

# Discrediting the “Other”

[ ZOE WALTS ]

In the early centuries AD, multiple religious traditions coexisted together, specifically paganism and the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The interactions between paganism and Abrahamic faiths, and between the Abrahamic faiths themselves, helped to define and enrich each religion. However, these interactions were also often tense and hostile. In one instance, when the Roman Emperor Theodosius was seeking to restore a Jewish synagogue that had been destroyed by Christians, the Christian bishop St. Ambrose of Milan wrote a letter scolding Theodosius for his attempt to build a “temple of impiety.”<sup>1</sup> Ambrose argued that Jews were unbelievers because they view God differently from Christians. Judaism, unlike Christianity, does not accept Jesus as the savior. Ambrose framed Christianity as superior to Judaism, and as a result suggested that Jews did not deserve help from the emperor despite how they were wronged. Making attacks in an attempt to delegitimize religious views is a trend found across religious borders. In this paper, I will argue that certain patterns of attack recur in the attempts to discredit the Abrahamic faiths, whether they come from within these faiths or from outside them. First, I will explore attacks on the character of the Abrahamic faiths’ influential figures. Next, I will examine how religious practices are described by a religious outsider as immoral. Finally, using the context of their shared origins, I will look at attacks based on different interpretation of shared religious texts of

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<sup>1</sup> Ambrose of Milan, “Letter 40 to Emperor Theodosius I,” in *Ambrose*, ed. and trans. Philip Schaff, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series 2, Volume 10 (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans 1896; reprinted 1995), 947.

the Abrahamic faiths.

Religious leaders from priests to prophets have an important role, acting as a divine link from heaven to a religion's followers. By attacking the character of a leader of a religion who holds power as an interpreter of God's word, an outsider thus attempts to dismiss the legitimacy of the religion as a whole. For example, in a letter, Paul the Apostle scolds his fellow Christians, the Galatians, for considering circumcision after listening to a group who claims to be spreading God's teachings. This criticism came during a time when Christianity's rules were not completely solidified and many interpretations were fighting for legitimacy. Paul tells the Galatians that "it is those who want to make a good showing in flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised."<sup>2</sup> Paul discredits the people suggesting Christian circumcision to the Galatians by questioning their motives. The "religious leaders" encouraging the Galatians to engage in the practice of circumcision are not doing so to spread God's true word. Instead, addressing the leaders' desire to physically mark the Galatians, Paul implies the leaders to be Jews infiltrating Christianity. In suggesting that this other Christian sect is secretly Jewish, Paul sets up a rhetoric of Judaism as actively against Christianity. This in itself clearly demonstrates the hostility between these two faiths. Leaders who claim to be interpreting God's word are Jews secretly working against God; thus, their teachings are irrelevant and the practice of circumcision itself is against God.

Dismissal of religious leaders is not limited to interactions between different sects of the same religion. The pagan Celsus used a similar argument to attack Christianity in *The True Word*. In terms of historical reliability, this text is by a pagan author but is preserved solely in lengthy quotes within a Christian text.<sup>3</sup> Because Celsus' writing is preserved in a hostile text, it has very possibly been misquoted and misinterpreted from the original source. Regardless, this text is an important resource because it describes some of the critiques Pagans raised against Christianity. In *The True Word*, Celsus poses a series of accusations against Jesus' character, even asking at one point if Jesus

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<sup>2</sup> Paul the Apostle, "The Letter to the Galatians," in *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings*, ed. Bart Ehrman (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 221-226 at 225.

<sup>3</sup> Celsus, "The True Word," in *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity*, second edition, ed. Bart D. Ehrman (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 62-69 at 63.

“fabricated the story of [his] birth from a virgin to quiet rumors about the true and unsavory circumstances of [his] origins.”<sup>4</sup> In this scenario, the virgin birth, a story central to Christianity, is framed as Jesus’ attempt to craft a self-serving lie. Celsus accuses Jesus of using his religious power to improve his own image, lying under the guise of preaching. The accusation of fabrication by a religious leader is an implication of the leader’s poor morals.

An attack which mirrors the one made by Celsus against the Christians is made by Christian John of Damascus against the Muslims. His text, *The Heresy of the Ishmaelites*, is his description of the ways Islam goes against God. At one point, John tells a story in which Mohammad falls in love with the wife of one of his apostles. Mohammad then brings divorce into Islamic law and convinces the apostle to divorce his wife. Mohammad marries this woman and thereby, as John of Damascus says, commits adultery.<sup>5</sup> This is another instance in which a religious leader is accused of using his religious power for personal gain. In this description of the events, God does not tell Mohammad to preach about divorce, but Mohammad uses his status as a religious leader to claim that God endorses divorce and that He encourages it in a specific situation which serves Mohammad’s own desires.

There is a pattern in these sources of accusing important religious leaders of promoting doctrine for their own benefit, framing them both as deeply immoral and as false leaders. Accusations of “Jewish” Christians working within a specific Christian sect are on a smaller scale; the accusations of false prophets, for example, Jesus and Mohammad, manipulating God’s word for their own benefit are on a larger scale. Either way, the pattern of describing the immorality of religious leaders comes from both outside and from within the Abrahamic faiths, leaving other teachings of these religious leaders tainted.

In the same way attacks on religion dismiss religious figures as immoral, they also assert that a religion’s practices are immoral. By interpreting customs central to a religion in relation to acts commonly seen as unacceptable, religious outsiders can attack the religion as a

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4 Celsus, 64.

5 John of Damascus, “De haeresibus,” in *John Of Damascus on Islam: The “Heresy of the Ishmaelites,”* ed. and trans. Daniel J. Sahas (Leiden: Brill, 1972) at 139.

whole. In the text “Octavius,” Christian author Minucius Felix documents a discussion between a Christian, Octavius, and a Pagan, Caecilius. The conclusion of the text comes when Octavius convinces Caecilius to convert to Christianity.<sup>6</sup> Similar to *The True Word*, the opinion of a Pagan is documented in a Christian source, but the dialogue is still valuable because it gives examples of arguments made against Christianity. In this dialogue, Caecilius highlights a practice of Christians that he finds strange and wrong. He notes of Christians that “indiscriminately they call each other brother and sister, thus turning even ordinary fornication into incest by the intervention of these hallowed names.”<sup>7</sup> The “hallowed names” are a result of the essential Christian belief that all people are children of God. Caecilius uses logic to associate a seemingly harmless practice with sexual deviancy. The author aims to convince the reader that decent people would oppose Christianity as a result of the immoral implications of its practices.

Criticism of religious practice isn’t limited to Pagans outside of the tradition of the Abrahamic faiths. In his text, *The Heresy of the Ishmaelites*, Christian John of Damascus, among many other critiques, questions the morality of worship of the Kaaba stone at Mecca. John asks of Muslims “‘How is it that you rub yourselves against a stone [...] and you express your adoration to the stone by kissing it?’ And some of them answer that Abraham had intercourse with Hagar on it.”<sup>8</sup> The status of the Kaaba stone as holy is central to Islam. A central pillar of Islam, which endures today, is that Muslims should attempt to make a pilgrimage to pray at the Kaaba. The association of an act of piety and sex, an act of desire, delegitimizes the act of piety.

Examining core practices of a religion and framing them as dirty and wrong is a way to put all followers of a religion in a negative light. In his *Warning About the Christians*, Muslim writer al-Jāhiz describes how Christians pose a greater risk to society than Muslims realize. He attacks differences between Christianity and Islam, in an attempt to lower the societal opinion of Christians. He posits that “[A Christian] is uncircumcised, does not wash after intercourse, and eats pig meat. His wife does not wash after intercourse, either [...] which

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6 Minucius Felix, “Octavius,” in *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity*, second edition, ed. Bart D. Ehrman (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 59-62 at 59.

7 Felix, p. 61.

8 John of Damascus, 137.

leaves her absolutely filthy. Furthermore she, too, is uncircumcised.”<sup>9</sup> Again, there is the use of association with sex to frame a religion as immoral. Al-Jāhiz explains that unhygienic, indecent sex is related to whether or not a person is circumcised. Interestingly, al-Jāhiz targets the practice of remaining uncircumcised, which was also a key difference between Christians and both Jews and Muslims, to show that Christians are lesser than Muslims. This argument further demonstrates hostility between Islam and Christianity, with the exploitation of differences between them to push Christianity’s immorality, while describing the immorality of Christians in relation to Muslims.

The act of calling each other brother and sister, the worship of the Kaaba, and remaining uncircumcised are all customs that most members of their respective religions practiced at this time. Associating the members of a religion with sex is a very targeted attack on morality. Sexual acts are associated with lust and impurity, particularly in Christianity, and associating a whole religion with sex is an effort to reduce the entire group’s perceived holiness.

The Abrahamic faiths are unique in the sense that they depend on each other sequentially. Judaism’s Torah was adapted by Christianity into the Old Testament. Christians added the New Testament. Muslims adapted stories from both the Torah and the New Testament with the revelations of Muhammad to form the Qur’an. Islam exists because Christianity existed; Christianity exists because Judaism existed. Pagans did attack Christians on their interpretation of the Old Testament, but the shared worship of certain religious texts give Abrahamic faiths more authority to criticize a religious other’s interpretation of these shared texts. The integration of existing religious texts into new religious traditions almost guarantees disagreement in the interaction between Abrahamic religions. For example, Muslim al-Jāhiz calls Christianity and Judaism “two forms of unbelief.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, in his letter encouraging Emperor Theodosius I to promote Christian beliefs within the Roman Empire, St. Ambrose calls a synagogue a place “made for the unbelief of the Jews.”<sup>11</sup> There is a different kind of tension between Abrahamic faiths than between Abrahamic faiths and paganism. To one Abrahamic faith, the others are not just misguided; they are unbelievers because they refuse to know God in the true way.

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9 Abū ‘Uthmān ‘Amr ibn Bahr al-Jāhiz, “Al-Jāhiz’s Warnings About the Christians,” in *Muslim and Christian Contact in the Middle Ages: A Reader*, ed. Jarbel Rodriguez (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 9-16 at 16.

10 Al-Jāhiz, 13.

11 Ambrose, 947.

Abrahamic faiths reinterpret their shared texts in a way that promotes themselves and discredits the other. Christians understand the Old Testament as a text describing laws which Jews broke and misunderstood. One widely read text during the second and third centuries, The Epistle of Barnabas, is an anonymous text later attributed to the Christian Barnabas.<sup>12</sup> This text justifies Christian interpretations of the Jewish Torah, placing the Christian understanding as superior to the Jewish understanding. At one point, the author focusses on the practice of circumcision, which has been mentioned repeatedly in other attacks. This is yet another example of how differences can be exploited to create tension and opposition. Jews believed that circumcision marked them as holy, while Christians rejected the practice. According to the Christian interpretation, “The Lord says in the prophet, ‘They obeyed me because of what they have heard with their ears.’ [...] Thus he circumcised our hearing, that once we heard the word we might believe.”<sup>13</sup> The type of physical circumcision practiced by Jews is described as a misinterpretation of God’s true intention, through Christian explanation of a Jewish text. Christians reinterpreted circumcision to be figurative instead of literal to validate Christian practice and simultaneously discredit Jewish practice.

By attacking the interpretation of a religious text instead of the text itself, the text is able to remain legitimate while the other religion is left delegitimized. Muslims use a similar approach to delegitimize Christianity and Judaism. Based on the Muslim interpretation of the Torah and the Bible “Neither was Abraham a Jew nor a Christian, but upright and obedient, and not an idolater.”<sup>14</sup> This passage claims that Abraham and other great prophets of the Abrahamic tradition were not members of the religions of their times. Being Muslim means being obedient to God, so anyone who is truly obedient to God, such as the prophets, is a Muslim whether or not they used that terminology in their lifetime. The reference to idolatry can be interpreted as a specific attack on Christianity for worshiping Jesus Christ as God, and not as a prophet.

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12 Pseudo-Barnabas, “The Epistle of Barnabas,” in *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity*, second edition, ed. Bart D. Ehrman (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015),. 114-123 at 114.

13 Barnabas, 119.

14 *Al-Qur’an: A Contemporary Translation*, trans. Ahmed Ali (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 58.

Muslims regard Jesus as a great prophet but insist that by worshipping Jesus as God, Christians are worshipping an idol and taking glory away from the true God.

With each Abrahamic faith, dismissing the logic of the previous faith's interpretation legitimized the new interpretations. The status of being a member of an Abrahamic faith, studying and worshipping the same religious texts as the religious other, gives these authors the authority to criticize interpretations of the texts. Sacred religious texts remain as the true word of God; these patterns of attack frame the seemingly heretical religious other as naïve and inferior. Dismissal and reinterpretation of other Abrahamic faiths is a way to simultaneously legitimize one's religion and delegitimizing the religious other.

These three patterns of attack, demonstrated by the evidence examined in this paper, are well established across religious texts of many origins and contexts. Accusing religious leaders of using God as a false pretense for their own motives is one way religious opponents are attacked. Outsiders of a religion also use association with sexual deviancy to highlight immorality in basic religious practices. Lastly, among the Abrahamic faiths, religious opponents attack each other's interpretation of holy texts while avoiding attacking the text itself. It is important to understand where religious tension and misunderstanding emerged because these patterns of attack are repeated in many contexts. Attacks in today's world between religious groups likely have similar established patterns. Understanding these patterns of attack has the potential to open the door to attempts at deconstructing the misconceptions that perpetuate religious tension and hatred today.