Judaism, Christianity, and Islam circa Nineteenth Century C.E.

Three Responses to the Enlightenment Challenge

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Every age brings its own challenge to the life of faith. The author presents three figures from the Enlightenment who addressed that period’s resistance to reconciling reason and religion: the Jewish thinker Moses Mendelssohn, the Muslim reformer Muhammad ‘Abduh, and the Catholic scholar Alfred Loisy. Each met resistance and fear; each influenced the movement of his respective tradition into the modern world. All three courageously witnessed to the possibility of development and renewal rather than regression and disintegration.

Introduction

This essay looks at a specific period in history (1783–1905) when each of the three Abrahamic traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—underwent significant development. There are two major reasons for focusing on this period: the need for an interval of time to elapse before the importance of events can be appreciated, the unique character of this period in the unfolding of all three religious traditions.

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First, in many instances, the more lasting effects of historical events are only fully evident after a century or more. This is especially true in the case of the persecution of minorities in any given society (e.g., the chattel enslavement of Africans in the U.S. and the Holocaust of European Jewry) where the legacy of atrocities seems to have its full impact long after the suffering of the initial victims. Thus, if we want a better understanding of many of the conditions of the present, a desire that has taken on a certain urgency in our post-September 11th global context, we would be wise to search the historical record of one to two hundred years earlier.

Second, unlike other historical periods when common threads or themes in the evolution of the Abrahamic traditions are not so obvious, the nineteenth century is one when all three were reacting to the challenges set before them by Enlightenment rationalism, albeit in very different circumstances and very distinct ways. This fact provides us a readymade framework within which to engage in some rudimentary yet meaningful comparative analysis.

The dates 1738 and 1905 identify the period during which seminal thinkers worked and wrote. The three key figures and works that will form the main focus of this investigation have each made highly influential contributions to the development of the Abrahamic traditions in response to the Enlightenment. They are: Moses Mendelssohn and his *Jerusalem*, first published in 1783; Muhammad 'Abduh and his *Treatise on Divine Unity*, first published in 1897; and Alfred Loisy and his *The Gospel and the Church*, first published in 1905. This analysis seeks to demonstrate just how significant the intellectual and social developments of this period are for understanding, not only where we have been as Abraham's children, but where we are today, and where we might be going.

### The Enlightenment and Religion

According to Immanuel Kant (d. 1804), the motto of the Enlightenment was "Sapere aude"—“Dare to know!” For Kant and others like him, the ‘daring’ had to do with the psychological and political risks inherent in the Enlightenment mandate to ask questions that would challenge the nature and authority of knowledge and institutions sanctioned by the weight of centuries of tradition and related power structures. To subject even the most sacred of traditional beliefs and practices to rational empiricism was daringly to declare that no longer would any perspective or interpretation of the “facts” be regarded as privileged. For many of the intellectual pioneers and heirs of the Enlightenment, traditional religion would no longer be granted immunity from scientific investigation.

There seem to have been two main schools of thinking about religion that emerged during the Enlightenment. The first can definitely be described as hostile toward the subject. It branded religion as the enemy of both reason and the
human “freedom” that many Enlightenment thinkers naively considered the natural byproduct of uninhibited rationalism. The second main school of Enlightenment thinking about religion was characterized by attempts to reconcile the dictates of empiricist rationalism with traditional religious identity, in the hopes of arriving at a synthesis of the two. The result would be modern religion, something both those in the first school and their traditional religious opponents would have considered an oxymoron.

Reason or Revelation?

In many ways, the exponents of the second school were faced with a new version of a much older Western challenge: How does one reconcile reason and revelation? Frequently held to be the father of Jewish Hellenism, Philo of Alexandria (d. c. 50 C.E.) made this the guiding question of his life’s work. He found his answer by espousing a two-sense theory of biblical hermeneutics and a two-fold theory of truth in which he associated the literal with the body and the allegorical with the soul, allowing neither to supplant the other. In this way, Philo used allegory to make room in Judaism for the exercise of reason in the pursuit of philosophical truth, while at the same time affirming the validity of the revealed law.

There are, however, significant differences between the way the reason-versus-revelation problem manifested itself in the late antique and medieval periods and the way it took shape in the context of the Enlightenment. Though a philosopher like Philo disagreed with a literal interpretation of anthropomorphic references to the divinity found in sacred Scripture, he did not adopt a suspicious approach to the claims of prophecy and scripture.

Enlightenment epistemology operated on a novel set of assumptions that cast the reason-versus-revelation question into an entirely different light. The most revolutionary among these was the principle of “maker’s knowledge.” It held that human beings can only really know what they themselves have either produced or are able to reproduce. According to this principle, whatever is rationally conceptualized as a product of human ingenuity is very likely just that—a product of human ingenuity. Thus, no matter how fundamental any aspect of culture may appear to be—including concepts of deities and myths about creation that are the stuff of prophecy and scripture—investigation will eventually yield proof of its human origins.

Although he himself did not coin the principle of “maker’s knowledge,” Giambattista Vico (d. 1744) developed it as the theoretical heart of his “new science”—a methodology for the critical analysis of human culture and all its institutions, including religion. The curious thing about Vico’s work is his insistence that biblical religion, because it is revealed and not a human product, cannot
ultimately be subjected to the analytical scrutiny of the “new science.” Scholars have debated Vico’s exemption of biblical religion, attributing it to everything from fear of excommunication to a desperate move to preserve a sense of meaning in history.

Although Vico was perhaps the greatest Catholic Enlightenment thinker of his day, he straddled the fence between the two Enlightenment schools on religion. His exception not only permitted him to avoid a radical deconstruction of Christian truth claims, but it also allowed him to shrink from the challenge of articulating a fruitful Catholic response to the expanding rationalist critique of religion.

The challenge Vico sidestepped was vigorously embraced by key Jewish Enlightenment thinkers who were committed to developing an authentically dual identity as both religious Jews, dedicated to traditional Jewish praxis, and modern rationalists, convinced of the virtues of unfettered intellectual inquiry. If ever there was a figure that best fit this description, it was without question Moses Mendelssohn.

Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786)—Father of the Haskalah

Mendelssohn is almost universally hailed both as the greatest Jewish thinker of the German Enlightenment and as the father of the Jewish Enlightenment or Haskalah. For the many Christian anti-Semites of his day, Mendelssohn was a contradiction in terms. He was one of the most brilliant, philosophically illumined and culturally sophisticated men of eighteenth-century Europe, yet religiously he chose to remain a Jew. Still, for many of his admirers Mendelssohn both taught and embodied the Enlightenment ideals of emancipation from political and social oppression, freedom of intellectual inquiry, and tolerance of diversity. Indeed it was through his influence that Wilhelm Christian Dohm argued for Jewish civil emancipation, in response to which the Hapsburg emperor Joseph II issued the Toleranzpatent (“charter of toleration”) of 1782. This decree abolished a number of laws that relegated Jews to the status of second-class Austrians.

In Jerusalem: Or On Religious Power and Judaism, published just three years before his death, Mendelssohn lays the foundation of the Haskalah and, thereby, lends enormous credibility and plausibility to the project of bringing Judaism into fruitful dialogue with modernity. As the subtitle indicates, Mendelssohn insists that both religious authorities and the state ought to forswear any and all attempts to regulate religious conviction. Mendelssohn argues: “Excommunication and the right to banish, which the state may occasionally permit itself to exercise, are diametrically opposed to the spirit of religion” (73). Here we can see the intersection of Mendelssohn’s religious and moral convictions as a Jew, his identity as a member of a marginalized religious minority, and his Enlightenment politics.
Many Christian polemicists publicly wondered how traditional Judaism with all its centuries-old commandments and prohibitions was at all compatible with Mendelssohn’s deeply rooted commitment to the emancipation of the human spirit and person. In *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn answers this question with what would become one of the pivotal theses of his life’s work. He argues that Judaism is not a “revealed religion” in the way Christians typically interpret this concept. Whereas Christians understand the value and superiority of their religion to inhere in revealed truths, Jews maintain that the substance of the revelation of Sinai was legislation, not a set of truths. This is significant, he claims, because it means that revelation in Judaism regulates behavior, not thought. As for “saving truths” and “universal propositions of reason,” Mendelssohn maintains that “[t]hese the Eternal reveals to us and to all other men, at all times, through *nature* and *things*, but never through *word* and *script*” (90).

The crux of the Christian polemic leveled at Judaism in Mendelssohn’s day was a recasting of the Pauline perspective on Jewish law as a source of bondage. Based on Paul, the Christian polemicists who attacked Mendelssohn were trying to prove just how dead and irrelevant Judaism was—especially as a rule-centered tradition in a period in which multiple circles of intellectuals and others were buzzing about the importance of individual freedoms. Mendelssohn manages to turn this polemic inside-out, transforming it into a classical modern apology for traditional Judaism. He insists that Christianity is infinitely more constraining and restrictive to the human spirit in its claims to possess—in historically conditioned, yet avowedly unchanging dogma—the greatest and most central of universal truths.

Mendelssohn’s work directly inspired subsequent generations of *maskilim* (Heb. “enlighteners”), from whom emerged the “science of Judaism,” a means of demonstrating the vitality and vibrancy of Judaism in the face of a modern ethos. This movement facilitated the integration of the Jewish community into larger societies and served as a forerunner of what came to be Reform Judaism.

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**The Enlightenment and “Orientalism”**

In many locales outside of Europe, especially in the Muslim Middle East, the Enlightenment project became incorporated into an “Orientalism” that Edward Said has famously identified as a Western discourse “for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 1978: 3). Such thinking
is a glaring example of a sinister colonial and imperialist distortion of the emancipationist themes permeating the work of figures like Mendelssohn. When integrated with racism, “Orientalism” can and has been twisted into a powerful justification of the perpetual subjugation of non-Western peoples by Western powers.

**Muhammad 'Abduh (1849–1905)—Modern Muslim Revivalist**

While still in his twenties, Muhammad 'Abduh met the foremost Muslim anti-imperialist thinker and activist of his day, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897). Afghani lived in Cairo from 1871 to 1879 where he taught philosophy and agitated for social and political reform. He blamed the crisis in the Egyptian economy on an unholy alliance between the British and Khedive Isma‘il, the titular Egyptian ruler. Afghani’s solution for a Muslim world in the grip of Western colonialism and imperialism was what came to be known as Pan-Islamism, a religio-political theory calling for Muslim countries to throw off foreign domination by uniting into one powerful and centralized umma or “community” of the faithful. The young 'Abduh became one of Afghani’s close disciples.

'Abduh soon became a leading reformist thinker and activist in his own right. As editor of the Egyptian government newspaper from 1880 to 1882, he participated in the 'Urabi coup, and was subsequently banished to Beirut. From Beirut he moved to Paris where he founded and edited, along with Afghani, a journal dedicated to the cause of Pan-Islamic revival. When he finally returned to Cairo in 1889, he devoted most of his energies to revivifying Islamic theology for the modern period.

In 1897 'Abduh’s most influential work *Treatise on Divine Unity* was published. The *Treatise* is more of an indirect than a direct response to the Enlightenment challenge. Though he was certainly well acquainted with modern Western thought, he saw himself more as an advocate for a modern Islamic renaissance than an advocate for integrating Enlightenment rationalism into modern Muslim culture. In fact, not unlike Mendelssohn who saw the key to lasting cultural enlightenment for the Jews in the very roots of traditional Judaism, 'Abduh saw the key to a similar transformation for Muslims in a reinterpretation of the dawn of Islam in the early seventh century.

'Abduh’s narrative of the history of the religious human race is an evolutionary approach with strikingly modernist overtones. It begins with references to the “childhood” and adolescence of humanity in which religion was tailored to people’s respective developmental aptitudes. Although he is not explicit, he seems to suggest that the religion of ancient Israel was the religion of humanity’s childhood and Christianity was the religion of its adolescence. The decay and
corruption of the religion in the adolescent stage is attributed, not to a particular religious tradition, but to rampant sectarianism and the perverse belief “that there is no harmony between religion and the intellect and that religion is one of the most vehement enemies of disciplined learning” (Ar. 152–54; Eng. 132–33). With the rise of Islam, ‘Abduh maintains, humanity has been given a unique opportunity for perfection by being granted what it never fully possessed: autonomy of the will (istiqlal al-irada) and autonomy of opinion and thought (istiqlal al-ra’y wa l-fikr) (Ar. 147–48; Eng. 127).

In his Treatise ‘Abduh develops four basic arguments for both his Western and his Muslim audiences. The first is more implicit than explicit. It claims that the Muslim world has no need to import the European Enlightenment to jump-start its own intellectual renaissance. The second, closely related to the first, insists that inherent in the dawn of Islam is an imperative that the intellect be freed from superstition and taqlid or “servile conformism,” to established traditions of thought or praxis.

The third is a critique of so-called Muslim authorities that insist on servile conformism as authentic Islam. ‘Abduh argues that those who forbid reinterpretations of Islamic law or ban the use of modern technologies that might enhance the welfare of Muslim societies are committing the cardinal sin of shirk or idolatry. They are denouncing the benefits of the human intellect as one of God’s most magnificent instruments of guidance and solicitude. The fourth argument maintains that freedom to inquire rationally after truth is not absolute. Rather, once the intellect has recognized the veracity of a prophet’s message, it must accept every aspect of that message, even those elements, which it does not yet fully understand. This does not entail accepting apparent incoherencies, but it does imply the willingness to live with them until one finds a way to reconcile them.

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Alfred Loisy (1857–1940)—Heretic and Hero of Catholic Christianity

In 1879, the year Jamal al-Din al-Afghani was expelled from Egypt for fomenting revolution against the khedivate, and three years before Muhammad
'Abduh was exiled for his participation in the 'Urabi coup of 1882, Alfred Loisy was ordained to the Roman Catholic priesthood in his native France.

In 1890 Loisy was appointed as a professor of sacred Scripture at the Institut Catholique of Paris, but in just three short years the nature of his scholarship had come into serious question. Among other things, he claimed that Moses did not write the Pentateuch, that the creation stories of Genesis should be read symbolically not literally, and that church doctrine underwent development in the Scriptures itself. What would come to be standard assumptions in late twentieth-century Catholic biblical scholarship was enough to have Loisy removed from his teaching position, and to spark an exegetical controversy which would move Pope Leo XIII to issue in November 1893 his anti-rationalist encyclical “on the study of sacred Scripture,” Providentissimus Deus.

During the time of Loisy’s expulsion from his teaching position, he worked on a number of essays that became part of a larger project designed to be the basis for a modern reform and renewal of Catholic theology. Many of these essays were reworked and published in what is arguably his most important work, L’Évangile et l’Église or The Gospel and the Church. This work is an apology for Catholicism in response to a series of lectures by the great German Lutheran patristics scholar Adolf Harnack (d. 1930). Harnack denounced the institutional Church as an amalgam of accretions: “The whole outward and visible institution of a Church claiming divine dignity has no foundations whatever in the Gospel. It is a case, not of distortion, but of total perversion.”

Loisy was perfectly poised to respond to Harnack’s bold and obviously anti-Catholic thesis. Like Harnack, Loisy was an enthusiastic heir to Enlightenment rationalism. In fact, he was quite sure that the Catholic Church would not survive the modern period if it did not respond in some fruitful way to the challenge that the Enlightenment posed to a whole range of traditional church teachings. Harnack believed that, by separating the warp of eternal, unchanging truth from the woof of changing historical context and the development of tradition, he could identify the essence of Christianity. Loisy seriously doubted that this was possible, for he saw no way for the human being to discern critically and objectively any aspects of a religious tradition that are not products of the human experience in history. He maintained: “Whatever we think, theologically, of tradition, whether we trust it or regard it with suspicion, we know Christ only by the tradition, across the tradition, and in the tradition of the primitive Christians.”
Loisy was a thinker who rose to respond to the Enlightenment challenge. However, the content of his response and its insistence on the human, historical, and thus critically assessable dimension of almost every aspect of the faith was, to the ears of the magisterium of the day, heresy. Instead of heralding Loisy as laying the foundation for a Catholic theology which could be at once authentic and at home in modernity, in 1907 Pius X condemned him as a “modernist” and numbered him among “the most pernicious of all the adversaries of the Church” (*Pascendi*, 1907: sec. 3). He was excommunicated shortly thereafter on March 7, 1908. What is both ironic and tragic is that he died in June 1940, a little over three years before Pius XII’s issuance of the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), which began the process of admitting as orthodox and even encouraged use of the very modern methods of biblical criticism that earned Loisy his condemnation.

**Conclusion**

Each of these three figures significantly influenced the way his respective tradition met the challenge of the Enlightenment. Mendelssohn laid the groundwork for thinking, out of which emerged a Reform movement that would be the touchstone for identifying various brands of modern Judaism. In similar manner ‘Abduh influenced those who made their mark on the development of modern Islam. As for Loisy, the same centralized ecclesial structure that so quickly and efficiently silenced him would, only a few years after his death, begin to institute the very practices that he advocated.

Of the three Enlightenment responders it was the Catholic, and not his elder Jewish brother nor his contemporary Muslim brother, who experienced the most resistance to change, the deepest fear of modernity, and one of the most common expressions of radical extremism—actual expulsion from his faith community. Perhaps there is a lesson here for those of us who jump to rash conclusions about the religious and cultural “other.”

**References**


