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Judaisms, Christianities, Islams

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JACOB NEUSNER, JUL 27 2011

To deal with the diversities of opinion in law and theology in the writings of authoritative Jews, Christians, and Muslims a while ago, I invented the plural, that is, a way of saying there is no single normative Islam, Christianity, or Judaism. All world religions encompass diverse components and we might as well come to grips with the internal diversity of religions. After generations of theological harmonization, we recognize the obvious and admit that there is no single Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, but only Judaisms, Christianities, Islams.

What has imposed this radical change? Norms of religion require definition. The crisis facing Islam confronted with the question "Is Islam a religion of peace?" forms only one immediate cause. The teachings on Islamic peace conflict with the reading of Jihad on the part of certain sectors of Islamic community. Judaism confronts secular and religious voices, and Reform and Orthodox Judaism have little in common. Christianity has the Holy Father in Rome and many communities that find their essence in denying the priority of the Pope. All three religious traditions have fought and today fight wars of definition. Plural definition overcomes wars of reformation in not only Christianity but also Islam and Judaism.

The adventure of a plural definition takes account of the facts in conflict. What defines a religion? Belief or behaviour? Individual preferences or communal traits? In general, people define religions by saying what they believe, for instance, reciting a creed. A definition of Judaism, therefore, could begin with the statement that Judaism believes God is one, unique, just, merciful, and concerned for us and our actions, hence "ethical monotheism." However, belief is too small a conception of what a religion is and accomplishes. Religion transcends matters of belief, because it shapes behaviour. It is rarely a matter of individual predilection, but commonly a social construction. Religion makes a difference when it accounts for the life of the social group that professes that religion. So much for defining religion only in terms of the worldview, the truth claims, and the theological structure and system. Such a definition is necessary, but insufficient.

Yet, defining religion mainly in terms of what people do also tells only part of the definition. For, rites and rituals require explanation, often in the form of a story. Religions do take positions on theological questions, they do set forth explanations of things, and not merely require actions. Therefore, if theology is necessary but insufficient, so does religious practice demand reasoned explanation within the larger intellectual system that sustains a religion.

Yet again, defining a religion in terms of belief and practice still leaves out a third essential component of that definition. The third element concerns exactly who practices the faith and affirms its propositions, where do we find the believers, and in what context within the larger social order do their beliefs take place. Religions are public, communal, and social; the faithful do things together; individuals join religious communities. And, forming communities takes place over time, so the historical unfolding of a religious tradition enters in.

It is the social dimension that makes religion something we can study. If the individual reports what he or she believes, that will amount to a subjective fact not susceptible to cultural analysis. Then when we study peoples' personal religions, we accumulate facts that remain inert, not subject to analysis and generalization. When a group of people, however, form a community defined by a common belief, that is an objective fact of the social order, subject to study and scrutiny.

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Written by Jacob Neusner

So a definition of propositions and practices without close attention to their social context in the everyday world is necessary but insufficient. Where religion makes a difference in the world, such that we can study and analyze concrete facts, it is in the social reality of specific religions — in history, in community, in the here-and-now of public action. So, in this context of objective learning, religion matters for several reasons.

First, religion is public, it is social, something people do together, and everyone gets a vote, so what people believe tells us only about what individuals think or are supposed to think.

Second, religion governs what we do, telling us who we are and how we should live, while what people believe tells us only about attitudes. Religion therefore encompasses not only beliefs or attitudes — matters of mind and intellect — but also actions and conduct.

And third, religion forms the foundation of communities of the faithful and presents the world with objective facts. The ethnos is formed by the people otherwise unrelated to one another but who see one another as an extended family, brothers and sisters for example.

Judaism, or Islam or Christianity sorts out through time how various religious formulations of that religion's practices and beliefs should take shape. It identifies the major periods in the life of the paramount religious system and proposes to show how what happened to that religious system correlates what happened to the religious community – important events that demand explanation, urgent issues that require attention – with the ongoing unfolding of the system.

In the case of Judaism, as of Christianity and Islam, which are equally complex, a major problem concerns the very definition of the faith: what do we mean by "Judaism"? For, over time, various Judaic religious systems have taken shape, and diverse communities of the faithful, all of them calling themselves "Israel," have defined Judaism for themselves. Christianity in its orthodox, catholic formulation was only one of these. From the inside, those definitions set forth not "our Judaism" or "a Judaism" but simply "Judaism." From the perspective of the observer, by contrast, each of the definitions, examined in the context of the life of the group that formulated it, tells us about *a* Judaism. Then what a history of Judaism will organize and explain is the picture of diverse Judaisms that competed in a given span of time and space. The newspapers every morning do the same for Islam. So much for plural definitions of world religions – a way of coping with the facts.

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