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The Three Religions

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of Tel Aviv University and Munich University,
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edited by
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Introductory Notes

“The Three Religions” – the title of this volume may sound presumptuous. It seems to claim a prominent role for only three out of the large number of religions in the world. Even narrowing the statement to “world religions” – a fairly problematic concept – would not make our heading look much better. Having held our symposium in October 2000 under this title, we are virtually committed to issue the volume under the same heading. This is, of course, not a very good excuse. Yet we think that we can offer a better one. We are confident that the particular context of the conference, as well as the specific delineation of its subject matter, will explain our language and invalidate any suspicion of a narrow-minded, parochial conception of the world’s religions.

The symposium on “The Three Religions” has been the second one in a series of Academic Symposia that we intend to continue on a regular basis. As such, it is the offspring of an ever-deepening cooperation between an Israeli and a German university, namely Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich, Germany, and Tel Aviv University in Israel. As often, collaboration between institutions arises from personal relationships between their members. As rectors of our respective universities, we are happy that we have had the opportunity to foster cooperation between our institutions in an atmosphere of both shared academic interest and personal friendship. One of our common projects is the joint Academic Symposia of Tel Aviv University and Munich University. The idea of these conferences is to bring together outstanding scholars of both universities on a subject of common interest to both countries. This underlying concept provides a first justification for choosing Judaism and Christianity as a subject matter of our symposium. As it could not be differently, the particular relationship of Germans and Jews, and its history, had to play a major part in the symposium.

In hindsight, our choice to consider *three* religions – the third of which necessarily had to be Islam – appears to be confirmed, if sadly, by the historical events of September 11, 2001, and the aggravation of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Again, the three religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have appeared as protagonists on the world stage, paralysing political and ideological players that boasted the main roles only to give way, at times, to a logic of conflict that began, almost one and a half thousand years ago, in the mediterranean. While the recent events demonstrate the ongoing tensions among those three religions it would, luckily, distort one's view to see their common history only through the lens of the horrific year 2001. Notwithstanding many instances of conflict and even terrible clashes, the history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam has equally been one of peaceful coexistence, often within the same territory, and mutual enrichment. It is this vivid history and the variety of relations between the three religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam during the (almost) one and a half thousand years of their coexistence around the mediterranean that suggested to us the title "The Three Religions".

The volume starts out – and so did the symposium (the sequence of contributions has been preserved) – with two rather general views on the encounter between religions. Philosopher *Wilhelm Vossenkuhl* of Munich University revisits Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's famous parable of the "Lost Ring". Reconstructing religious thought, *Vossenkuhl* casts doubt on Lessing's claim that relativism is consistent, or can be, with religious self-conception. To create a firm foundation for tolerance, he argues, requires reverence and sympathy that cannot be based on reason alone. From the entirely different viewpoint of the law, *Ruth Lapidoth* of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem examines the law of "Holy Places". Laying out the entangled concept of a holy place she considers conflicts between religious communities carried out over the possession of holy sites.

The perspective is shifted to the history of the three religions by Tel Aviv professor *Israel Finkelstein's* contribution. *Finkelstein* identifies

the common ground of the history of Jewish-Christian culture in the late monarchic era of Judah. *Finkelstein* makes his case that it is only at this time that ideas like monotheism and social justice were born. An altogether different part of Jewish-Christian history is illuminated by *Hans-Georg von Mutius* of Munich University in his analysis of the treatment of Jews and Non-Jews by the rabbinic law in (early) modern times. And in analysing the reasons for the Roman state to oppose the rapid proliferation of the Christian cult, *Benjamin Isaac* of Tel Aviv University carves out one principal difference between Judaism and Christianity, which he finds in Christianity's departure from ethnic origin as a source of religious community and the missionary thrust associated with that departure. Finally, *Benjamin Arbel* of Tel Aviv University takes up one particular instance of peaceful coexistence between confessions within Christianity, namely that of Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox in the early-modern Venetian state.

The three articles that follow are grouped around the notion of dialogue and exchange between different religions. A colourful outside perspective is provided by *Thomas O. Höllmann's* treatise on "Jews, Christians, and Muslims in China". *Gerhard Ludwig Müller*, a professor of Catholic theology at Munich University, undertakes to highlight how Christianity may enter into a dialogue with the Jewish and Islamic religion. Lastly, *Michael von Brück* of Munich University looks at the encounters between religions from a constructivist angle. In his view, the problem is one of the social construction of identity and alterity.

The papers by *Miriam Eliav-Feldon* and *Jan Rohls* are connected in that they look at protestantism. Tel Aviv professor *Eliav-Feldon* ventures into rarely explored territory analysing the Jewish response to the schism of the western Christian church arising from the protestant uprising. Conversely, *Jan Rohls* of Munich University examines the role that Judaism played in the theology of great protestant scholars in 19th and 20th century, ranging from Friedrich Schleiermacher to Karl Barth.

Shifting the focus to Islam, *Farhad Kazemi* of New York University traces the struggle of Muslims with the social, economic, technological and – most of all – cultural challenges of modernity. By contrast, *Camilla Adang* of Tel Aviv University takes us again to the interplay of the three religions, and back to the middle ages, but from an Islamic perspective. Her quest for a richer view on the lives of Jews and Christians under Muslim reign leads her to explore a source that, thus far, has rarely been exploited to that end, namely the legal opinions or “fatwâs” by Islamic muftis.

The volume concludes with a look at (partly) contemporary Jewish identity. *Anita Shapira* deals with a very contemporary and ever-changing issue, the Israeli identity, which she localises on a complex grid of religious origin, the 19th century national idea, and a modern country with a population of widespread origin.

We are grateful to the Munich University Association (Münchener Universitätsgesellschaft) for giving generously for the publication of “The Three Religions”. We are also grateful to Mr. Sam Wijler for his generous donation to Tel Aviv University, which supported the conference and the publication of the book. As with the first volume of the Academic Symposia, it would not have been possible to publish this compilation of exciting work of scholars from many different fields without their support. Also, we would like to thank Petra Köpf for taking care of the editorial fine-tuning after the conference. As always, it has been an especial privilege to hold the conference in the premises of Venice International University on the San Servolo Island in Venice, Italy. We are confident that both the venue and the concept of the Academic Symposia will continue to inspire truly original scholarly work that crosses the boundaries of countries and disciplines.

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The Lost Ring Religious Tolerance, Relativism, and Necessary Claims

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It's a simple story, written in high enlightened spirits, but – with hindsight – too good to be true. In *G. E. Lessing's* dramatic poem *Nathan the Wise*, *Nathan* offers *Saladin* a parable which is meant to show that none of the three religions is able to claim to be the true and only one. *Nathan* tells of a man “in the east” who possessed an invaluable ring, an opal, with the secret power to make one pleasing to God and to man. The man intends to bequeath the ring to the one of his three sons he loves most. In the end, unable to make up his mind which one he prefers, the man promises it to each of them. In order to do so in the face of his death he has two copies made which finally turn out to be indistinguishable from the original.

As the three rings stand for the three religions *Nathan* concludes that it is impossible for any of the three to claim uniqueness, primacy and originality. “The true ring was probably lost” *Nathan* suspects and every single one only a copy. *Saladin* seems to be convinced by *Nathan's* parable and the argument drawn from it. It's an argument for religious tolerance and this is probably why we still favour *Lessing's Nathan*. Otherwise his parable gains tolerance from an ill basis. It argues from inscrutability and relativity, that the evidence for “the true belief” is unavailable as the criteria to identify this belief got lost. The argument runs from the inscrutability of origins to the relativity of claims to originality.

This argument won't help to found religious tolerance. None of the three religions will admit that there are no adequate criteria to identify the uniqueness and singularity of their claims to truth.

They offer – at least from their respective point of view – reliable chains which allow to trace their claims back to an initial endowment with religious truth from ultimate authority. There is no point in ignoring these claims. If religious tolerance is possible it is not available at the price of relativity. Those of the claims of three religions which are significant and ineluctable cannot be ignored. There have to be other sources for tolerance beyond relativity and inscrutability.

My argument first offers an epistemic account of religious claims. I'll try to substantiate philosophically – not theologically or historically – why these claims will not survive relativity. Religious tolerance, I'll argue secondly, indeed stems from some similarities of religions but needs grounds beyond aesthetics. In practical terms I won't be too far away from what *Lessing* may have had in mind.

Reasons to believe

Religious beliefs – like any other beliefs – presuppose reasons for being held. The theory of knowledge tells us what counts as a reason to believe something. The clear-cut criterion for holding a belief is that there are facts – at least a single one – which substantiates what a person takes for being true, right or good. These facts are not merely subjective, i.e., they are neither individual psychological episodes nor tastes or opaque mental states. The facts which are reasons for my belief that, say, colleagues from Tel Aviv and Munich are presently engaged in discussions about the three religions on San Servolo, are accessible and transparent to those at least who participate. Not all beliefs are, of course, based on reasons. I might have believed that there was a fire in my hotel this morning. And this belief might have moved me to jump into the canal outside my room before I realised that I was misled by an illusion.

Very often religious beliefs are meant to equal this second type where no facts substantiate what is taken to be true. Therefore *J. L. Mackie* and others argued that the belief in the existence of God is based on illusion. If this was the case religious beliefs were indeed false and irrational. But then, if religious beliefs are not irrational which are the facts to be taken as reasons to believe? There are quite a number of facts which are open and accessible, e. g., texts like the Bible or the Koran, and religious practices and rites which are implemented in the cultural and political life of societies. The problem is whether these facts count as reasons to believe.

No doubt, my reason to believe that my hotel is on fire cannot be this very belief itself. It got to be the fact that there is a fire. Reasons to believe only count if they are actually independent from the beliefs themselves. Are there any reasons for religious beliefs which are independent from these beliefs? Those who hold these beliefs are convinced that there are facts which substantiate what they take to be true, facts which are – as it were – revealed to prophets. Those who do not hold religious beliefs disregard or even deprecate revelations. Whatever may be revealed is, as they claim, inaccessible and not transparent to those who don't believe. Again, there seem to be no facts which may count as reasons that are independent from the religious beliefs themselves.

We may hesitate to expect help from the theory of knowledge to clarify whether there are reasons for religious beliefs. There is an empiricist or even positivist air about the concept of reasons in terms of facts. Nevertheless, there are facts which indeed count as reasons for religious beliefs beyond the moot facts of revelation. The facts I have in mind are the validity claims of religious authorities. The contents of these claims may themselves be doubted and ignored. But they do exist like, e. g., the validity claims of legal or political authorities.