

# **RB4009: Abrahamic Faiths**

**2019**

## **Assessment Cover Sheet for the Essay**

**Assessment Due Date: 6th January 2020**

**Please complete the following**

**I confirm that this assignment which I have submitted is all my own work and the source of any information or material I have used (including the internet) has been fully identified and properly acknowledged as required in the school guidelines I have received.**

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*Critically examine whether the revelatory aspects and doctrinal developments of the Abrahamic faiths are binding or can its theology continue to be developed and reinterpreted in response to a modern context?*

Divided into three distinct parts, this essay principally states that the Abrahamic faiths, and particularly the Catholic Church, are theologically static, but undergoing constant pastoral and ecclesiastical change. To explore the validity of this statement, examples will be provided to cover the three aspects of the question

A critical examination will thoroughly explore, firstly, the revelations that play a fundamental role in the theology of the Abrahamic religions. By measuring the extent to which the Abrahamic faiths are dependent upon revelation for their continued existence, we will pinpoint whether these revelations are truly binding. This, followed by an exploration of the actions and policies of different denominations to keep revelations intact and then by an overview of the different types of revelations and revelatory sources, will solidly answer the first aspect of the question at hand.

Secondly, we will explore whether the doctrinal developments of the Abrahamic faiths are alterable with examples from historical and contemporary events to support the proposed argument. Examining aspects particularly from within the Catholic Church and between different Christian denominations will allow for a clear conclusion on whether the doctrines of a particular church can be considered as unalterable or otherwise binding.

Thirdly and finally, the theologies of each of the three major Abrahamic religions – Christianity, Judaism, and Islam – will be analysed in the context of modernity. This will be followed with examples of the difficulties that each has faced in the modern world with a view to identify whether their doctrines are firstly re-interpretable in a modern context, whether it is fair that they are interpreted in this way, and the resulting consequences for each of the religions if such reinterpretations are popular and successfully established.

Revelation is the connection between humanity and God; revelation is the knowledge we have of God through sources considered to be at least divinely inspired as is the approach of the Catholic Church in relation to the writings found in the Bible (Marshall, 2004, p31,45,52,75; Ramage, 2016, p66-80). In the case of Islam, the Quran is believed to be the verbatim word of God therefore there exists no higher form of binding than that which claims to be bound by the direct will and word of God. Therefore, we can affirm that these elements of the Abrahamic faiths are certainly binding and each religion is absolutely dependent upon such revelations for their continued existence. They constitute a core part of their respective religion and it is these specific components that are unalterable due to both the divinity of the source and the inextricable nature of certain central doctrines (e.g. resurrection of Jesus in Christianity and Muhammad as receiving the word of God in Islam).

The Christian church approached the issue of the binding nature of revelation through its customisation of the concept of sacredness. A word originating in Middle English, the attachment of not only Christian beliefs but Christian objects with the concept of sacredness allowed for the Church to retain its control over what people did and what people said about Christianity. It is from the notion of sacredness that opposite notions of sacrilege and blasphemy emerged. By affirming through Canon Law that certain fundamental beliefs of the Church must remain unchallenged, the Church bound itself to revelation. An important general distinction to make in the context of the philosophy of religion is the difference between doctrine and dogma. Doctrine has the functionality to change by the authority of the Church while dogma is consistent and unchanging (Ward, 2008, p169-184).

Alternatively, Christianity now consists of a number of churches self-identifying as non-denominational, hence they affiliate themselves with no wider church governance in particular. This growing trend in non-denominationalism presents a revisioning of Christianity as these

independent churches do not hold the same historical contentions with other churches. It could be suggested that non-denominational Christianity is a purer form of Christian practice and belief by focusing on the central tenets of the faith and therefore removing the various historical entanglements.

As part of his extensive contributions to Catholic theology and the development of scholasticism, Thomas Aquinas segmented revelations into two major types. If we are to understand whether the revelatory aspects of Christianity are binding, we must understand the differences between the types of revelation. The two major forms of revelation identified by Aquinas were general and special revelation. The former of which involves receiving knowledge about God through God's creations, such as through the natural world while the latter involves receiving knowledge about God by means of the supernatural, namely through scripture or miracles.

A more recent example of the Catholic Church's approach to revelation came with its position on the public revelations of Our Lady of Fátima. The Bishop of Leiria-Fátima, on 13 October 1930, declared Our Lady of Fátima to be "worthy of belief" (Jolly, 1997). In this line of thought, we can split beliefs of any religion into two segments; the conditional and the preferential. Conditional beliefs are those which exist as central and unchanging beliefs of incontrovertible truth, such as the resurrection of Jesus Christ, while preferential beliefs are those which are, as the Bishop of Leiria-Fátima declared, "worthy of belief", but are nonetheless binding (Esteves, 2017). Essentially, one need not believe in the miracles of Fatima to continue being a Catholic, but if they so wish, they are permitted by the Church to believe in the miracles. However, a difference in circumstances would be to focus on the context of papal infallibility. A declaration made under papal infallibility constitutes a statement incapable of being erroneous which means that no refutation or reinterpretation of such a declaration is permitted to occur.

The key theological principle of the majority of Christianity is that of the Trinity and this dogma arose during the pivotal Council of Nicaea in AD 325 after being established by Emperor Constantine (New Advent, 2017). There was a series of defenders of trinitarianism even before it was fully established; these views are now described as proto-trinitarian and significant figures like Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Theophilus of Antioch and Tertullian (Hurtado, 2005, p595-599). However, even Tertullian himself noted that the majority of those around him during these discussions found issues with his proposed doctrine. The several ecumenical councils dotted throughout the centuries presented themselves as an opportunities for the fiercest theologians and thinkers of the day to exhibit their beliefs about the nature of God and the future of the Church.

Although results were derived from the discussions taking place during these councils, it would be a misrepresentation to say that the vote was unanimous on certain doctrines. Ecumenical councils continue to present the most practical and efficient way of establishing new doctrines to take the Church in new directions, as was seen with the Second Vatican Council which revolutionised the weekly Mass for Catholics as they could receive Mass in their own language rather than in Latin (Pope Paul VI, 1965). This opened up Catholicism to a wider set of people and although Traditionalist Catholicism which opposed the changes emerged as a result, the alterations made to accommodate non-Latin languages in the Mass have been almost universally accepted.

These changes have seen dramatic impact on the way in which Mass is conducted; language is the principal communicator of the faith and through translated Masses, Catholics were poised to better understand and interact with their faith in ways previously reserved for those whom could speak fluent Latin. Not only did this hold incredible consequences for the faith community, but it also painted the Catholic Church itself as markedly more open and accepting of changes to the fundamental elements of the liturgy through language. The Second Vatican Council brought the Catholic Church into the modern, globalised world, it reinvigorated the liturgy and made the Catholic Mass ripe for worldwide export.

Islam is notably more monolithic in its basic theological history in comparison to the history of Christianity as the doctrine of the One God is clearly stated in the Quran without room for ambiguity on the matter. However, the two main denominations of Islam (Sunni and Shia) are not mainly split along theological lines, but are instead divided by the question of succession which can be considered as a practical division with theological implications.

In the context of the Catholic Church, there exists that which is known as the sacred tradition which essentially states that the practices, beliefs, worship, and teachings of the Church passed down through an oral tradition, also referred to as the 'Living Tradition', are the foundations through which the Bible is to be interpreted (Porter, 2016, p3-26). This sacred tradition was one of the main causes for the split between Catholicism and Protestantism, as the latter upheld *sola scriptura*, or the belief that the Bible alone was a sufficient basis for all teachings about Christianity.

With the development of Thomism comes the understanding that in relation to binding nature of revelation, new approaches can be formulated about revelation and the beliefs of Christianity, but not new interpretations of dogma (Copleston, 1955). Such new interpretations would be quickly considered as heretical or otherwise incompatible with the pre-existing beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church. It is for this reason that Thomism was not only accepted, but embraced by the Catholic Church and other philosophies like Jansenism, Arianism, and Adoptionism were designated as heretical (Smit, 2015, p177-199).

Mormonism is a pertinent example of how Abrahamic faiths are not so binding. This is because the Mormon Church believes that whomever its current leader is, is receiving revelations from God on a regular basis and these are constantly being integrated into the doctrine of the Church (BBC News, 2018). The fact that the Church leader is granted such a power to constantly change the direction of the Church and its doctrine on such a regular basis in comparison to the powers of the Pope in the Catholic Church demonstrates a strong case for the notion that doctrinal developments within certain Christian churches are in constant state of change.

The ability of doctrines within Christianity to change can be considered as hindered by denominational differences and the static nature of certain Churches in comparison to others. With the development of Modern Christianity has emerged non-denominationalism (Stetzer, 2015). Non-denominationalism can be viewed as a way of widening the theological conversation within a religion and as an escape from denominational doctrines (Hawley, 2006). Theologians and philosophers are free to change and develop the doctrines of Christianity to suit modern social views, for example the changing attitudes towards homosexuality, divorce, and abortion. Although such developments would likely not receive support from certain traditional Churches, newer Church bodies may support such doctrinal changes. Essentially, non-denominational Christianity provides a free space for Christian freethinkers to reconsider their faith's important doctrines.

In recent decades, Christianity has seen a dramatic decline in popularity, particularly in the number of Christians attending church on a regular basis. A number of issues can be suggested as to blame for this decline that have held major impacts on the approach of the Catholic Church in particular towards the development and reinterpretation of theology and religious dogma. Such causes include the Church's attitudes towards normalised social issues such as homosexuality, abortion, and transgenderism; the laws of secular countries like France and the United Kingdom are now severely contrasted with the views of the Church, thus alienating the Church and undermining its moral role in society. To demonstrate a direct example of this takes us back to papal infallibility, particularly for example, on the topic of women priests, Pope John Paul II in 1994 infallibly declared that women could not be priests and so because he used papal infallibility, any future Pope cannot challenge what previously been infallibly declared (Stanford, 2009).

Most recently, the Amazon Synod gathered in October 2019 to discuss the presence and future of the Catholic Church in the Amazon Basin which makes up about 35% of the landmass of the entire

South American continent (Catholic News Agency, 2019). With a dispersed population of approximately 2.8 million speaking a hugely diverse set of languages, the Amazon Basin presents a population whom have largely remained isolated from Catholic conversion in contrast to the rest of the continent due to the history of Spanish colonialism. This particular synod was set to be controversial from the outset as two of its topics of discussion centred firstly on the permission of permanent deacons who are married be allowed to become ordained priests and secondly on the permission for women to be ordained as priests, both of which have emerged as proposals to be discussed due to the shortage of priests in this region.

Although isolated cases with a multitude of constraints placed on applicability, the vote in favour of these two proposals presents an example of how the doctrines of the Church are able to be developed and reinterpreted in response to a modern context. It is important to note that these proposals concern ecclesiastical issues while the theology of the Church remains firmly intact without major theological change since the Second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965 (Daley, 2017).

The issue with the development of theology means that the Church could stray from the origins (i.e. Jesus himself), examples of which include Augustine and his writings on divorce. Meanwhile, in the Eastern Orthodox Church, the concept of *oikonomia* developed in contrast to legalism as a means to manage social circumstances such as divorce through a discretionary deviation from the literal code of law. *Oikonomia* therefore adopts the spirit of the law in its application rather than the application of the law in literal terms. *Oikonomia* represents a way to reasonably apply the law and codes of the Church to pastoral issues in relation to a modern context through development and reinterpretation of doctrine (Lampe, 1968, p940-943).

It is essential for aspects of a religion to change so that it may survive in accordance with the advancements made in the society that it resides within. The Catholic Church's struggle to retain followers is arguably due to its consistent resistance to change on social issues as well as its resistance to the reinterpretation of its beliefs. However, revitalisations of religions are essential to keep followers interested and engaged with their faith, particularly in a modern were technology, materialism, and a variety of other non-religious activities and events dominate our lives (Kerr, 2007).

However, despite the Church's resistance to open philosophical debate about its beliefs, certain figures continue to reinterpret the Church's understanding of Christianity. One such figure is the modern-day mystic Ruth Burrows whose re-development of the trinity demonstrates a revitalisation of some of the central beliefs of Christianity and proves that the development and reinterpretation of theology can occur in relation to modern-day thought (Burrows, 2019; Jones, 2018).

Throughout the histories of all three of the major Abrahamic faiths, it is the ascetics whom have made the most profound of theological developments and contributions. Now honoured as one of only two female Doctors of the Church, Saint Teresa of Ávila was perhaps most pivotal out of all the ascetic figures of her time due to the simultaneous occurrence of the Protestant Reformation and her role as the central figure of the Counter-Reformation (Nelstrop, 2009, p139-158). Teresa's role during this time was two-pronged; it was a role of both theological development and of theological defence as she dedicated her thoughts to the protection of Catholic theology from Protestant thought. Through the Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, the Islamic philosopher, Avicenna, and through Aquinas himself there was a distinct desire or requirement to reconcile the doctrines of both Abrahamic religions with the Greek philosophers of antiquity, namely Socrates and Plato (Ruprecht, 2002, p1-24).

Change to doctrine in the context of Islam, however, can be described as an even greater challenged as the second largest Abrahamic faith is not governed nor is it structured in the same way that Christianity is with its Church denominations (Perwiranegara, 2002, p67-82). Sunni Islam

is perhaps best understood as a monolithic entity from an outsider's perspective, but is in fact hugely fragmented on the inside (University of California Television, 2012). Sunni Islam as the largest denomination of Islam is not lead by a single figure or government like the Catholic Church is and although muftis may be appointed as legal experts, expertise is largely subjective thus allowing greater flexibility for imams (Harvard Extension School, 2011; Omer, 2016). This perhaps also causes an issue for the development of theological and operational change in Islam because the only unifying source is the Quran which is itself fragmented into different schools of thought whom have interpreted its teachings in a particular way (Amanat & Griffel, 2009, p729-733).

From the points made in this essay, the conclusion that can be made is certainly two-pronged. As a fundamental component of their respective religions, the divine revelation of scripture and sacred tradition (in the Catholic Church) are aspects of faith which are "addable to" but not alterable. By this, the interpretation of theological doctrine can be elaborated and embellished from its basic state as it has been through the writings of Thomas Aquinas, Teresa of Avila, and more recently Ruth Burrows as well as by writers and philosophers throughout the history of the Abrahamic religions, but the theological foundations of each faith remain unchangeable. This is why positions like Jansenism, Arianism, and Adoptionism all remain heretical from the Church's perspective because they proposed fundamental theological change rather than ecclesiastical and pastoral change.

However, as we have seen from events like the Amazon Synod most recently and the results of the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s, ecclesiastical change (acting as a practical manifestation of theology) is not only permissible, but is in constant change and development. With this dichotomy in mind, we are now lead to consider the variety of issues facing the Catholic Church due to its arguably regressive stance on social topics like homosexuality, transgenderism, and abortion (Alison, 2007, p50-62). These are most accurately classified as ecclesiastical issues rather than theological which opens the question of whether the stances taken on them are open to alteration so that the Church can more easily navigate in the 21st century religious landscape.

These same social issues are facing both Islam and Judaism and these religions are in the same scenario as to whether such topics are acceptable. However, due to the Catholic Church's heartland residing in various countries across Europe, North America and South America, the onus of tolerance is perhaps placed more firmly on the Catholic Church due to the progressive secularised positions taken by many Western Europe states. In this case, one's religion does not reflect and is in direct opposition to the tolerance of the government; the close relationship that many Churches have held with the state is therefore undermined. This is perhaps the place from which religious disillusionment stems which is perhaps the principal reason for for the decline in Christian practice and belief in Western Europe, the future of which will be up to the Church to decide whether it can take progressive stances without contradicting its principles or isolating its ardent, traditionalist followers.

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## Further reading

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