How Jews, Christians, and Muslims perceive people who do not share their religious beliefs

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Summary: This paper is an outline of a lecture for health care professionals. Without an ambition to provide a comprehensive and theologically founded approach to the complex and sensitive topic of interaction among Abrahamic religions, I would like to provide a brief introduction to those who work with people from different faith traditions. There is no doubt that our globalized and interconnected world must face new challenges, with a special reference to the interaction of Abrahamic religions, namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In this complex mesh of cultural exchanges, it is crucial to understand how individuals with different religions perceive each other. Despite this fact, relatively few attempts have been made to perform a head-to-head comparison of the attitudes of Abrahamic religions. In this brief paper, I first elucidate the etymological and historical aspects of interfaith attitudes, and then describe more modern perceptions of disbelievers. Although there are some differences among Jews, Muslims, and Christians in their perception of individuals with other faith traditions, these seem to be exaggerated by the current political turmoil and hysteria. Every effort must be made to take into consideration the cultural and individual determinants of interfaith interactions in order to avoid potentially detrimental reactions, violence, close-minded prejudice, and political-religious fundamentalism and fanaticism.

1. Introduction

In our globalized and interconnected world, people from different cultural backgrounds are struggling to preserve their identity and beliefs while living in increasingly multicultural contexts. As the systems of beliefs and practices that govern nearly every aspect of the life of many people, religions are highly likely to affect the way how "believers", intended as individuals who practice a certain religion, see "disbelievers", a term that encompasses those who practice a different religion, skeptics, atheists, agnostics, doubters, nihilists, and unbelievers in general [1,2].

Ever since their emergence, the world's three major monotheistic religions, namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam, have been spreading across the world, thus shaping their followers' perception of the world, themselves, and mankind. Besides teaching people that the world was created by a single God, who has also given them specific rules to help them distinguish right from wrong and good from evil, the aforementioned religions often, but not always encourage their followers to convert disbelievers [3-5]. During the past 3500 years, attempts to expand influence over other lands, impose views on disbelievers, and use their human and material resources have resulted in countless battles, wars, and military campaigns, which have changed the course of history.

Considering the significant impact that religion can have on attitudes towards those who do not share beliefs, it is crucial that anyone who lives in a multicultural society should understand how Jews, Christians and Muslims perceive disbelievers, so that they can gain a better understanding of the reasons why certain religious groups manage to coexist in harmony, while some others simply cannot accept religious pluralism.

2. Etymological and historical considerations

Since every language reflects specific traditions, ideas, values, beliefs and attitudes, it is believed that an etymological analysis of the words used by Jews, Christians and Muslims to define disbelievers should help understand how each religious group perceives the outside world.

2.1 Judaism

As far as Judaism is concerned, non-Jews are commonly referred to as *goy*, a Hebrew term which literally means "people" or "nation". As Benbassa and Attias pointed out [6] (p. 118), Jews have never been truly hostile towards non-Jews, to the extent that non-Jews were initially known as *Gentiles*, a perfectly innocuous word that did not carry any negative messages; however, with the passage of time, the term "goy" became more common, to the extent that Jews began dividing goys into different categories. For example, for some time, conservative Jews living in Central and Eastern Europe used the expression *shabes goys* to refer to goys who performed all those tasks that they could not perform on certain days for religious reasons. It follows that *shabes goys* were perceived as useful resources who could help Jews stay faithful to their beliefs, rather than hostile disbelievers. There were also Orthodox Jews who used to sell the food they were not allowed to eat to non-Jews; they would then buy it back from non-Jews when their sacred holidays were over [6].

While the term goy can be used as a pejorative, there is nothing inherently offensive about this word, to the extent that the Torah – the source of Judaic literature and beliefs – occasionally defines Jews as *goy* [7]. For example, in Exodus 19:6, the expression *goy kadosh* refers to the Jewish kingdom and nation. It is believed that one of the main reasons why many Jews consider goy to be an offensive term is because historical events – such as the Holocaust – have caused them to develop hostile

attitudes towards anti-Semitic non-Jews; that being said, etymology suggests that this word is neither offensive nor insulting.

In fact, there are other words that Jews can use to express their disapproval of non-Jews; *shiksa* (non-Jewish woman) and *shkutz* (non-Jewish man) are the most common ones and derive from the Hebrew word *Shin-Qof-Tzadei*, which translates as hateful, disgusting and abhorrent, as opposed to *Tzaddi*, which means righteousness.

Being many Jews rather intolerant towards the idea of interfaith marriage, the term *shiksa* is often used to define and offend non-Jewish women going out with or married to Jewish men, and the term *shkutz* is associated with anti-Semitic men [8].

2.2 Christianity

The letters of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians and Romans suggest that Jesus Christ's message applies to both the circumcised and the uncircumcised, which clearly indicates that his teachings were universal in nature. Later, Christianity introduced a pejorative term, *infidel*, to refer to all those who were not baptized and did not share their religious beliefs.

With the passage of time, the Church created a body of literature surrounding the matter of infidelity, distinguishing the faithful (i.e. Christians) from the unfaithful (i.e. pagans, non-Christians, unbelievers and, therefore, all those who were outside the faith). The term pagan was commonly used by Christians to define not only those who live outside the city – also known as heathens -, but also those who live outside the Christian church. In the 1500s, Christian terminology began evolving as a result of opposition and aggressiveness towards the Christian faith. During that period, Christians began distinguishing pagans whose infidelity is likely to stem from their ignorance of Jesus Christ's teachings from infidels whose infidelity derives from their

open and explicit rejection of the Christian faith. The term infidel was commonly used to refer to those Jews and Muslims who opposed and fought Christianity [9].

It should also be noted that the Western Christian church has always been much more tolerant towards infidels than heretics: while infidels refuse the doctrine because they simply do not believe in it, heretics challenge the true doctrine with rival beliefs. For example, one who does not think that Christianity is the only way to Salvation is an infidel, whereas one who denies Jesus Christ's divinity is a dangerous heretic. Needless to say, this led to multiple schisms within the Church. As Richardson & Bowden pointed out [10] (p. 249), heresy comes from the ancient Greek word *hairesis* whose literal meaning is "choice", thus suggesting that a heretic is someone who willingly denies the Christian doctrine.

In medieval canon law, heresy was used to define baptized Christians who openly rejected certain aspects of the Christian religion, even though they have received a religious education [10]. In the Middle Ages, heresy became increasingly widespread, to the extent that Pope Innocent III (1161-1216) decided to develop a centralized system of enquiry aimed at identifying and punishing all heretics; he established a dedicate institution, which he called Inquisition or Holy Office [11] (p. 309). Before this action, local bishops and priests would deal with heretics their own way, without having to comply with any rules or standards imposed by the Pope. At this point, one could wonder why the Roman Catholic Church decided to disregard Jesus Christ's universal message by developing an institution that no Apostle has ever mentioned in their accounts of Jesus' teachings and provisions.

The reason is actually quite logical: since heresy was seen as a contagious disease that threatened the survival of the Christian religion, the Church had to resort to unconventional measures and tools to persecute those who betrayed God. After all, in the Middle Ages, it was customary for Kings to have political traitors sentenced

to death and, since religious traitors were just as odious as political ones, medieval Christians thought that heretics also deserved to die [11] (p. 309). With the passage of time, more and more governments began forbidding the Church to execute capital punishment, which resulted in the Inquisition slowly disappearing. The last heretic to be killed by the Roman Catholic Church was Cayetano Ripoll, a schoolmaster who had been accused of deism by the Spanish Inquisition and was hanged in 1826 [12]. Initially, the Catholic Church considered all non-Catholics, including Protests, as formal heretics – i.e. the kind of heretics who qualified for capital punishment. Following the Second Vatican Council (1962 - 1965), the Catholic Church became a lot more tolerant towards the outside world and labeled all those who sought God with a sincere heart as individuals who should not be blamed for their lack of familiarity with Jesus Christ's teachings [13] (p. 197).

2.3 Islam

As the main source of Islamic theology and morality, the *Quran* provides a wealth of information about Muslims' perception of non-Muslims – even though it is worth mentioning that the so-called *Hadiths* (accounts of Mohammed's life and words), the *Sunnah* (examples and rules extracted from Mohammad's life) and other Islamic texts also tell Muslims how they should treat, consider, and address disbelievers.

As Naqvi observed, the *Quran* specifically states that a *Kafir*, which is the Arabic word for a disbeliever, is a faithless individual who refuses to submit himself or herself to God [14] (p. 254). *Kafir* comes from an Arabic word which means "a farmer who puts soil on the seed", thus referring to unbelievers' tendency to cover the Islamic truth. Infidel is a term that was introduced by Christians to refer to Jews and Muslims and, even though it is commonly used to describe non-Muslims, Muslim scholars agree that it is not an accurate translation of the word *Kafir* [14]. There is great

confusion regarding Muslims' perception of Christians and Jews, as opposed to all other non-Muslims.

On the one hand, some verses in the *Quran* suggest that as people of the book, Christians and Jews are different from all other non-Muslims; for example, Verse 98:1 refers to disbelievers among the people of the book, thus suggesting that there are also Jews and Christians who are considered to be believers. With regards to interfaith dialogue, the *Hadiths* instruct Muslims not to argue with the people of the book in a harsh manner because God is the same as Allah (Verse 29:46). The *Quran* also explains that among the people of the book, there are some righteous people who will be rewarded in the end as they believe in Allah and have chosen to submit themselves to Allah (Verse 3:199).

That being said, there are some other verse in the *Quran* which seem to contradict Allah's initial benevolence and tolerance. In verse 5:51, for example, the *Quran* forbids Muslims to be friends with Christians and Jews. As for all other infidels (i.e. non-Christians and non-Jews, as well as disbelievers among Christians and Jews), there are many verses in the *Quran* which encourage Muslims to despite and even fight unbelievers. Below are some examples:

- Verses 2:1/2:6-2:10: unbelievers have no faith and will be punished
- Verse 2:286: Allah, help us defeat the unbelievers
- Verse 8:12: Allah states that He will terrorize infidels, cut off their heads and even the tips of their fingers
- Verse 9:5: whenever you find an idolater, slay them, arrest them and do your best to kill them
- Verse 9:123: Allah asks Muslims to make war with all infidels

However, this kind of aggressive attitude towards nonbelievers is not unique to the *Quran*: the Old Testament of the Bible is quite similar when presenting how Israel

must face faithless enemies (e.g., Deuteronomy 20:17: "You shall not leave alive anything that breathes.")

As Peters noted [4] (p. 36), the *Quran* presents *jihad* (intended as preservation and promotion of the Muslim religion through battle and war) as a clear duty which forces Muslims to fight unbelievers and deal with them according to specific rules. For instance, unbelievers should either convert or pay a tax in order to be able to keep practicing their religion; however, such conditions do not apply to apostates, who must be killed whether they surrender or not. In other words, those who are not eligible for a *dhimmah treaty* (a treaty that spares unbelievers so long as they pay a special tax or convert), have two options: conversion or death.

Since Islam lacks a central institution that tells all Muslims how to approach the *Quran* and deal with non-Muslims, different interpretations of Islamic texts have resulted in the emergence of many different sub-groups, some of which are more tolerant than others towards non-Muslims [15] (p. 33). One of the main reasons of confusion about Muslims' relations with non-Muslims is that the word infidel is commonly used within the Muslim world to offend and criticize Muslims whose ideas offend those of some other Muslims.

One of the most important schism today is between "true" Muslims and "moderate" Muslims: "true" Muslims obey every single Quranic rule and strive to walk on the path of Mohammed, whereas moderate Muslims commit sins such as eating pork, eating when other Muslims are fasting, drinking alcohol, are friends with unbelievers, but they have not refused any of the fundamental principles of Islam [17] (p. 50). Since moderate Muslims often embrace non-Muslim customs and traditions, it can be quite difficult to determine whether or not they share radical Muslims' hostile attitudes towards non-Muslims. Hostile attitude towards out-group members is

fundamentally affected by individual personality, developmental, and situational variables rather than general religious commands.

3. Some modern perceptions of disbelievers

3.1 Judaism

As far as interfaith marriage is concerned, many Jewish scholars pointed out that since the Hebrew Bible clearly states that Israelites were not allowed to marry people from other tribes, whose members could have turned them away from God, Jews should not marry non-Jews [14] (p. 261). However, most Jews are not interested in converting non-Jews, nor do they believe that non-Jews are damned. In fact, since Judaism does not say a lot about what happens to people after they die, Jews do not think that disbelievers are bound to go to hell. Epstein [3] (p. 85) argues that according to Jewish texts, Judaism can be offered to disbelievers. By reaching out to non-Jews, Jews would demonstrate that they actually care about non-Jews and do not think that disbelievers would pollute their community to fight against the stereotype that Jews care so much about their identity that they would do anything to preserve the purity of their blood.

3.2 Christianity

As previously mentioned, in the early 1900's the Roman Catholic Church and the entire Christian world began rethinking their relationship with non-Christians. The Second Vatican Council specified that even though the Church is the only way for people to attain Salvation, those who live outside the Church may also attain Salvation as long as their search for God is moved by honesty and grace, and the only reason why they are not Christians is because they do not know Christ's teachings [16]. Based on the assumption that millions of people out there are ignorant

of Jesus Christ's Gospel, the Church has been encouraging Christians to preach to everybody, thus giving them the opportunity to find the truth and save themselves [13] (p. 197). After all, evangelization has always been an important part of the Christian religion, whose very existence was made possible by Jesus Christ's efforts to introduce as many people as possible to his Gospel. Many Christians feel that God's love urges and motivates them to introduce all disbelievers to the truth, so that they can also attain Salvation – hence Christians' world-renowned missionary dynamism and activism.

In view of the above considerations, it can be inferred that Christians' perception of disbelievers has changed significantly over the centuries. Those were initially perceived as a threat to the survival and dominance of the Christian religion are now seen as people who can and need to be saved by helping them get rid of their ignorance [5] (p. 141). Since evangelization is central to Christian theology, it occurs very frequently during interreligious conversations that the Christian participant tries to convert the partner, or at least strengthen his or her connection with the Christian tradition. Since it was Jesus Christ himself who told his followers "go and make disciples", it is no surprise that Christians tend to perceive disbelievers as potential Christians.

3.3 Islam

Islam accepts and permits interfaith marriage. In fact, the *Quran* states that Muslims can marry both chaste free-believing women and chaste women from among the people of the book. As Akbari pointed out [17] (p. 51), both moderate and radical Muslims believe that the *Quran* is the absolute truth and that Quranic laws should be followed strictly. According to radical interpretations, any Muslim who wishes to be friends with a disbeliever, without secretly planning to convert them or kill them, is not really a Muslim. Nowadays, in the islamophobic milieu it is often declared that

the ultimate aim of all Muslim people is to promote and establish their beliefs, which are clearly incompatible with democracy, religious pluralism, and freedom of thought and speech. Any Muslim who believes that Islam should dominate the world is a potential supporter of Islamic jihad against infidels [17].

On the other hand, many scholars argue that the *Quran* has been completely misinterpreted and that many Muslims worldwide have been tricked into seeing infidels as enemies who are unworthy of respect [18] (p. 152). Specifically, since the *Quran* clearly states that everybody has the right to follow their own religion, Islam is actually a tolerant religion that is widely misunderstood. The worst case is that while only a limited number of Muslims want to prosecute and kill infidels, millions of so-called moderate Muslims' voice can not reach the world. According to Rabasa et al. [18], policymakers, people with other faiths, and well-intentioned Muslims should unite in order to teach Muslims and non-Muslims that Islam is a peaceful and tolerant religion. Again, it is important to emphasize that hostile radicalism is a feature of individual psychosocial development and contextual factors (i.e., life circumstances), rather than a specific property of any kind of religious culture.

4. Different perceptions of disbelievers: an overview

After comparing a wide range of different points of view, it appears that the world's three major monotheistic religions have different perceptions of disbelievers. However, these differences are magnified and fueled by emotions due to the current political turmoil and hysteria surrounding the critical situation in the Middle East and Europe's migrant crisis.

Despite being the oldest monotheistic religion, Judaism appears to be rather tolerant towards disbelievers, with whom Jews can interact, do business and even be friends. Many Jews believe that converting disbelievers to Judaism might destabilize their

religious dynamics, which date back to 3500 years ago. Even though there are Jews who believe that disbelievers should be introduced to their monotheistic values, they regularly do not feel threatened by the presence of disbelievers. However, it is worth mentioning that anti-Semitism has resulted in many Jews referring to non-Jews using pejorative terms, and hostile radicalism referring to religious foundations exists in some Jewish communities.

Unlike Jews, Christians perceive most disbelievers as people who are not familiar with or open to Jesus Christ's teachings and need to be introduced to the Gospel in order to attain Salvation. As peaceful and tolerant as today's Christians are towards disbelievers, their perception of infidels has actually changed quite a lot during the past fifty years. In fact, it is only thanks to the Second Vatican Council that the Roman Catholic Church is now much more accepting of disbelievers and considers those who seek God with a sincere heart and should not be blamed for their lack of familiarity with Jesus Christ's teachings [13]. In other words, after persecuting heretics and fighting infidels – especially people with other Abrahamic religions – for over 500 years, Christians returned to Jesus Christ's original message, which encouraged them to spread his word and find disciples, rather than fighting those who think differently.

As for Islam, the *Quran* appears to contain a number of contradictory messages, which have been causing great confusion among Muslims and non-Muslims all over the world. The Hebrew Bible also contains such contradictions, but the power of those potentially destructive words is much weaker today as compared with that of the *Quran*. On the one hand, the *Quran* seems to tolerate a certain degree of religious freedom and even praises the people of the book, i.e. Jews and Christians, to the extent that Muslims are allowed to marry Jewish and Christian women who satisfy certain criteria. On the other hand, there are verses which clearly instruct Muslims to despise, hate, fight, and persecute all disbelievers. Moreover, the *Quran* encourages

Muslims to promote their religious beliefs among disbelievers and to impose Islam on infidels, who can either convert to the only true religion or pay a special tax – that is, if they are not apostates [19].

5. Conclusion

Understanding the differences among the world's three major monotheistic religions' approach to disbelievers is an essential point to better understand why and how the extremist variants of the fundamentalist Abrahamic religions may lead to intolerance, violence, and even a detrimental geopolitical outcome [20].

While Judaism does not require Jews to convert disbelievers, many Christians view evangelization as their divine duty and mission, to the extent that in the 1960s, the Roman Catholic Church clearly stated that disbelievers should not be blamed for not being Christians, as it is not their fault if they are ignorant of Jesus Christ's message. Furthermore, since Jesus Christ was a preacher himself who encouraged his followers to convert and baptize disbelievers, Christians think that by preaching to disbelievers, they are operating in accordance with Jesus' commands.

There is a widespread view today that Muslims tend to see disbelievers as individuals who must submit themselves to Islam. By imposing their beliefs on disbelievers, Muslims aim to create a world where Islam governs every aspect of their lives and the only non-Muslims alive are those who pay a special tax in order to be able to keep practicing their religion. However, Islam is a widely misunderstood religion whose peaceful messages need to be unveiled and promoted by policymakers and people of all faiths in order to show both Muslims and non-Muslims that Islam is not a violent religion whose main goal is to subjugate disbelievers. In a similar vein, it is indispensable to broadly educate non-Muslim believers and atheists/agnostics to extinguish the potentially detrimental effects of the emerging anti-Muslim sentiment

(islamophobia), close-minded prejudice, and religious fundamentalism and supremacy.

It is important to underline that the above-discussed features should not be used as all-or-none stereotypes to automatically judge individuals from any faith traditions. Even in extreme situations when there is no separation between state and religion, and nearly all aspects of the life are regulated by religious traditions, there is a wide variance how people experience and practice their faith during everyday interactions. When there is economic growth, no serious and direct external threat is present, and the human, natural, and material resources are not concentrated in the hands of a narrow elite due to corruption and nepotism, religious exclusionism and violence are markedly diminished. At the individual level, hostile radicalism is dominantly affected by psychosocial development and contextual factors (i.e., life circumstances), rather than a specific property of any kind of religious culture.

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