two. At this stage a level-three usage of 'Abrahamic faiths' seems plausible given the significant continuity surveyed, though further investigation is required.

I have briefly sketched the significant continuity between Christianity and Islam and so it is proper to now turn to an examination of doctrinal discontinuity. I shall critically evaluate the third-level usage of 'Abrahamic faiths' by assessing whether Christians and Muslims share 'a basic unity of faith' and 'claim the same revelation' by comparing Christian and Muslim doctrine vis-à-vis four central Christian dogmas: (1) the person of Jesus Christ; (2) the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ; (3) the Bible; and (4) the Triune God.

IV. Specific theological continuity and discontinuity between Christianity and Islam

1. *The person of Jesus Christ*

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate deity!²⁵

...the Christians say, 'The Messiah is the Son of God.' That is the utterance of their mouths, conforming with the unbelievers before them. God assail them! How they are perverted!²⁶

The Bible recognises a diachronic progression of divine revelation culminating in the person of Jesus Christ. The letter to the Hebrews says – 'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and *the exact imprint of God's very being*...' ²⁷ The New Testament refers to Jesus as 'in the form of God', 'the image of the invisible God', 'the Word was God... the Word was made flesh'. On one occasion Jesus said, 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.' The New Testament says that in Jesus 'all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell'. He is 'Immanuel, God with us'.²⁸

The Christian claim is that in Jesus Christ people encounter the holy and merciful God *in persona*. The Nicene Creed defines the faith of the Christian church worldwide at the heart of which is the affirmation that Jesus Christ is 'the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true

25 From the Christmas hymn *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, Charles Wesley, <http://www.hymnsite.com/> accessed August 15, 2006.

26 Surah 9:30. Cf. Surah 5:116-7 – 'And when God said, "O Jesus son of Mary, didst thou say unto men, 'Take me and my mother as gods, apart from God?'" He said, "To Thee be the glory! It is not mine to say what I have no right to."

27 Heb. 1:1-3, emphasis added.

28 Phil. 2:6; Col. 1:15; John 1:1, 14; John 14:9; Col. 1:19; Matt. 1:23.

God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being [*homoousion*] with the Father, through him all things were made...’ Alan Torrance explains that the word *homoousion* affirms ‘that the reality of God himself is present with us and for us in Christ.’²⁹ Torrance observes that this affirmation is decisive for theological epistemology and soteriology, which we shall look at in turn.³⁰

The heart of the Christian gospel is that ‘God himself is the content of his revelation...’³¹ Jesus Christ mediated knowledge of God because He is Immanuel, God with us. This is because, as Emil Brunner argues, God is *subject, person*, and therefore cannot perfectly reveal Godself except in *personal* presence. For Christians, revelation does not primarily entail propositional knowledge about God, but the establishment of a personal relationship,³² thus ‘When we speak of God’s self-revelation, we are certainly speaking of more than information and even invitation: we are speaking of reconciliation, of atonement, of salvation.’³³ The *homoousion*, the incarnation of the Son of God, constitutes the hinge between God and humanity. Without it, all ‘God-talk’ loses its foundation and can only disintegrate into unwarranted projections onto the transcendent. T. F. Torrance explains,

Without that ontic unity there is no Mediator between God and man and the identity of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with any *self-giving* or *self-revealing* on the part of the eternal God, in which event the whole structure not only of the Creed but of the Gospel itself would disintegrate and collapse.³⁴

For there to be such a concept as *divine* revelation God must reveal Godself.

Concerning the soteriological implications of the *homoousion*, Pannenberg explains that, ‘The divinity of Jesus and his freeing and redeeming significance for us are related in the closest possible way.’³⁵ Sin is viewed as a violation of the Creator and his purposes by his creatures. Hence, to the extent that sin is sin against God, and not merely some problem internal to creation, only God can be the Agent of reconciliation and forgiveness.³⁶ Only the Creator can overcome the revolt and redeem humanity.

29 A. J. Torrance, ‘Jesus in Christian Doctrine’ in Markus Bockmuehl (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 203.

30 In what follows I am indebted to A. Torrance’s discussion.

31 T. F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Towards Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1994), 9.

32 E. Brunner, *The Scandal of Christianity: The Robertson Lectures* (London: SCM Press, 1951), 47.

33 J. E. L. Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 67-68.

34 T. F. Torrance, ‘Introduction’ in T. F. Torrance (ed.), *The Incarnation: Ecumenical Studies in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed A.D. 381* (Edinburgh: The Handsell Press, 1981), xi emphasis original.

35 Quoted in A. E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* 2nd Edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 320.

36 A. Torrance, ‘Jesus in Christian Doctrine’, 205-6.

According to Torrance, Irenaeus of Lyons emphasised that ‘in Jesus, God the Son took what was ours (namely, our alienated and confused condition) and healed it so that we might have what is his (the communion with God which was God’s creative purpose for humanity from the very beginning).’ Torrance continues, ‘This insistence, conceived as a summary of the gospel, was central to patristic orthodoxy.’³⁷ In summary, if Jesus Christ is not fully divine then reconciliation is merely an action between creatures, no reconciliation with God has taken place and we are still in our sins. ‘That is why Jesus’ acts are *saving* acts, for they are *divine* acts.’³⁸

Conversely, although Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet, affirm the virgin birth and the second-coming, and acknowledge that he was God’s messenger, they are resounding in their rejection of the divinity of Christ. Al-Hahi states that, ‘All forms of God-incarnate philosophies are excluded by Islam’s monotheism...’³⁹ Explaining the Islamic understanding of revelation Isma’il al-Faruqi says:

God does *not* reveal Himself... to anyone in any way. God reveals only His will... This is God’s will and that is all we have – and we have it in perfection in the Qur’an... Christians talk about the revelation of God Himself – by God and for God – but that is the great difference between Christianity and Islam. God is transcendent, and once you talk about self-revelation you have hierophany and immanence, and then the transcendence of God is compromised. You may not have complete transcendence and self-revelation at the same time.⁴⁰

Anglican Bishop and Islamicist Michael Nazir-Ali says that Islam believes in the hiddenness of God and ‘in the impossibility of ever knowing Him.’⁴¹ The different concepts of divine revelation could not be more stark. Jesus claimed, ‘He who has seen Me has seen the Father.’⁴² Al-Bukhari records the hadith narrated by Masruq, ‘Aisha said, “If anyone tells you that Muhammad has seen his Lord, he is a liar, for Allah says: ‘No vision can grasp Him.’” (6.103) And if anyone tells you that Muhammad has seen the Unseen, he is a liar, for Allah says: “None has the knowledge of the Unseen but Allah.”’⁴³ For Muslims the Christian belief in

37 A. Torrance, ‘Jesus in Christian Doctrine’, 206.

38 T. F. Torrance, ‘Introduction’, xiv, emphasis original.

39 U. N. S. Jah Al-Hahi, ‘Christian-Muslim Relations: An Islamic Point of View’ in Silsilah Editorial Board (ed.) *Inter-Religious Dialogue: A Paradox?* (Zamboanga City: Silsilah, 1991), 157.

40 *Christian Mission and Islamic Da’wah: Proceedings of the Chambésy Consultation* (The Islamic Foundation, 1982), 47-48, quoted in Colin Chapman, *Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenge of Islam* (Leicester: IVP, 1995), 246-7.

41 *Frontiers in Muslim-Christian Encounter* (Regnum 1987), 20, quoted in Chapman, *Cross and Crescent*, 246.

42 John 14:9.

43 Sahih Bukhari Vol. 9, Book 93, Number 477, Narrated Masruq, http://www.searchtruth.com/book_display.php?book=93&translator=1, accessed October 19, 2006.

Jesus Christ is quite intolerable. Likewise, Christians find Islamic belief about Jesus quite insufficient.⁴⁴ Greek Orthodox Archbishop Methodios explains:

Neither Christianity without the incarnation nor the Creed without the homoousion is acceptable to us. The first constitutes the essence of our Faith. Christianity without the incarnation of God is meaningless and useless. Christ without being homoousios to the Father is neither the Revelation of God nor our Redeemer.⁴⁵

It is clear, therefore, that Christian and Islamic beliefs about Jesus Christ are simply incompatible.

2. *The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ*

Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures...⁴⁶

That they said (in boast), 'We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah';- but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not.⁴⁷

Although 'The New Testament thinkers seldom separate the Cross and the Resurrection; they seldom think of the *sacrifice* of Christ without thinking of the *triumph* of Christ',⁴⁸ we shall discuss them sequentially, starting with the crucifixion. The cross is the quintessential symbol for Christianity and was central to Jesus' mission, for he came to give his life as a ransom for many.⁴⁹ The message of the cross is central to the New Testament for it represents the redeeming and reconciling work of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul states, 'while we still were sinners Christ died for us.'⁵⁰ The cross represents the scandalous claim that God would lower Godself, not only to the point of becoming human, but much further, to the point of humiliation, crucifixion and death. 'Tis mystery all: the Immortal dies' says Charles Wesley. The two ritual acts central to Christianity,

44 Newbigin accurately depicts a Christian objection to the Islamic view of Jesus. 'The figure of Jesus which some of our non-Christian friends would gladly include in their pantheon [of prophets] is not the Jesus who actually lived here on earth.' J. E. L. Newbigin, 'The Wretchedness and Greatness of the Church', *National Christian Council Review* 76 (1956), 472.

45 Archbishop Methodios of Thyateira and Great Britain, 'The Homoousion' in T. F. Torrance (ed.), *The Incarnation*, 11.

46 1 Cor. 15:3-4.

47 Surah 4:157.

48 W. Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter: The Daily Study Bible* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1965), 219.

49 Matt. 20:28.

50 Rom. 5:8.

baptism and the eucharist, are both consciously centred on Jesus' death. Additionally, the cross represents Christian discipleship, for Jesus said, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me'.⁵¹

Without the resurrection the message of the cross is not good news but together Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection form the centre of the Christian gospel. The apostle Peter said,

This man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.⁵²

It is clear that the resurrection is integral to the gospel, and without it the gospel is no longer good news, as the apostle Paul explains:

If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith... For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins... If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.⁵³

Jesus' resurrection is the basis of both Peter's gospel and Paul's. The resurrection of Jesus vindicated the authority of Jesus' teachings, ensures the believer's salvation, and provides the means by which Jesus serves as the believers High Priest. The resurrection affirms that sinful humanity is not beyond redemption, 'the deviance of humanity's will, with its fateful leaning towards death, has not been allowed to uncreate what God has created... the resurrection of Christ is a new affirmation of God's first decision that Adam should live'.⁵⁴

By contrast, Nazir-Ali explains that the Qur'an's attitude to the death of Jesus is very ambiguous. He interprets the Qur'an to affirm the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus,⁵⁵ although this is universally rejected by orthodox Islamic teaching. Nazir-Ali says,

the verse, which has dominated Muslim thinking about the death of Jesus is 4.157... Muslims have traditionally interpreted this verse to mean that Jesus was not crucified but that either Judas or Simon of Cyrene was substituted in his place, while he was taken up alive to heaven. In order to reconcile this view with the other passages in the Qur'an which speak of Jesus'

51 Luke 9:23.

52 Acts 2:23-24.

53 1 Cor. 15:14-19, NIV.

54 O. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 13-14.

55 M. Nazir-Ali, *Islam: A Christian Perspective* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1983), 18-19. Nazir-Ali bases his argument upon Surah 3:56 and 19:33. G. Parrinder also believes that the Qur'an teaches the crucifixion and death of Jesus. *Jesus in the Qur'an*, London: Faber, 1965, 105.

death, Muslim commentators have often adopted the view that although Jesus was taken up alive, his death will occur at his second coming...⁵⁶

Although Riddell and Cotterell maintain that “the actual meaning of the passage [Surah 4:157] is not clear”, they say “The most obvious meaning is that given by the majority of Muslim scholars: Jesus was not crucified.”⁵⁷ Although Muhammad knew that prophets could be rejected and killed, nevertheless, ‘many Muslims find it hard to believe that a prophet like Jesus could be *crucified*... [since] crucifixion was a death cursed in the Old Testament.’⁵⁸ The control belief behind the Islamic denial of the crucifixion of Jesus is the nature of divine providence – God would not allow his prophet to be so humiliated.⁵⁹

In summary, the Qur’an does not accept that Jesus was crucified, thus irreducibly separating Islam from Christianity.⁶⁰ Evidently, since the crucifixion of Jesus is denied so too is the resurrection.

Jesus Christ’s death by crucifixion and his resurrection from the dead forms the centre of the Christian Gospel. Diametrically opposed to this, the Ahmadi writer Muhammad Zafrullah Khan correctly perceives the implication of Islamic teaching concerning the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, ‘Once it is established that Jesus did not die on the cross, there was no accursed death, no bearing of sins of mankind, no resurrection, no ascension and no atonement. The entire structure of church theology is thereby demolished.’⁶¹ Though a little aggressive in tone, Khan’s logic cannot be faulted. Christian and Islamic beliefs concerning Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection are irreconcilably contradictory.

3. *The Bible*

Christians believe that the Bible is a unique witness to the sovereign grace of God at work in the history of Israel and above all in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Biblical interpretation is one of theology’s primary tasks and it is a fundamental source for all Christian theology and ethics. Theology’s dependence upon the Bible is absolute, for as Murray Rae says, ‘Theology is reliant on apostolic testimony to the fact of God’s Word, conveyed through Scripture and the tradition of the church. If that conveyance has become thoroughly cor-

56 Nazir-Ali, *Islam*, 17.

57 P. G. Riddell and P. Cotterell, *Islam in Context: Past, Present, and Future* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 78.

58 Riddell and Cotterell, *Islam in Context*, 79, cf. Deut. 21:23.

59 This is not to suggest that God would not allow his prophets to be killed, for the Qur’an testifies to this fact, but that he would not allow them to be crucified.

60 Despite the fact that ‘By the standards of modern historiography the crucifixion of Jesus is one of the most certain events in past history’, it is consistently denied by Islamic teaching. W. Montgomery Watt, *Islam and Christianity Today: A Contribution to Dialogue*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983, 144.

61 *Deliverance From The Cross* (Southfields: London Mosque, 1978), 89, quoted in Riddell and Cotterell, *Islam in Context*, 80.

rupted, then theology has been cut off from its only possible foundation.⁶² According to New Testament scholar Gordon Fee, ‘*the Bible is God’s word spoken in human words in history.*’⁶³ Christians believe that the Bible is divinely inspired and as such is seen as always relevant in all times and all places to all people. Although Christian communities differ in their understanding of biblical inspiration, ‘formally it has always been held and continues to be held by every major Christian tradition that Scripture is to be treated as “authoritative” in some sense.’⁶⁴ The Bible is also central to Christian devotion. Emil Brunner said, ‘The Bible is the soil from which all Christian faith grows. For if there were no Bible we should know nothing of Jesus Christ... Christian faith is faith in Christ, and Christ meets us and speaks to us in the Bible. Christian faith is Bible faith.’⁶⁵ The Bible is not only central to Christian theology, worship and personal devotion, but furthermore, the Bible and the Church are mutually definitive, for “Scripture” is that text which functions authoritatively within the church, and “church” is that community which treats Scripture as authoritative for its life and faith, and allows it to shape its own distinctive identity.⁶⁶

The Islamic attitude to the Bible is theoretically positive but actually negative, incorporating both continuity and discontinuity. Positively, the Qur’an recognises the Tawrat (Torah), Zabur (Psalms) and the Injil (Gospel) *as originally given* as Scripture. Surah 3:3 reads, ‘It is He Who sent down to thee (step by step), in truth, the Book, confirming what went before it; and He sent down the Law (of Moses) and the Gospel (of Jesus) before this, as a guide to mankind...’ The Qur’an depicts itself as the last revealed Holy Book, confirming and superseding previous scriptures. However, there are significant incongruities between the Bible and the Qur’an. These have been explained differently from within and outside of Islamic faith. Expressing the latter view, Riddell and Cotterell say,

Encountering the Jewish and Christian Scriptures only orally, Muhammad was unable to distinguish between canonical Scripture and legendary accretions. Through the Qur’an, both alike were invested with the authority of Islamic scripture, and both Jews and Christians were not slow in pointing out the discrepancies between their Scriptures and the Qur’an. This in turn led to the Qur’anic accusation that Jews and Christians had allowed their Scriptures to become corrupt, or worse, had knowingly corrupted them in favour of their respective theologies...⁶⁷

62 M. Rae, ‘Prolegomena’ in P. Metzger (ed.), *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology* (London & New York: T & T Clark International, 2005), 18.

63 G. D. Fee, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 30 emphasis original.

64 T. Hart, ‘Tradition, Authority, and a Christian Approach to the Bible As Scripture’ in Joel B. Green & Max Turner (eds.), *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids & Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000), 193.

65 E. Brunner, *Our Faith* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1949), 7.

66 Hart, ‘Tradition’, 193.

67 Riddell and Cotterell, *Islam in Context*, 213.

Although Islam retains a theoretical belief in inspiration the Old and New Testaments Muslims do not generally accept the extant versions of either. Kate Zebiri explains, 'On the basis of several Qur'anic passages which imply the Jews and Christians forgot, altered or suppressed parts of their own scriptures, Muslim scholars elaborated the doctrine of *tahrif* (scriptural alteration or corruption).'⁶⁸ Islam sharply distinguishes between the Bible as originally given, which it accepts, and the Bible extant today, which it largely rejects. Given that there is no textual evidence to support this dichotomy, the Bible *as originally given* is effectively non-existent (one could question whether it ever existed), leaving Muslims unanimous in their rejection of the Bible revered by Christians worldwide.

In conclusion, the Bible is held by Christians to be sacred, central to Christian theology, ethics and devotion. Islam theoretically affirms the Bible as originally given but rejects the Bible extant today believing that it has been irretrievably corrupted and superseded by the Qur'an. Christian and Islamic beliefs concerning the Bible remain irreconcilable.

4. *The Triune God*

In his book *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, Jürgen Moltmann says, 'The New Testament talks about God by proclaiming in narrative the relationships of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, which are relationships of fellowship and are open to the world.'⁶⁹ That is why Christian theology has maintained that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Although the New Testament does not contain a formal Trinitarian theology it does convey a 'primary trinitarianism' which underlies and permeates the apostolic writings.⁷⁰ Jesus taught his disciples to baptise 'in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.'⁷¹ In concluding his second letter to the Corinthian church the apostle Paul writes, 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.'⁷² Christian theology has understood the doctrine of the Trinity as *tres personae, una substantia* (Latin West) or one *ousia* three *hypostases* (Greek East).

An indispensable constituent of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is a high Christology. 'The importance of the confession "Jesus is Lord" is not only that Jesus is divine but that God is Christlike.'⁷³ If one 'maintains the unity of essence between Christ and God, then', says Moltmann, 'not only is Christ understood in divine terms; God is also understood in Christian ones.' He continues, 'The inten-

68 K. Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 6. Qur'anic passages include 2:75; 4:46; 5:13, 41. Watt notes that although this doctrine of *tahrif* was never precisely formulated it did not lessen its usefulness as a 'defence' against Christianity and Judaism. Watt, *Islam and Christianity Today*, 2.

69 J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, 46, emphasis removed.

70 Cf. R. W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Vol. 1: The Triune God* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 90-4.

71 Matt. 28:19.

72 2 Cor. 13:14.

73 A. M. Ramsey quoted in A. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 323.

tion and consequence of the doctrine of the Trinity is not only the deification of Christ; it is even more the Christianization of the concept of God. God cannot be comprehended without Christ, and Christ cannot be understood without God.⁷⁴

The Islamic view of the God of Christianity, like the Islamic view of the person of Jesus and the Bible, consists of both continuity and discontinuity, affirmation and refutation. Positively, the Qur'an regards the God of Judaism and Christianity as its own God.

Say [to the People of the Book], 'We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; Our Allah and your Allah is one; and it is to Him we bow (in Islam).'⁷⁵

There is partial continuity between Islamic and Christian conceptions of God; for both God creates, is one, rules, reveals, loves, judges, and forgives.⁷⁶ However, there is also significant discontinuity, for Islam also pronounces a decisively negative judgement on the Christian doctrine of God.

O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion... Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a messenger of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allah and His messengers. Say not 'Trinity': desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is one Allah: Glory be to Him: (far exalted is He) above having a son.⁷⁷

It has already been noted that Islamic monotheism rejects the incarnation of God in Christ. The doctrine of *tawhid* asserts that God is one and there is but one God. To Muhammad the doctrine of the trinity looked like tritheism, thus apparently conflicting with the doctrine of *tawhid*. The problem is further complicated by the fact that Muhammad 'thought of the Christian Trinity as Father, Mary, and their son Jesus. (Surah 5:116)⁷⁸ Watt maintains that the Qur'an criticises tritheism and not the doctrine of the Trinity, a criticism with which Christians would concur.⁷⁹ Whilst Christians want to distinguish between the Trinity and tritheism, Muslims see no distinction: 'For Muslims, the Trinity is nothing other than tritheism. Therefore, Christians are not really monotheists, but 'associators', having committed the sin of shirk, that is, associating other deities with God.'⁸⁰ In Islam *shirk* is the gravest of sins, since '*Shirk* is the fundamental

74 Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 131-2.

75 Surah 29:46.

76 Chapman, *Cross and Crescent*, 218.

77 Surah 4:171

78 Riddell and Cotterell, *Islam in Context*, 76. This assumes that Muhammad wrote the Qur'an, an important but separate issue which I shall not discuss here. Cf. *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad* trans. & ed. by Ibn Warraq, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000, which argues an alternative to the traditional account.

79 Watt, *Islam and Christianity Today*, 50.

80 R. Jukko, *Trinitarian Theology in Christian-Muslim Encounters* (2001), 94-5, quoted in V-M. Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Christian Theology of Religions* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 156.

state of being in revolt against God,' and is 'the *only* sin that God cannot forgive, because it denies Himself, and prevents forgiveness'.⁸¹

Belief in the Triune God as depicted in the New Testament presentation of God and central to Christian orthodoxy is held by Islam to be the only unforgivable sin. On this aspect of faith Christian and Muslim beliefs could not be more discontinuous.

V. Evaluating the term 'Abrahamic faiths'

Although there are elements of continuity as described above, these are strictly derivative of the central tenets of the Christian faith. From a Christian theological perspective, Christian and Islamic dogma are predominantly discontinuous, whereas continuity between the two faiths is central to Islam's self-understanding.⁸² At its heart Christian faith believes that the Triune God has once and for all time revealed Godself, in person, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as proclaimed by the apostles in the Bible. This is the lowest denominator behind which it is impossible to go and accurately retain the designation 'Christian'. Integral to Islamic faith is the categorical denial of these Christian beliefs. Norman Daniel concludes his book *Islam and the West* by stating that between Christianity and Islam 'there are irreducible differences between non-negotiable doctrines... The Christian creeds and the Qur'an are simply incompatible and there is no possibility of reconciling the content of the two faiths, each of which is exclusive, as long as they retain their identities'.⁸³ Christian efforts at emphasising the continuity between these two great faiths therefore focus on derivative subjects, such as belief in a personal, omnipotent, omniscient creator God, rather than on Christology and soteriology which enjoy dogmatic and noetic priority. To focus on similarities, such as the divine sending of and reverence for Jesus, is to completely miss the point. Alan Torrance writes:

The whole *raison d'être* of the church is the recognition that Jesus is not simply a good person, or an inspired prophet, or a person with spiritual insight but, rather, the very presence of God identifying with humanity and revealing himself to humanity in a reconciling act of pure and unanticipated grace.⁸⁴

81 C. Glassé, 'Shirk', *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam* (London: Stacey International, 1989), 370, emphasis original. Surah 4:116 – 'Allah forgiveth not (The sin of) joining other gods with Him; but He forgiveth whom He pleaseth other sins than this: one who joins other gods with Allah, Hath strayed far, far away (from the right).'

82 Zebiri rightly says, 'For Muslims, this element of continuity is integral to their self-definition, while for Christians the opposite is true: it is difficult to accord validity to Islam without in some sense undermining the finality and the ultimacy of the revelation they believe they have received in Christ.' *Muslims and Christians Face to Face*, 5.

83 N. Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Oxford: Oneworld Classics in Religious Studies, 1997), quoted in Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face*, 13.

84 A. Torrance, 'Jesus in Christian Doctrine', 200.

Thus the commonality implied by the term 'Abrahamic faiths' is significant from the standpoint of the phenomenology of religion (Section 2) but superficial from a Christian theological perspective (Section 3). Whilst stressing similarities is often expedient for political and practical purposes, to overlook the severity of theological discontinuity is to do an injustice to Islamic⁸⁵ and/or Christian⁸⁶ dogma. From a Muslim standpoint Sheikh Ahmed Zaki Yamani states:

In the great debate between Christians and Muslims however, there are areas of fundamental principles where no amount of logical discussion can bring the two sides nearer to each other and where therefore the existence of an impasse must be recognised. Issues like the Trinity, the Divinity of Christ and the Crucifixion *so central to Christian beliefs, have no place in the Islamic faith*, having been categorically refuted by the Qur'an, on the authenticity of which there is no discord among Muslims.⁸⁷

Thus Cardinal Pignedoli, Mahmud 'Awan, and Seymour Siegel are incorrect in their third-level usage of 'Abrahamic faiths', as is Douglas Pratt who comes to similar conclusions. Christianity and Islam do not share a basic unity of faith, they do not claim the same revelation nor revere exactly the same historical personalities, for Christians cannot acknowledge Muhammad's prophethood. Such assertions are merely statements of faith rather than arguments supported by the evidence. In summary, Christians and Muslims do not share the same *Abrahamic* faith. This third-level usage of 'Abrahamic faiths', however well intended, must be categorically rejected as inaccurate and misleading.

Is the God of Islam the same as the God of Christianity? This question, raised in Section 1 by Polkinghorne, Pignedoli and Pratt, is a colossal subject in its own right which deserves much fuller treatment than I can here attempt, so I will limit myself to some preliminary observations. Although Pignedoli and Pratt would respond in the affirmative, this is actually a kind of trick question in which the simple answer of either 'yes' or 'no' is insufficient. The question needs to be broken down into several smaller questions. Is the Christian's idea of God the same as the Muslim's idea of God? No. Is there anything in common between the Christian's idea of God and the Muslim's idea of God? Yes. Is it possible to identify the God of Islam and Christianity? Both the Qur'an⁸⁸ and the late Pope,⁸⁹ two

85 Such as Nazir-Ali and Parrinder's claim that the Qur'an in fact confirms the crucifixion of Jesus, despite universal Islamic denial – see footnote 55 above.

86 Such as Christian scholar D. Pratt who asks Christians to accept Mohammad's prophethood and the divine inspiration of the Qur'an – see references 13 and 14 above.

87 Sheikh A. Z. Yamani, 'Foreword' in Watt, *Islam and Christianity Today*, ix-x, emphasis added.

88 Although Islam condemns what it perceives as the doctrine of the Trinity in no uncertain terms, the Qur'an also clearly states that Christians and Muslims worship the same God (Surah 29:46).

89 The Catholic Church has recently made many pronouncements such as the often-quoted statement by the late Pope John Paul II, 'As I have often said in other meetings with Muslims, your God and ours is one and the same, and we are brothers and sisters in the faith of Abraham.' Quoted in Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism*, 156.

unlikely allies, say ‘yes’. However, as we have seen, when Christians and Muslims *say* God, they do not mean exactly the same thing. Kärkkäinen explains the Christian difficulty as follows:

The trinitarian doctrine affirms that the only way to know God is through Jesus Christ and that there is no decisive knowledge of God apart from this Mediator... Therefore, without leaving trinitarian parameters, it is extremely difficult for a Christian theologian to affirm an identity between this trinitarian God and the God(s) of other religions.⁹⁰

For Christians especially it is no simple matter to affirm that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. For Muslims the qur’anic endorsement (Surah 29:46) removes the formal but not necessarily the material difficulty.

Even at a second-level usage, ‘Abrahamic faiths’ emphasises the similarities of Christianity and Islam whilst remaining silent over their differences. As has been discussed, this can be useful and prudent with certain goals in mind. However, to suggest that Christianity and Islam are in the same ‘family’ of religions, or are different species of the same genus, is to prioritise derivative Christian doctrine, such as God’s general providential activity in history, over central Christian doctrine, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Asking ‘Abrahamic faiths’ to bear increasingly heavy theological loads proportionately prioritises derivative Christian dogma over the central tenets of the Christian faith. The incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as witnessed in the Bible are irreducibly foundational to Christian faith. Thus Newbiggin contends that, to use missiologist Hendrik Kraemer’s favourite phrase, the gospel is ‘*sui generis*, something that cannot be put into a class with other events. It cannot be treated as one example of a class of things called “religion”⁹¹ or one might add, a class of faiths called ‘Abrahamic faiths’. A second-level usage of ‘Abrahamic faiths’ seeks to incorporate Christian faith into another classification and is therefore problematic, as Newbiggin demonstrates:

The New Testament repeatedly asserts, in one way or another, that the whole fact of Christ (his incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection) is either a stone of stumbling, to be discarded, or else the corner stone on which the whole building is itself constructed. It is not something which can be fitted into another kind of edifice, a structure of belief, built on another foundation. It is either something to be rejected, or something which becomes the new starting point for all thought and all action. If the Jesus whom we know through the apostolic witness is truly the word through whom and for whom all things have their being, then there cannot exist any more comprehensive frame of thought into which he could be fitted.⁹²

90 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity and Religious Pluralism*, 161.

91 J. E. L. Newbiggin, ‘The Christian Faith and the World Religions’ in Geoffrey Wainwright (ed.), *Keeping the Faith: Essays to Mark the Centenary of Lux Mundi* (London: SPCK, 1989), 330.

92 Newbiggin, ‘The Gospel in Today’s Global City’, 12.

This 'lowest common denominator' aspect of the second-level usage of 'Abrahamic faiths' is its major shortcoming.

The primary difficulty of the first-level usage of 'Abrahamic faiths' is that it can be confusing. Although it does not intend to use the term *theologically*, the term does not exist in a theological vacuum and so what is intentionally left empty by writers such as Dickens is filled by the reader familiar with other uses of the term; hence the confusion. Furthermore, the first-level usage does not succeed in actually *saying* anything significant.

It is for these reasons just outlined that two possible courses of action remain. The *first* is simply to avoid using the term altogether, an approach practised by some scholars of religion.⁹³ The untenability of the third-level usage of the term, the difficulties attached to a second-level usage, and the almost negligible gain of the first-level usage weigh in favour of abandoning its use altogether. The *second* option is to use the term whilst carefully defining what is meant by its usage. It is convenient shorthand as used by W. T. Dickens (first-level), and it does express some truth in conveying theological commonality (second-level), though this has its dangers. The chief advantage, I contend, of this approach is that it is a very valuable and functional term for inter-faith dialogue, and it is to some extent accurate, depending on usage. What is unambiguously objectionable is using 'Abrahamic faiths' in an undefined manner which rides roughshod over the important nuances and blurs distinctive theological convictions. However, even in a carefully qualified sense, this second approach is problematic.

The utility of 'Abrahamic faiths' for inter-faith dialogue has been seriously questioned, albeit indirectly, by F. E. Peters.⁹⁴ He observes that according to Surah 2:135 the 'religion of Abraham' was the pristine pre-Jewish and pre-Christian monotheistic religion. 'Abraham, the Quran pronounced triumphantly, came before both the Torah and the Gospel (3:55-58). Abraham was, in fact, the first Muslim, the first submitter to God in absolute monotheism (2:127-134).'⁹⁵ Far from being a term that unites these faiths it is actually an assertion of religious supremacy, the will to power. Muhammad's claim to practise the 'religion of Abraham' did not function as a uniting slogan in the modern interfaith sense, but from the perspective of Christianity was subversive in claiming to be the only authentic religious community. In the Medinan Surahs the Qur'an takes up the task of distinguishing between Muslims from both Jews and Christians 'by recourse to the notion of a religion of Abraham, a faith community that antedated both Judaism and Christianity and of which the Muslims were the most authen-

93 In private conversations with me Dr. Gregory Dawes and Dr. Simon Rae have confirmed that they both take this approach.

94 *Indirectly* because Peters does not discuss the term 'Abrahamic faiths' with its current interfaith usage in mind, but solely with regard to its original Qur'anic usage. But this, of course, has direct implications for contemporary usage.

95 Peters, *The Monotheists*, 102, emphasis original.

tic representatives.⁹⁶ This directly contradicts the central Christian claim that God has, once for all, been definitively revealed in Christ, for it posits an authentic and primal faith that precedes and qualifies the coming of Jesus. From the perspective of the Qur'an, Christianity is an Abrahamic religion that has been corrupted and superseded by Islam. Thus 'Abrahamic faiths' is a distinctly Islamic term that subverts historic Judaism and Christianity, the very opposite of its alleged intended usage.

In conclusion, we have seen that there is significant continuity *and* discontinuity between Christian and Islamic doctrine, analogous to my second-level usage of the term 'Abrahamic faiths'. That term has been invested with a variety of meanings many of which are simply unsuitable, therefore it is crucial to establish an academic convention for the meaning of 'Abrahamic faiths'. The most logical choice is not any of my three levels of usage but its original use in the Qur'an as shown by F. E. Peters, where it is a loaded term which serves the Islamic *da'wah* by undermining the authenticity of rival faith claims. Therefore, I conclude that 'Abrahamic faiths' is a term that should be abandoned by scholars *except* in its original Qur'anic signification.⁹⁷ Consequently, its usage should also be abandoned in interfaith activities as a concealed will to power which directly contradicts the spirit of such activities, and a more suitable alternative term found. The title of F. E. Peters' book, *The Monotheists*, comes readily to mind as a replacement term that could serve the important purpose of furthering interfaith dialogue.⁹⁸

VI. Implications for Christian-Muslim inter-faith dialogue

Pratt rightly observes that 'Interreligious dialogue, as an intentional and institutionalized activity... is one of the most notable advances that have occurred in the field of religion during the latter half of the twentieth century.'⁹⁹ Remarkable advances have continued into the twenty-first century also. This is partly because religious (and political) leaders have recognised the importance and necessity of dialogue. 'Abrahamic faiths' has proved to be a useful umbrella term and a powerful symbol of unity for Jews, Christians and Muslims engaging in

96 Peters, *The Monotheists*, 122. Peters makes this same point in *The Children of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, A New Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 21, 37.

97 All the evidence points to 'Abrahamic faiths' and its cognates being originally Qur'anic, and I am unaware of any evidence of its prior usage.

98 As with all terms that seek to unite differing beliefs and traditions, that term will be interpreted in diverse ways that are in accordance with each tradition. These diverse interpretations may even be mutually contradictory and vehemently opposed to each other, as it the case with Islamic doctrine of *tawhid* and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

99 D. Pratt, *Rethinking Religion: Exploratory Investigations* (ATF Series; 6, Adelaide: ATF Press, 2003), 69.

inter-religious dialogue, despite its original Qur'anic meaning. Needless to say, such symbols are desperately needed. Since I have in this essay scrutinised that term, I shall here offer two considerations concerning the impact upon inter-faith dialogue.

First, inter-faith dialogue needs to be more scrupulous in its terminology, careful in its claims, and precise in its articulation, for good will must not be allowed to negate rigorous scholarly exposition. The otherwise excellent Christian Islamicist W. Montgomery Watt concludes his book *Islam and Christianity Today* with the words, 'the various world religions [need to] accept one another as fellow-climbers of the cloud covered mountain on whose summit in the mists God dwells unseen.'¹⁰⁰ This reveals a total misunderstanding of the central Christian claim that "the Word was made flesh", in other words, that the Word God thundered from the top of Mount Sinai came down from the mountain, 'became flesh and made his dwelling among us.'¹⁰¹ In this spirit Newbigin says,

As a human race we are on a journey and we need to know the road. It is not true that all roads lead to the top of the same mountain. There are roads which lead over the precipice. In Christ we have been shown the road. We cannot treat that knowledge as a private matter for ourselves. It concerns the whole human family.¹⁰²

The pluralistic approach of Montgomery Watt is not evidentially based but is itself an instance of religious belief.¹⁰³ Furthermore, most Muslims and Christians are likely to resist attempts at radical pluralism.¹⁰⁴ Behind pluralism's popularity in inter-faith dialogue is the assumption that the removal of exclusivist claims is a *necessary condition* to fruitful dialogue. On this religion scholars Knitter, Hellwig, Hick, Kaufman and Morris all concur.¹⁰⁵ This is problematic for both

100 Watt, *Islam and Christianity Today*, 146.

101 John 1:14.

102 Newbigin, *The Gospel In a Pluralist Society*, 183.

103 Newbigin says, '...the dogma that all religions are the same...if you examine it, you will see that, of course, under the cloak of neutrality, it is really a particular form of religious belief.' J. E. L. Newbigin, *Christ Our Eternal Contemporary* (Madras: Christian Literature Society of India, 1968), 84. He further asserts, 'Don't ask us to believe the dogma that all religions are really the same because they are not. It is only possible to insist that they are all the same by not looking at any of them: and that is what is usually done.' *Ibid*, 4.

104 Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face*, 13.

105 P. F. Knitter, 'Religious Diversity, Historical Consciousness, and Christian Theology' in J. Hick and P. F. Knitter (eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, 36; M. K. Hellwig, 'The Thrust and Tenor of Our Conversation' in L. J. Swidler (ed.), *Death or Dialogue?*, 55; Hick, as discussed in Dickens, 'Frank Conversations'; Gordon D. Kaufman, 'Religious Diversity, Historical Consciousness, and Christian Theology,' in J. Hick and P. F. Knitter (eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, 37; P. Morris, 'The Role of Interfaith Activities in Building Peace', *Otago University Peace Lecture* (Dunedin: Otago University, 2006), 4.

Christianity and Islam which are missionary religions¹⁰⁶ who make exclusive truth claims.

Second, disagreement need not preclude fruitful dialogue; indeed it often provides the occasion of it. W. T. Dickens is very helpful here. First, he usefully distinguishes between soteriological exclusivism and religious truth claim exclusivism: both religions affirm the latter but not necessarily the former.¹⁰⁷ Second, drawing an analogy with the political process Dickens shows that fundamental disagreement in discussion need not preclude it being fruitful; the two are not mutually exclusive. He writes,

Hick appears to be saying that one will almost certainly grow to hate those with whom one fundamentally disagrees. An example drawn from the sphere of politics suggests that is not necessarily so. People frequently disagree with their immediate neighbours over a range of political issues both take very seriously. Yet they can still respect one another's mutual openness to argument, patience, humility, good humour, and commitment to a political party's ideals and practices – all while still thinking that they are right and their neighbour wrong. Not obviously or culpably wrong, but still wrong. If that is so for political disagreements, why must religious ones necessarily be different? There is nothing that compels disputants to react with hatred in the face of their mutual disagreement. Moreover, we know that fruitful dialogue has gone on among those who do not endorse Hick's program... To put the point oversimply, I do not think I must be in fundamental agreement with someone else to respect and learn from her.¹⁰⁸

Disagreements are natural when those committed to public truth meet in dialogue. To help facilitate constructive disagreement in inter-faith dialogue Dickens counsels that participants cultivate the three virtues of honesty, empathy and humility.¹⁰⁹ He rightly encourages participants to be honest about their agreements and disagreements, to seek to identify imaginatively with the

106 '...to be a Christian is to believe that Jesus is the Sovereign Lord and Saviour of all mankind. And to believe that, in any real sense, is to be committed to the Church's mission in all the nations.' J. E. L. Newbigin, 'Mission of the Church to All the Nations: Address Given at the NCC CUSA General Assembly, San Francisco' (Geneva: WCC Ecumenical Centre Library, 1960), 2. 'It is every Muslim's duty to call all humans to Islam, to invite and warn all humans equally to enter into the community of faith... Islam is a missionary religion requiring its adherents to offer and teach the divine message to all humans and to invite them all to join the faith.' 'Awan, 'The Faith Community', 86.

107 Dickens, 'Frank Conversations', 400

108 Dickens, 'Frank Conversations', 406. P. Morris concurs. 'My personal view is that we are much too polite to each other and we need to raise our real differences alongside out share[d] concerns if we are to develop the levels of trust necessary for living with our differences. We do share many things but our real and profound differences are just as important part of our faiths.' 'The Role of Interfaith Activities in Building Peace', 10.

109 Dickens, 'Frank Conversations', 413ff.

partner's existential situation, and to be humble, which 'is not a justification for timidity... [but] is an antidote to arrogance.'¹¹⁰ I would add the importance of common action towards common goals such as justice, development or ecology, which roots inter-faith dialogue in the day-to-day realities of living in a shared world.

Authentic inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims is essential, as the Vatican has repeatedly acknowledged.¹¹¹ Whilst acknowledging a degree of Christian-Muslim theological continuity and also affirming aspects of fundamental doctrinal dissimilarity the prospects for inter-faith dialogue are promising indeed. May future, limited, usage of the term 'Abrahamic faiths' help and not hinder this important work.

Abstract

The term 'Abrahamic faiths' and its cognates, prominent in inter-faith and political conversations, has now entered, largely uncritically, into academic discourse. It is not clearly defined and is used by scholars in different and potentially misleading ways. Thus far the term has evaded *theological* critique; this paper is a contribution to towards just such a critique.

The 'Abrahamic faiths' are Judaism, Christianity and Islam, but, this paper shall focus on Christianity and Islam. I propose to critique the term 'Abrahamic faiths' by evaluating three different 'levels of usage' employed by scholars of religion.

Thus far the term has evaded critique, hence the significance and importance of this undertaking.

This evaluation will first involve examining Christian and Islamic theological continuity. Then, I shall investigate Christian and Islamic theological dissimilarity concerning four core Christian doctrines. My objective is to show that the continuity and discontinuity of Christian and Islamic doctrine requires careful qualification of the term 'Abrahamic faiths'. I conclude with some constructive reflections for inter-faith dialogue.

110 Dickens, 'Frank Conversations', 417.

111 F. Gioia (ed.), *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council to John Paul II (1963-2005)* (Boston: Pauline Press, 2006).