

Three Prayers in Dialogue: The Shema, the Lord's Prayer, and al-Fatiha

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P R E C I S

The three prayers, the Shema, the Lord's Prayer, and al-Fatiha, lie at the heart of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions, respectively. The authors of this essay are committed and practicing members of their faiths. This essay brings the three prayers into dialogue by process of comparative theology and comparative experience. The three prayers are presented in both their theological aspects and their liturgical settings. The three authors then observe how the encounter with the other prayers has enhanced their understanding and appreciation of their own prayer.



Introduction

Francis X. Clooney defines comparative theology as “acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions.”¹ This approach differs from comparative religion inasmuch as it starts from within a faith tradition and, as a result of learning from another, leads to a fuller understanding of one's own.

Comparative theology is often done between two religious traditions as in the case of Clooney's *His Hiding Place Is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic The-*

¹Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 10.

opoetics of Divine Absence.² The innovation in this essay is to have a three-way comparative theological dialogue among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which is even daring—considering that the three Abrahamic religions have all too often set up barriers against one another.

Comparative theology speaks of “acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted,” so this present study is done not from outside the traditions, as might be the case in studies in comparative religion, but from within, by three committed members of the three faiths. We identify ourselves as practitioners, not simply as researchers. We provide a living example of comparative theology, showing that there is much for all members of our respective faiths to learn from the other Abrahamic faiths. We show that comparative theology is not only intellectually legitimate, but also particularly valuable in the modern context. We show that within our differences we can work together; indeed, our religious commitment gives heightened sensitivity to the conversation.

While comparative theology may bring together other virtually unconnected faith traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, each uniquely different, are nevertheless linked together as “Abrahamic religions” and therefore already constitute in a profound way a joint faith tradition. There are both unity and difference. The texts we are taking for this exercise in comparative theology—the Shema, the Lord’s Prayer, and al Fatiha—lie at the very heart of our traditions. They are the three defining prayers, so our study has far-reaching ramifications. As well as using doctrinal and historical methodologies, we use other approaches, namely, the devotional, the populist, the homiletic, for these three prayers by their very nature are multi-contextual. This shows that cooperative theology can be done in various ways.

In Part I we analyze our respective texts both exegetically and liturgically in what might be called an objective manner. In Part II each of us looks at the other two texts. It is a process of learning and therefore a subjective response. In other words, it looks at what effect the reading of the others’ texts has on each of us individually. This learning is not illusory or make-believe but an accurate description of what is happening. This second part is the moment of comparative theology, properly speaking. Note that the lim-

² Francis X. Clooney, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

itations of space confine us to examining in detail those words and phrases that are more relevant to this exercise. Given the innovative approach we are taking, we hope this essay will be viewed as a worthwhile and significant achievement.

The prayers can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

The Shema Deuteronomy 6:4–9	The Lord's Prayer Matthew 6:9–13 (N.R.S.V.)	al-Fatiha* Qur'an 1:1–7
<p>4 Hear, O Israel, the Lord (YHVH) [is] our God, the Lord (YHVH) [is] one! Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever.</p> <p>5 And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.</p> <p>6 And these words that I command you today shall be in your heart.</p> <p>7 And you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit at home, and when you walk along the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up.</p> <p>8 And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes.</p> <p>9 And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.</p>	<p>9 Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.</p> <p>10 Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.</p> <p>11 Give us this day our daily bread.</p> <p>12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.</p> <p>13 And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one (for thine is the kingdom the power and the glory for ever and ever).</p>	<p>1 In the name of God, the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate.</p> <p>2 All praise and gratitude (whoever gives them to whomever for whatever reason and in whatever way from the first day of creation until eternity) are for God, the Lord of the worlds,</p> <p>3 The All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate,</p> <p>4 The Master of the Day of Judgment.</p> <p>5 You alone do We worship and from You alone do we seek help.</p> <p>6 Guide us to the Straight Path,</p> <p>7 The Path of those whom You have favored, not of those who have incurred (Your) wrath (punishment and condemnation), nor of those who are astray. (Ameen — O Allah, accept our supplication, our prayer)**</p>

* The original Arabic, a transliteration, and a number of English translations may be found at <http://islamawakened.com/quran/1/1/>.

** See the translation of the Qur'an by Ali Unal at <http://www.mquran.org/index.php/content/section/2/4/>.

Part I: Theological Aspects and Liturgical Context

A. The Theology

1. The Shema (Morgan)

All textbooks on Judaism agree that the Shema is Judaism's preeminent declaration of faith, but what do they mean when they speak of the Shema? The term "*shema*"—literally meaning "Hear!" or "Harken!"—is used in Jewish sources to refer to a number of different but interrelated units. In the first place, it refers to a single verse from Torah, Dt. 6:4: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord (YHVH) [is] our God, the Lord (YHVH) [is] one!" It also refers to the whole passage, Dt. 6:4–9, comprising the initial verse followed by an interpolated doxology³ and then the verses that follow in Torah: "You shall love the Lord (YHVH) your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might."

Note that much of Jewish tradition interprets the word "one" in relation to YHVH not in a simple numerical sense but as meaning unique, unitary, and whole or complete.⁴ In its liturgical setting, the term refers to this entire passage plus two other passages that are recited along with it; they are, in order of their recitation, Dt. 11:13–21 and Num. 15:37–41. Finally, the term can be used for the entire section in the morning and evening service, which contains these three passages as well as early rabbinic blessings that are read before and after their recitation.

Each of the three Torah passages is understood to focus on one aspect of the relationship between the individual Jew and God. The first paragraph, "Hear O Israel . . . you shall love the Lord your God," is called "accepting the yoke of the kingdom." By reciting this passage, the individual worshiper declares his or her acceptance of God's *mitzvot*, the covenantal obligations undertaken at Mt. Sinai. The second paragraph expresses divine judgment and

³Baruch shem kevod malchuto l'olam vaed, "Blessed [or, Praised] be His name, whose glorious kingdom is forever and ever." A number of possible translations have been offered for this line, which is particularly obscure in the Hebrew. See Lawrence A. Hoffman, ed., *My People's Prayerbook* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1997), vol. 1, p. 91.

⁴The late Orthodox Jewish scholar Michael Wyschogrod interpreted the Shema in terms of obligation, so he might have paraphrased it this way: "YHVH is the God to whom alone we owe loyalty" (see Michael Wyschogrod, *Abraham's Promise*, ed. R. Kendall Soulen [London: SCM, 2004], pp. 29–42).

retribution. The third paragraph links our free acceptance of God's obligations to God's act of redemption in bringing the Jewish people out from bondage.

The first line of the Shema, "Hear, O Israel," is often called the watchword of the Jewish faith, because it refers to the resolute "ethical monotheism" that is understood to be at the heart of Judaism. This is how it is read theologically by the Jewish people, those who believe in God and, also, perhaps surprisingly, those who do not, but that is only a part of the matter. For many Jews, the Shema also expresses the unity of the Jewish community as God's covenant people. It is seen to unite an otherwise fractious community and make of it a single people. Further, it ties us into a unity that reaches back to Mount Sinai and extends forward over millennia to the present day. As an extension of this bonding over time, the Shema can evoke feelings of return, acceptance, and "homecoming" for those who may have been estranged from their religious roots. In this way, the Shema generates a sense of theological, genealogical, sociological, and psychospiritual unity among those who recite it. It works simultaneously on several different levels to create a messianic frisson of unity in the midst of evident diversity—a thrilling anticipation of how unity and wholeness might feel.

2. The Lord's Prayer (Dupuche)

There are two versions of the Lord's Prayer, Mt. 6:7–15 and Lk. 11:2–4. However, we will confine our commentary to the Matthean version, which is the one recited by nearly all Christians.⁵ The carefully structured passage can be set out as follows:

Our Father in heaven,
 1a hallowed be your name.
 1b Your kingdom come.
 1c Your will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread.

⁵ Some traditions add the doxology, "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, for ever (and ever)," which is not found in the Sinaiticus and Vaticanus and is considered by many to be a gloss. It is found in *Didache* 8.2, dated to late first or early second century C.E.

2c And forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
 2b And do not bring us to the time of trial,
 2a But rescue us from the evil one.
 (For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever.)

The context of the prayer is significant. Jesus links it explicitly with three typical practices of almsgiving, fasting, and prayer “whenever you give alms” (Mt. 6:2), “whenever you pray” (Mt. 6:5), “whenever you fast” (Mt. 6:16). He does not elaborate on almsgiving and fasting but is explicit about the style and inner quality of the prayer, a fact that shows its importance. The Lord’s Prayer is also introduced in contrast with the prayer of hypocrites who are not concerned with God but with human respect: “do not be like the hypocrites for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others” (Mt. 6:5) or of pagans who doubt the beneficence of their gods: “do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.” Furthermore, the context is that of Jesus’ first great sermon, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), wherein he pointedly speaks to his disciples, although a wider circle hears his teaching. The Gospel of Luke further develops the context of the Lord’s Prayer in comparison and contrast with the disciples of John the Baptist: “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples” (Lk. 11:1). The recitation of the prayer is, therefore, a sign of discipleship.

Jesus expands the prayer with a corollary on forgiveness: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Mt. 6:14–15).

The chiastic structure is clear. The first three phrases are mirrored, even in grammatical structure, by the second three phrases. However, the major element is given at the very start: “Our Father.” It is an acclamation that springs from faith but it is not strictly creedal. The rest of the prayer can be seen as an expansion or commentary on it. What is the value of “our”? May the Lord’s Prayer be recited only by Jesus’ disciples? Is Jesus himself included in the “our”? Jesus is Sovereign, not a disciple among the other disciples. Furthermore, Jesus is without sin and cannot say “forgive us our trespasses.” Thus, Jesus forms the community rather than being an equal

member of the community. Speaking correctly, if surprisingly, Jesus is not a Christian, for the term “Christian” refers to one who has faith in Jesus as the Christ sent from God.

The first set of three petitions begins with “your.” In three different ways, the disciple asks that the Father’s will be done. This threefold request gives it an absolute character for, in the customs of Jesus’ day, a statement was considered definitive if repeated three times. This elucidates the sense of trust inherent in the acclamation “Father!” The second set of three petitions emphasizes “us.” It is concerned with forgiveness, sin, and deliverance—in other words, with the universal human plight. It has likewise a thrice-repeated character.

The central phrase that the chiasmic structure serves to emphasize is “give us this day our daily bread.” “Daily” is a translation of the Greek, *ton epiousion*. Some of the church fathers, such as Jerome, Ambrose, and Cyril of Jerusalem,⁶ proposed that the word could mean both “of today” and “of the Day.” In other words, *ton epiousion* can be a request that the completion of time should occur now, as well as a request regarding the needs of the present moment. Thus, the seven petitions and even the phrase “Our Father” have a strongly eschatological sense.

3. Al-Fatiha (Tuncer)

The Arabic title *al-Fatiha* means “The Opening.” It not only “opens” the Qur’ān, being the first of its 114 chapters, but, unlike any other “preface” or introduction, it also marks the commencement of one’s prayer. Al-Fatiha is a direct verbal supplication that allows the believer to speak to God and establish a personal relationship. In response, God speaks to the believer through subsequent chapters of the Qur’ān. Al-Fatiha is thus a contract or seal for new beginnings. It represents the opening up of one’s heart, the opening up to everything that is lawful. It is, according to the Prophet Muhammad, the “Greatest Surah (chapter)” in the Qur’ān,⁷ revealed to humanity.

The first verse is the *Basmala*, a blessed formula and symbol of Islam.

⁶ See F.-M. Braun, “Le pain dont nous avons besoin,” *Nouvelle Revue Theologique*, vol. 100, no. 4 (1978), pp. 561–563.

⁷ This hadith has been recorded in *Musnad* of Ahmad ibn Hanbal (hadith collection), along with Bukhari, *al-Sahih*, bab tafsir al-qur’an, XIII.384 (hadith number: 4114); Tirmidhi, *Sunan*, bab ma ja’a fi fadl fatihat al-kitab, X.103 (hadith number: 2800); Abu Laty al-Samarqandi, *Bahr al-ulum*, Maktaba Shamila, I.1.

This verse is recited before every chapter of the Qur'ān, except the ninth chapter about which scholars debate whether it is a continuation of the previous chapter, or a chapter in its own right.⁸ Muslims also recite the first verse to seek God's blessing before engaging in any lawful action. The *Bas-mala* opens "in the name of Allah"; for Islam, Allah is the personal name of the One true God. Nothing else can be called Allah, for the title has no plural form and no gender. As repeated in the third verse, the first verse (*Bas-mala*) refers to Allah by two of Allah's most beautiful ninety-nine other names or manifestations: *al-Rahman* (The All-Merciful), which refers to His Mercy and Grace without discrimination between belief and unbelief, truth, and falsehood, right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, and good and evil; and *al-Rahim* (The All-Compassionate), referring to Allah's special compassion and mercy for faith, justice, truth, right, beauty, and good, both in this world and, particularly, in the hereafter.

The fourth verse states, "The Master of the Day of Judgment" (*Mālik yawm al-din*). The word "Master" (*Mālik*) here means both "owner" and "sovereign." While God is the Master of both this world and the hereafter, the verse specifically refers to the hereafter, the time of absolute reality and justice, when reality will be truly known. The word "Day" (*yawm*) also refers to the limited time of every creature and nation, etc. Therefore, the Fatiha reminds the believer to be mindful of every action and encourages good deeds in order to attain the favor of God who is the One and Only, as expressed in the fifth verse. The sixth verse asks for guidance to the "Straight Path" (*Sirāt*), meaning the way of truth, the Book of God, the bridge between paradise and hell, or the middle way between hope and hopelessness, without excess in search of the pleasure of God as outlined in the final petition.

Al-Fatiha is the qur'ānic chapter that best shows the relation between God and the Universe, and between God and human beings, referred to as *rububiyah* (Oneness or Unity of Lordship). The first half of the chapter, verses 1–5, belongs to God, while the other half, verses 6–7, belongs to the servant.⁹ According to Muslim scholars, the reciter should stop after read-

⁸ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-qur'an al-azim* (Riyadh: Dar Tibah lilnashr wa al-Tawzi, 1999), IV.101.

⁹ According to a hadith, God said: "The half of al-Fatiha belongs to Me, while the other half to My servant" (Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Jami al-bayan fi ta'wil ay al-qur'an* [Beirut: Risala Publishing House, 2000], I.201).

ing verse 5 and contemplate the help they are about to seek; then, after taking a new breath, proceed to recite the rest of their prayer.

B. The Liturgical Context and Lived Experience

1. The Shema (Morgan)

The multidimensional experience of the Shema explains why it is the first line of liturgy that a Jewish child learns. Traditionally, it is learned by rote from the parents, who recite it over the child as the bedtime prayer. The text of the Shema is also written on a piece of parchment that is mounted on the doorpost of a Jewish home (the *mezuzah*), and it is fitted into the leather boxes of the phylacteries (*tefilin*) that are wrapped around the arm and head during weekday morning prayers. When persons lie on their deathbeds, they are enjoined to recite the Shema as a final expression of faith in the One God. In sum, the Shema is virtually omnipresent in a Jewish life.

Every one of these usages is derived from the words of the Shema itself; that is, from the passages in Deuteronomy and Numbers, and mainly from the opening paragraph. So, early rabbinic sages interpret the phrase “these words” to mean the Shema itself. They also interpret the phrases “when you lie down and when you rise up” to refer to morning and evening worship. These can be understood in manifold other ways as well.¹⁰ The interpretations of the rabbis are called “Oral Torah” and, in principle, have the same authoritative weight as the [Written] Torah, as paradoxical as that sounds. Without such interpretations, the Five Books of Moses would be impossible to understand and apply to life within the framework of the *mitzvot*. So, our recitation of the Shema also references our acknowledgement and acceptance of Jewish tradition.

2. The Lord’s Prayer (Dupuche)

The importance of this prayer is shown by the fact that it is recited during the celebration of all seven major ritual actions of the Catholic liturgy that encapsulate the whole of Christian revelation, called “the Seven Sacra-

¹⁰ These phrases are discussed at length in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakhot, which in fact commences the entire Talmud with the question, “From when should the evening Shema be recited?” That the Talmud begins by referencing the Shema shows its significance in Jewish life.

ments.” Again, in the Catholic tradition, the Lord’s Prayer is recited properly three times each day, at Morning and Evening Prayer and at Mass. Again, in the Rite of the Christian Initiation for Adults, it is ceremonially imparted, ideally in the week prior to Holy Week, to the baptizands who at the Easter Vigil as newly baptized persons, join with the rest of the faithful in reciting it.

It is the supreme Christian prayer that Christians recite together. Indeed, on Easter Sunday, 2007, for example, many of the 2,000,000,000 Christians who were celebrating Easter on the same day recited or sang this short prayer in many hundreds of different languages. There is a profound sense of solidarity in the fact that a large section of the human race is united by this one prayer, which is arguably the most translated text ever. The prayer is handed on to the child at baptism by being recited by the surrounding congregation; it is also recited by the congregation as the coffin of the loved one is consigned to the earth. The Lord’s Prayer is found at the beginning and end of their ritual lives.

An anecdote will illustrate its significance. When the coffin bearing the mortal remains of Archbishop Frank Little was lowered into its final resting place in the crypt of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, Melbourne, the whole congregation of several thousand spontaneously burst into singing the Lord’s Prayer. It was intensely moving. They were one with him in faith, in his vulnerability, in their sense of forming one body with him in hope.

3. Al-Fatiha (Tuncer)

The seven verses that make up al-Fatiha are one of the first chapters memorized by children, as well as one of the most memorized and recited chapters of the Qur’ān. For Muslims who attend to daily obligatory prayers, the chapter is recited all across the world in its original Arabic form at least seventeen times a day. For many Muslims who also perform the Sunnah prayers as recommended by the Prophet, this number increases to forty times a day. Furthermore, al-Fatiha is recited at almost every significant moment of human life: as a tradition at birth; to help cure any distress or ailment; as thanks for meals and sustenance; for success in one’s endeavors; as a contract of union at engagement or wedding ceremonies; at business and formal gatherings; at the beginning and completion of prayers; at funerals or when visiting graves.

Some Muslims also display scripts of al-Fatiha either by title or in its entirety as a sign of devotion and as an encouragement to recite the prayer, inside their vehicles, homes, and businesses—and even on their tombstones.

With such widespread use and importance, al-Fatiha is known not only by the direct translation of its title, “the opening,” but it is also referred to by many other honorary titles, each indicating a different aspect of its essence. Some of these titles include The Great Qur’ān (*al-Qur’an al-Azim*), Mother of the Qur’ān (*Umm al-Qur’an*); Mother of the Book (*Umm al-Kitab*); Foundation of the Qur’ān (*Asas al-Qur’an*); The Seven Oft-Repeated Verses (*Sab’ al-Mathani*); Praises to Allah (*al-Hamd*); The Prayer (*al-Salah*); The Cure (*al-Shifa*); The Spiritual Cure (*al-Ruqyah*); The Treasure (*al-Kanz*); Gratitude, Thanksgiving (*al-Shukr*); Supplication (*al-Dua*); the sufficient or remedy for all material and immaterial diseases (*al-Shafiyah*); the Sufficient that is enough for everyone’s need (*al-Kafiyah*); the Fulfilling (*al-Wafiyah*).

Part II: Reading One’s Own Text in Light of Another’s

A. A Jewish Response (Morgan)

1. The Shema in Light of the Lord’s Prayer

Many traditional *halakhic* authorities have ruled that Jews are not permitted to engage with the Lord’s Prayer. This decision emerges from centuries of Christian Antisemitism, persecution, and banishment in the name of Jesus. Even those rabbinic authorities who have overcome their antipathy toward all things Christian assert that it is not permissible to worship with Christians or to discuss with them matters of theological concern.¹¹ What we are undertaking here, then, is something radical: a small but, we believe, valuable attempt to overturn the past in order to gain insight from the comparative reading of each other’s scriptures.

The Jewish reader is struck by how almost all of the phrases used in the Lord’s Prayer echo either biblical or rabbinic usage. Simply taking note of

¹¹ See, notably, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Confrontation,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought* 6 (Spring–Summer, 1964): 5–29. Soloveitchik’s views have undergone considerable rethinking in the Orthodox world over the past fifty years. See my review essay: Fred Morgan, “Jewish Perspectives on Jewish-Christian Dialogue over Five Decades,” *European Judaism* 48 (September, 2015): 3–22.

these similarities does not lead me to experience the Shema in a new way. There is, however, something else in the Lord's Prayer that does help me to see the Shema from a different perspective. I am struck by the use of the first person plural pronouns in the Lord's Prayer.¹² To whom do they refer? As a Jew am I included in the "our" of "Our Father"? Do I have to change my religious identity in order to pray these words? Certainly there are well-known passages in Jewish liturgy that employ "father" in relation to God, for example, the "Our Father, Our King" (*Avinu Malkeinu*) sequence of prayers that is a highlight of the High Holy Day liturgy in the synagogue. But, is the "Father" as conceived of in the words of Jesus in Matthew the same as the "Father" of the "Our Father, Our King"?

Conversely, I might ask whether the "YHVH/our God/YHVH" referred to in the Shema is everyone's God or the God of Israel alone. The *mitzvot* that emerge from the three paragraphs of the Shema are significant for the Jewish people alone. There are indeed *mitzvot* that are recognized as universal, namely, the seven obligations that devolve upon all "children of Noah," that is, on all the nations. They include prohibitions from murder and the requirement to set up a system of justice. But, the obligations that emerge from the Shema form part of the unique covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people.

Yet, this exclusive character of the *mitzvot* must be weighed against another aspect of the Shema, its insistence that there is only one God whose will is sovereign for all peoples. There is a contradiction: Simultaneously, God is transcendentally the God of all peoples and immanently in covenantal relationship with the Jewish people. The God I seek to love ("you shall love the Lord your God") is the God whose *mitzvot* build a bridge of intimacy between us. At the same time, I share this God with all who would call upon God as "our Father."

2. The Shema in Light of al-Fatiha

The al-Fatiha shares much of its terminology with the Shema, the stress on the name of God and the guidance to the "straight path," comparable to the *mitzvot* in Judaism. The second verse of the *Surah* is a doxology, "Praise

¹² See Kevin Hart, *Kingdoms of God* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), pp. 265–278, on the "our" of "Our Father" and the problem of religious pluralism.

belongs to God, Lord of the Worlds, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy, Master of the Day of Judgment,” not unlike the doxology added as a second line in the Shema; both expressions of praise are responses to utterances of “the name of God.” In both cases (and the Lord’s Prayer as well), the power of the recitation comes from the intention or mindfulness with which it is spoken. In this respect, both al-Fatiha and the Shema can sometimes act as meditative mantras, focusing the mind on their object, which is (the holy name of) God.

More than these similarities, al-Fatiha articulates a paradox that makes me aware of the same paradox at the center of Judaism, a paradox that drives the spiritual engine within the Jewish psyche.¹³ The paradox is captured by two different theologically weighted “names of God” that are juxtaposed at the very commencement of al-Fatiha: on the one hand, “Lord/God of mercy” and, on the other hand, “Master of the Day of Judgment (in Arabic as in Hebrew, *din*).” The paradox is in the singular attribution to God of characteristics that in human terms contradict one another. This raises real issues about our behavior and attitudes.

I now notice how the Shema combines the generic term for “gods/God,” *Elohim*, which is associated in rabbinic teaching with the impersonal character of the God of justice, with the “personal” name of God, YHVH, which is associated with intimacy and mercy. A world built only on mercy would not be able to provide for human order and fair treatment for all. On the other hand, a world of strict justice would be soulless and unforgiving, with nothing to ameliorate the harshness of the natural world and give life its soulfulness. Both of these virtues come from God.

Yet, there is the paradox that is so powerfully presented for me in al-Fatiha. Given that both virtues are godly, how do I act to preserve them and so declare God’s “oneness” in my life? Thanks to my reading of al-Fatiha, a new dimension now enters into my recitation of the Shema. I am now aware of its existential character. It is as much about my struggles as a human being, attempting to integrate God’s will into my life, as it is about the nature of God’s divinity. The paradox of justice vs. mercy confronts me every day, in ways large and small. To be aware of the paradox and struggle with it

¹³ The paradox is identified and analyzed in Jeremy Schonfield, *Undercurrents of Jewish Prayer* (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006), pp. 189–190.

is to do God's will, to declare God's unity, to "love God with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my might."

B. A Christian Response (Dupuche)

1. The Lord's Prayer in Light of the Shema

Exodus 20:2–3 and Dt. 6:4 are part and counterpart. In Exodus 20 God has brought the People out of the land of slavery: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:2–3). In Dt. 6:3, God is about to bring them into the Promised Land: "Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you." I realize better to what extent the land occupies a most important position; it is an earthly reality that has spiritual significance.

My Christian tradition has too easily seen "kingdom of heaven" or "your kingdom" (Lord's Prayer) in otherworldly terms, as standing outside time and space. Not enough emphasis has been given to the words "come" and "on earth." The eschatological nature of Christianity is indeed "thisworldly" but not in some banal economic or political sense. The eschatological dimension is left vague in Christian piety. The Shema has made me realize more forcefully the thisworldly element of the petitionary clauses of the Lord's Prayer, especially the first three.

The term "one" in the Shema could be seen to militate against the term "three," which is fundamental to my Christian understanding of God. Yes, as a Christian I fully agree that God is one; indeed, the Nicene Creed starts with the phrase "I believe in one God." The question is the meaning of the word "one." There is no space for discussing trinitarian monotheism here, except to say that, in reading the Shema, I am warned powerfully against the longstanding temptation to tritheism. The Shema is a constant reminder to me of the need to hold in perfect balance the classical Christian phrase, "God is Three and God is One." I am brought into the paradox of God who is three Persons and not three individuals, who is Three but in such unity that they are One reality. I agree that both the Shema and the Christian tradition cannot reduce God to being like an individual in the way that humans are individuals.

Jesus, who gives the Lord's Prayer but does not pray it, is not a disciple like the rest of the disciples. In his regard, I realize more fully that he is unlike Moses, who includes himself within the Chosen People when he uses the phrase, "The Lord our God." Furthermore, Jesus, in the Christian understanding, is without sin and so cannot say "forgive us our trespasses." Jesus forms the community of which I am part rather than being an equal member of the community. Moses is a Jew; Muhammad is a Muslim; Jesus is not a Christian, as already noted. This contrast with the Shema and with al-Fatiha brings out more fully the unique position of Jesus within the various theological understandings. In short, the Shema reminds me of essential teachings—both about the future of this world and the Author of this world.

2. The Lord's Prayer in Light of al-Fatiha

The term "Father" is problematic for Muslims, as Fatih Tuncer will explain below. *Surah* 112, "*al-Ikhlās*," states that "[Allah] neither begets nor is begotten." The words "beget" and "begotten" originally meant simply "to produce" or "to give birth to." The term "begotten" is now used only in the English translation of the Greek word *gennēthenta* or the Latin word "*genitum*" of the Nicene Creed (381 C.E.), which is the definitive Christian statement of faith. It is well known that translation always involves interpretation. No Christian theology, however, would hold that God procreates in a genetic sense or produces in a technological sense. Indeed, the Nicene Creed contrasts "begotten" (*gennēthenta*, *genitum*) with "not made" (*ou poiēthenta*, *non factum*). The Arabic original of the words "begets, begotten" (*Surah* 112) is sometimes translated as "procreates" or "gives birth." Is this teaching in opposition to the beliefs of pagan tribes of Arabia who held that their tribal gods produced children in some anthropomorphic way? The discussion on the word "Father" will continue below in a more specifically Muslim context.

This is important for me as a corrective. There is a fine balance between reverence and intimacy. The Christian feeling of intimacy, even to the point of being able to cry out "Abba" (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6), a term that was used in the intimacy of the home by the children whether young or grown up, has been adversely affected by familiarity. In using the term "Father," I realize more clearly, I would do well to echo once again the highly reverential ele-

ment in *Surah* 1:2–4 and to rebalance the term with a sense of obedience, indeed submission, as when Jesus cries out in agony, “Abba . . . thy will be done” (Mk. 14:36). Indeed, the Lord’s Prayer three times, in various ways, prays “thy will be done.” This threefold petition is made before the middle and second half of the prayer, which have the word “us.” In other words, submission to the will of God, the central teaching of Islam, is emphasized and restores the right balance in the Lord’s Prayer. The implications for my Christian spirituality are considerable.

The term “Father” does, however, take up the sense of exclusiveness in the Shema, which emphasizes how YHVH has chosen God’s People. Likewise, the relationship of the offspring to their Father is unlike any other relationship to any other human being. I learn from the Shema how significant the address “Father” is meant to be.

The theme of forgiveness is not explicitly mentioned in the Shema or al-Fatiha. This shows even more forcefully how forgiveness is a dominant feature of my Christian discipleship and must be shown all the more strongly.

C. A Muslim Response (Tuncer)

It is not very difficult for a Muslim to read the Lord’s Prayer or the Shema in light of al-Fatiha, because Islam accepts the scriptural lineage between the Abrahamic religions. The Qur’ān refers to Christians and Jews as “People of the Book” (*Ahl al-Kitab*). “Those who believe, those who are Jews, and the Christians, and Sabeans, all who believe in Allah and the Last Day and act rightly, will have their reward with their Lord. They will feel no fear and will know no sorrow” (*Surah al-Baqara* 2:62) (*Surah al-Maida* 5:69).

The Qur’ān demonstrates utmost respect and reverence for the revealed scrolls of the Prophet Abraham (*Sahifa*), the Torah of Prophet Moses (*Tawrat*), the Psalms of Prophet David (*Zabur*), and the Gospel of Prophet Jesus (*Injil*). “Step by step, He [God] has sent the Scripture down to you [Prophet] with the Truth, confirming what went before: He sent down the Torah and the Gospel earlier as a guide for people and He has sent down the distinction [between right and wrong]” (*Surah al-Imran* 3:3).

The Qur’ān explains these scriptures as containing wisdom, guidance, and light and confirms the existence of Christianity and Judaism as valid religious traditions. However, the Qur’ān also warns of human interference

in scriptures over time and claims that individuals or groups have not remained faithful or have forgotten the message of their Prophets. Therefore, apart from the Qur'an, most Muslims will generally neither wholly accept nor wholly deny the above-mentioned scriptures as they exist today. This information is important to consider when asking how a Muslim feels when engaging with Christian and Jewish texts. After all, a strong tradition of "*Is-rā'iliyyāt*" exists in Islam, where Muslim scholars have referred to and engaged with Christian and Jewish sources to explore additional details of some topics only alluded to in the Qur'an.

1. Al-Fatiha in Light of the Lord's Prayer

Both al-Fatiha and the Lord's Prayer possess a number of strong similarities. Both prayers contain notions of respect and worship, and both ask for forgiveness, mercy and guidance. Like al-Fatiha, it seems half of the Lord's Prayer (Mt. 6:9–10) is devoted to the praise of God and the other half (Mt. 6:11–13) to the reciter who engages in personal prayer asking for guidance.

Although Muslims can relate to much of the Lord's Prayer, the opening verse, "Our Father in heaven," is problematic. This is due to the words "Father" and "in heaven." While the intention behind the use of "Father" by both Christians and Jews can be understood, Muslims are likely to refrain from referring to God as "Father" lest they be misunderstood. In the Lord's Prayer, in its suggested original Aramaic, Douglas-Klotz explained that the word "Abwoon" or "Abwūn" is translated as "Father," a word that can be translated on different levels as "Birther," "O breathing life," "Father-Mother" of the Cosmos," etc., which all seem to be synonymous with the term "Creator."¹⁴ The word "father" today has a meaning that is more specific than this suggestion. For Muslims, the term "father" limits the perfect, glorious, and exalted nature of Allah, as "There is nothing whatever like unto Him" (*Surah al-Shurā* 42:11). Furthermore, the terms "father" and "son" can suggest the doctrine of the Trinity, with which Muslims have serious difficulties. The term "father" is used in Islam when referring to Prophet Adam, the father of humanity, of whom we are children, whereas, "Allah" is the unique, proper, and greatest name of God and a culmination of the

¹⁴ Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Prayers of the Cosmos* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).

ninety-nine special names chosen out of an unrestricted number in which Muslims find a personal relationship through elements such as reverence and affection. The second section of the verse, “in heaven,” if taken literally, can also similarly be misunderstood. According to Islamic belief, God is the Exalted, Most High; God is everywhere, existing without a place.

The specific mention of “as we forgive those who trespass against us” in the Lord’s Prayer is very powerful. It teaches us to incorporate the most beautiful qualities of God in our daily lives. This parallels Muslim belief. When the Prophet asked Angel Gabriel the meaning of the verse “Show forgiveness, enjoin what is good, and turn away from the ignorant” (*Surah al-A’raf*, 7:199), Gabriel responded, “It is a command of God to forgive those who wronged you, to give to those who deprived you, and to tie relations with those who sever theirs with you.”¹⁵

Like the Lord’s Prayer, al-Fatiha shares similar themes. It begins with “In the name of Allah,” Allah being the unique name encompassing ninety-nine special names that include “the All-Forgiving” (*al-Ghaffar*) and the “Oft-Forgiving” (*al-Ghafur*). Therefore, the verse begins in the name of the All-Forgiving, the Oft-Forgiving God, who is All-Merciful and All-Compassionate. Once al-Fatiha is recited, Muslims say “*Amin*” (Amen) meaning “O Allah, accept our supplication, our prayer.” Based on strong prophetic tradition, the Prophet explains he was taught by the Angel Gabriel to say *Amin* at the end of al-Fatiha¹⁶ and in another explains, “When (after reciting surah al-Fatihah) the imam says *Amin*, you too say *Amin* (because the angels also say it). So, if anyone’s *Amin* coincides with the angel’s then all [one’s] past sins are forgiven.”¹⁷

The petition, “Give us this day our daily bread,” can be linked to the second verse of al-Fatiha, “Lord of the worlds” (*Rabb al-âlamîn*), where the term “*Rabb*” means “Sustainer,” “Master,” “Nourisher,” who fosters everything that exists; “*Al-âlamîn*” means “all worlds” and all of existence, whether seen or unseen, animate or inanimate, spiritual or material.

The final verse of the Lord’s Prayer, “And lead us not into temptation, but

¹⁵ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-qur’an al-azim*, III.531–532.

¹⁶ Abu Dawud, *Sunan*, al-ta’min wara’a al-imam (hadith no: 800), III.120; Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-qur’an al-azim*, I.146.

¹⁷ Bukhari, *al-Sahih*: bab jahr al-imam bi ta’min, III.244 (hadith number: 738); Abu Dawud, *Sunan*, al-ta’min wara’a al-imam (hadith number: 800) III.113; Ahmad b. Hanbal, *Musnad*, musnadu Abu Hurayra, XIV.431 (hadith number: 6890).

deliver us from evil,” echoes the final verse of al-Fatiha. Christians may find the final verse difficult, as some interpretations have taken the term “astray” as referring to Christians. This interpretation will be explained in the following section on the reading of al-Fatiha in light of the Shema.

2. Al-Fatiha in Light of the Shema

The opening words of the Shema, “Hear, O Israel,” address a specific group of people, namely, the twelve tribes of Israel. However, the overall message of the Shema is one that can appeal to others. The opening verse begins with the ultimate expression of Jewish monotheism, “The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” which Jesus described as the first of all the commandments. (Mk. 12:29) According to Islam, there can be no greater and more important statement than the belief there is no deity worthy of worship but the one true God (*lâ 'ilâha 'illâ Allâh*).

This for Muslims is the difference between “belief” (*iman*) and “disbelief” (*kufr*). The al-Fatiha begins in the name of Allah, who is “The One and Unique” (*al-Wahid and Ahad*), and al-Fatiha v. 5 reiterates, “You alone do We worship, and from You alone do we seek help.” Worship here is to love God—who is nearer to one than one’s jugular vein¹⁸—with all of one’s heart, soul, and might.

The Shema reminds one to live by these words, to teach them, and to make them part of everyday life. Similarly, al-Fatiha is recited over and over again, privately and as part of the congregation, in silence and aloud, through the obligatory five daily prayers that form five different phases of one’s day in constant remembrance of God. Muslims may relate to much of the Shema, especially if its final verses can be applied metaphorically rather than literally. While many Muslims display the text of the Fatiha, this is not a religious requirement but a custom to remind and encourage Muslims to live by its words.

However, Jews, like Christians, may find the final verse of al-Fatiha difficult if, according to Muhsin Khan’s translation that contains his own commentary as gloss, the phrase “who incur anger (or wrath)” refers to Jews, and “who go astray” refers to Christians.¹⁹ While Khan’s is the only translation

¹⁸ See Surah *Qaf*, 50:16.

¹⁹ *The Noble Qur'an*, tr. Muhsin Khan and Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din (Riyad: Darus-salam, 1996).

among many popular translations to incorporate this commentary as gloss, it is important to treat such a text within its context and remember that, in the sight of the Qur'ān, all Jews and Christians are not alike. However, the text itself does not specify two groups of people, and, according to Fethullah Gulen, the phrases have a broader meaning and include those who reject God and those who follow a religion but are hypocrites.²⁰

Furthermore, according to the majority of scholars, al-Fatiha was revealed to the Prophet in the Meccan period (610–622 C.E.) and must be read in tandem with the chapter revealed during the Medinan period (622–630 C.E.), which reads:

Yet they are not all alike: among the People of the Book there is an upright community, reciting God's Revelations in the watches of the night and prostrating (themselves in worship). They believe in God and the Last Day, and enjoin and promote what is right and good and forbid and try to prevent the evil, and hasten to do good deeds as if competing with one another. Those are of the righteous ones. Whatever good they do, they will never be denied the reward of it; and God has full knowledge of the God-revering, pious. (*Surah al-Imran*, 3:133–115)

Conclusion

This essay has shown the fascinating interplay of text and context. For while texts can be studied in themselves, as we have done in Part I, they do not actually exist outside their context. To decontextualize them means truncating them. Their context is not only the scriptures in which they are embedded but also the wider tradition, namely, the commentaries—indeed, the debates and disputes in the history of the respective religions. Above all, they had to be understood within the context of the liturgical usage and the community that they inspire and that in turn gives them substance. They do not exist *in abstracto* but are part of a religious experience that millions undergo each day.

The advantage of this method has been to show that such texts are not museum pieces but a living and constantly developing reality. The primary

²⁰ See Ali Unal, *The Quran with Annotated Interpretation in Modern English* (Rutherford, NJ: The Light, Inc., 2008), pp. 55–57.

context of this essay has been, in fact, the friendship among the three authors, who have long known each other and worked together on various projects. The respect we have for each other personally has naturally led to the wish to understand each other better, whence this tripartite study. It is a progressive unfolding.

In Part II we showed the highs and lows. A particular problem was the words “our” and “we.” Did they mean “not yours” or “not you”? Are the three prayers essentially exclusionary? Did this, in turn, challenge the members of the traditions to replace their ancient hostilities with rapprochement and to see if, in fact, they could begin to say the same prayers while allowing a level of diversity in meaning?

We came to the consensus that we could recite each other’s prayers, if the meanings of the words “Father” and “our” were adapted, with the word “Father” being allowed to mean “Creator” and the word “our” not having to involve a particular religious allegiance. It was felt, notably, that all three of us could recite al-Fatiha without demur; in fact, al-Fatiha became a bond of union among us. This is surely worthy of note.

This study, therefore, invites members of the Abrahamic faiths to revisit their central prayers and see to what extent they can lead to unity and cease to be walls of separation. Our knowledge of the truth of our own religion has led to openness to truth wherever it may be found, whether it is different or even challenging. Our theology of religions is based on the presumption that truth and holiness may be found in others also, an attitude that contrasts with the prejudice and hostility of the past. Indeed, by means of this essay we have discovered an essential point of agreement: We are children of Abraham.

This approach has further underscored the possibility of comparative theology’s being applied to the central rituals, those gestures beyond words, or to music and art—but that is the subject of other essays.

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