PROPHETIC FAITH AND THE CRITIQUE OF TRADITION: JEWISH, CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM PERSPECTIVES

Patrick J. Ryan, S.J.
Laurence J. McGinley Professor of Religion and Society
Fordham University

On March 12, 2000, the first Sunday of Lent in the year that completed the second millennium, Pope John Paul II celebrated a liturgy in Saint Peter’s Basilica for what was called “A Day of Pardon.” There were some in the Vatican at the time who opposed the events planned for the liturgy of that day. There were also some outside the Vatican who criticized the liturgy for its focus on seeking God’s forgiveness for sinful behavior by Church people over the past millennium; they would have preferred something more like an apology to human beings, past and present, who had suffered at the hands of Church officialdom. But the focus of the prayer in that liturgy—as should be the focus of all monotheistic prayer—was on God, who alone can forgive sins. Furthermore, not all the sinners in the Church over the past millennium have been Church officials, although one might sometimes get that impression from the media.

In the prayers of petition for that Sunday’s liturgy seven prelates of the Roman Curia introduced prayers by the Pope (1) for the forgiveness of sins in general, (2) for the forgiveness of sins committed “in the Service of Truth” (e.g., various Inquisitions), (3) for the forgiveness of sins that damaged Church unity, (4) for the forgiveness of sins against the People of Israel, (5) for the forgiveness of sins associated with colonialism and ethnocentrism, (6) for the forgiveness of sins involving the oppression of women as well as racial and cultural intolerance, (7) for the forgiveness of sins that entailed the abuse of minors, the poor, the unborn and other defenseless persons.¹

What Pope John Paul II did on that Sunday in Rome in 2000 was unprecedented; his successor in the Chair of Peter, Benedict XVI, has had to repeat that gesture many times, and especially the seventh prayer of petition, in the aftermath of proliferating charges of sexual abuse by Catholic Church personnel. But is not repentance central not only to the Christian tradition of faith but also to the tradition of Israel from which Christianity took its origins? Such repentance has often led to fruitful revision of the Jewish and Christian traditions. In the course of this lecture I will also suggest that the faith tradition of Muslims knows the reality of repentance for its past and revision of its formulations.

How can a faith tradition or those who bear that tradition repent? How can a faith tradition revise its self-understanding? I would suggest that it is precisely the prophetic charism—the free gift of God’s intervention in the lives of faithful human beings, enabling them to speak on God’s behalf to you and to me—that makes such repentance, such self-critique, such revision possible. We Jews, Christians and Muslims have much to learn from each other in this matter, much need to share how our faith traditions can undergo genuine internal critique, can endure prophetic rebuke from God. As a result we
can undergo or even undertake change. This assertion flies in the face of the opinions of some interpreters within each tradition of faith who propagate an ahistorical vision of the past, as if nothing important has ever changed or ever can change. A great English writer and theologian of the 19th century, the recently beatified John Henry Newman, thought quite differently: “In a higher world,” he wrote, “it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.”

I. PROPHETIC CRITIQUE IN THE JEWISH TRADITION

In the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, it is stated in more than one version of the commandments that the Lord is “an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon their children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me.” Fortunately, the same passage counterbalances this word with a promise that the same impassioned Lord shows “kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments” (Ex 20:6). The context of this baleful threat and glorious promise is the sin of idolatry: “You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image . . . You shall not bow down to them or serve them” (Ex 20:4-5).

In the relatively brief experience ancient Israel had with kingship, a period of five centuries, few kings of Judah come in for more deserved obloquy than Manasseh, who ruled in Jerusalem from 687 to 642 BCE. The son of the reformist Hezekiah, Manasseh came to the throne at the age of 12. Over the next 45 years he reversed the policies of his devout father and his father’s counselor, the prophet Isaiah. The sin of idolatry, and especially the cultus of Baal and Asherah, the fertility gods of the pagan populations among whom the Israelites had settled, was introduced into the Jerusalem Temple under Manasseh. The author of the Deuteronomic history blames Manasseh for the hardships Judah would suffer in the Babylonian exile half a century later (2 Kgs 21:10-12). It is interesting to note that the Deuteronomic historian’s utterly negative judgment on Manasseh was not entirely shared by the Chronicler, who maintains that late in his career Manasseh repented of his ways (2 Chr 33:12-20). Even the reforms introduced by Manasseh’s second successor on the throne of Judah, Josiah (r. 640-609 BCE), did not save the Southern Kingdom from the punishment enunciated by prophets in the era of Manasseh.

It was probably in the reign of Josiah that the Book of Deuteronomy first questioned the justice of punishment visited on anyone other than the perpetrator of sin: “Parents shall not be put to death for children, nor children for parents: a person shall be put to death only for his own crime” (Deut 24:16). When the Babylonian Exile eventuated, the prophet Ezekiel (as well as a late voice in the tradition of Jeremiah) rejected the notion that descendants to the third and fourth generation could be punished for the idolatry of their forebears:

The word of the Lord came to me: What do you mean by quoting this proverb upon the soil of Israel, “Parents eat sour grapes and their children’s teeth are set on edge”? As I live—declares the Lord God—this proverb shall no longer be current among you in Israel. Consider, all lives are Mine; the life of the parent and
the life of the child are both Mine. The person who sins, only he shall die (Ezek 18:1-4).

This chapter of Ezekiel dwells on this theme at some length. It specifies, in particular, the happy fate that awaits the person who observes the Law and avoids idolatrous practice, various forms of sexual misbehavior and economic crimes such as the abuse of debtors and robbery. More positively Ezekiel praises the same person who cares for the poor and practices true justice: “Such a man shall live—declares the Lord God” (Ezek 18:9). But if that just man’s son, like Manasseh, the son of Hezekiah, reverses all his father’s deeds of righteousness, “he shall die; he has forfeited his life” (Ezek 18:13). But if that unjust man’s son goes back to the good deeds of his grandfather, “he shall not die for the iniquity of his father, but shall live” (Ezek 18:17). Ezekiel even brings up the possibility that a sinner can repent; perhaps he knew the Chronicler’s tradition that the wicked Manasseh repented towards the end of his life. But he also mentioned the opposite possibility, that a just man can go astray. How could he not forget Solomon?

Obvious as Ezekiel’s prophecy on this subject may seem to us in modern times, it was not entirely obvious to his listeners and readers, people raised in the ancient understanding of persons as inextricably identified with their family, clan, tribe or nation, a notion typical of the era before what the German philosopher Karl Jaspers called the Axial Period. But even after the Axial Period, hearers of the parable of Jesus about the unforgiving debtor would not have been surprised that this major economic criminal had originally been “sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions” (Mt 18:25) to atone for the unimaginably large sum he had squandered. Even today, right here in post-Axial Age New York City, some would like to jail the family members of major economic malefactors.

The revolutionary nature of Ezekiel’s prophetic critique of Torah moral teaching about guilt is recognized by the prophet himself, who responds to the objection of those of his fellow exiles who say that “the way of the Lord is unfair” (Ezek 18:25, 29), meaning the Lord’s new way of punishing only the sinner rather than the sinner and his whole family. The victim is often tempted to seek total revenge. On God’s behalf the prophet completes this revolutionary new teaching with a general rule from God: “It is not My desire that anyone shall die—declares the Lord God. Repent, therefore, and live!” (Ezek 18:32).

In the Babylonian Talmud, the great collection of the Oral Law composed between the first and sixth centuries CE, it is suggested in the Tractate Berakoth, in mitigation of the threat of multi-generational punishment of idolaters and other major sinners, that children will be punished for the sins of their parents only if they themselves continue in the same sinful behavior. Much more radically, the Tractate Makkoth in the Babylonian Talmud quotes Rabbi Jose ben Ḥanina, a sage of the third and fourth centuries CE, who states quite boldly that the Law of Moses was revised by prophets. After revisions of the Torah attributed to Amos and Jeremiah, and before one attributed to Isaiah, Rabbi Jose cites the example of Ezekiel: “Moses had said, The Lord . . . is visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and upon the children’s children,
unto the third and unto the fourth generation; Ezekiel came and declared, the soul that sinneth, it shall die.”

Indeed, the Talmud as a whole is replete with such examples of what the late Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser (d. 1984) called “daring illustrations of the independence with which the rabbis reacted to biblical texts.”

But after the death of the last prophets (for Jews Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, who probably lived in the late sixth and early fifth centuries BCE), was there a possibility within the Jewish tradition for prophetic critique and revision of that tradition? The example of the Babylonian Talmud suggests that there was, but did that possibility persist in the era after the Talmud was substantially complete? The great scholar of the Jewish Theological Seminary here in New York City, the late Abraham Joshua Heschel (d. 1972), once suggested that the prophetic charism continued in the Jewish tradition later than the Talmud. Appearances of Elijah the prophet and voices from heaven (examples of what has been called a bat qol in Hebrew) emboldened not a few medieval rabbis to speak on God’s behalf with the boldness of the biblical prophets. “The master-rabbi of all generations”—as Heschel calls Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Itzhaki: 1040-1105 CE)—“hinted that he had been granted divine illumination.”

Even though Rashi usually cited earlier authorities as sources for his judgments on a scriptural or Talmudic passage, he could set out independently in a new direction. Rashi even went so far as to say at one point in his commentary on the prophecy of Ezekiel, “As for me, neither teacher nor helper aided me in explaining this entire matter. So it has been shown to me from heaven.” On another occasion, Rashi asserted, “I have never heard nor found the correct interpretation of this verse . . . but I say . . . .” So bold were Rashi’s assertions of his own inspired interpretations that some modern editors of Rashi eliminated completely from the text of his commentaries such claims to divine inspiration and independence from human authorities.

Rabbi Heschel, no mean prophetic voice himself here in the United States during the Civil Rights struggle and the anti-war agitations of the 1960s, concluded with his usual eloquence his essay on continuing prophecy in the Jewish tradition and its critique of the status quo: “One cannot grasp the innermost thought of the holy men of Israel without remembering that in their eyes, prophetic inspiration hovered over human reason, and, at times, heaven and earth would meet and kiss. They believed that the divine voice which issued from Horeb was not stilled thereafter.” That voice from Horeb still strikes our ears and moves our hearts to repentance and deeper faith. The word of God enunciated by prophets corrects our waywardness even today. Prophets continue to call us to the critique of what is past, repentance for our sins and tikkun olam, the repair of the broken world in which we live.

II. PROPHETIC CRITIQUE IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

The New Testament offers multiple examples of prophetic voices that criticize or revise what has gone before in the tradition of Israel or even in the traditions of the first Jewish Christians. The very name by which we know the uniquely Christian scriptures, the New Testament, derives from a Christian reinterpretation of the prophet Jeremiah’s hope for a new covenant to be struck between the Lord and Israel in the aftermath of the
Babylonian exile (Jer 31: 31-34). Jesus and the New Testament writers, referring to this passage in Jeremiah, seem to have had something radically different in mind, and in this they departed from Jewish exegesis of the same text. In the Christian understanding of Jeremiah’s new covenant, the New Testament writers imitate the style of Jesus as a prophet, or even as a rabbinical commentator on the Torah, revising the Law and sometimes even contradicting it. Ezekiel, Rabbi Jose ben Ḥanina and Rashi, to cite only a few names in the Jewish tradition, have also made such prophetic critiques and revisions. That this should happen in the New Testament is not surprising in historical terms, given the rabbinical formation of Paul and the nearly contemporary careers of the Gospel writers and the principal contributors to the Mishnah, most notably Yoḥanan ben Zakkai (d. 90 CE).

For Christians, Jesus is understood fully as much more than a prophet, but he is understood as a prophet and the Gospels make this clear. Matthew’s Gospel, in particular, preserves in its five great discourses of Jesus many traits of prophetic and rabbinic critique and revision of the Torah. Six times in the first chapter of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus contrasts his teaching on the Ten Commandments with what has gone before; like Ezekiel and Rashi, Jesus speaks on his own authority, an authority derived from God. “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times . . . But I say to you . . .” (Mt 5: 21-22).

Paul of Tarsus, no immediate disciple of Jesus and even an enemy of the first Christians, whom he considered deviant Jews, narrates most succinctly in his letter to the Galatian Christian community, dated no later than 55 CE, how he went from a persecutor of those who followed Jesus to the most ardent witness to Jesus. Paul’s account of how he changed is best understood as a prophetic call narrative, not unlike that of Jeremiah (Jer 1:4-19):

You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stay with him fifteen days (Gal 1: 13-18).

Note the insistence of Paul writing to the Galatians on the independence of his call from that of Cephas (Peter) and the other disciples who had known Jesus in his lifetime. Like Ezekiel and Rashi, Paul took an independent line, although he did admit, when later challenged as to the authenticity of his proclamation to Gentiles of salvation by faith apart from works of the Law, that he returned to Jerusalem for “a private meeting with
the acknowledged leaders” (Gal 2:2b). Paul the prophet did this not because of some summons from headquarters but “in response to a revelation” (Gal 2:2a) from God.

The prophet Paul felt emboldened by God to contradict the leaders of the Jerusalem community when they divided on the question of whether Gentiles had first to convert to Judaism before they could become Christians. Emissaries from the Jerusalem Church had evidently disturbed the consciences of the Gentile Christian community in Galatia, urging them to be circumcised and adhere to Jewish dietary practice, implying in the process that Paul had not proclaimed the whole Gospel to them. Paul, nothing if not irascible, struck back: “If anyone proclaims a gospel contrary to what you have received, let that one be accursed” (Gal 1:9). Paul even tells us how he took on Cephas (Peter), who had earlier eaten with Gentiles but later, influenced by James, the relative of Jesus and head of the Jerusalem Church, had withdrawn from such table-fellowship: “When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned” (Gal 2:11).

In the same letter Paul elaborates an extraordinary re-reading of the story in Genesis about the two wives of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, and their sons Isaac and Ishmael. In the process of this re-reading, Paul identifies those freed by Christ from observance of the Law with Sarah and her freeborn son, Isaac; those still bound to observe the Law he assimilates to the slave spouse of Abraham, Hagar, and her son, Ishmael (Gal 4:21-5:1). Since the Hebrew Bible identifies Sarah and her son as the progenitors of the people of Israel and Hagar and her son as the progenitors of non-chosen peoples, most notably the Arabs of the Sinai peninsula (Gen 25:12-18), Paul’s midrash or scholarly meditation on this narrative in Genesis runs directly against normative Jewish understanding of the story (Gen 21:8-21). Note that Paul is here rebuking and criticizing the teaching not of Jews but of his fellow Jewish Christians, most notably James, Peter and John, an apostolic trio Paul calls, possibly with some irony, “pillars” (Gal 2:9) of the Jerusalem Church. Paul sums up the radical nature of his prophetic teaching by denying the relevance of any traditional barrier to first-class status in the Church: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

It has taken the Christian churches throughout the world a long time to receive fully the teaching of Saint Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Although Ethiopia preserves a variety of Judeo-Christianity16 and certain 19th-century American-originated Christian groups have taken up some Jewish dietary restrictions,17 most Christians today reject such practices. As to Paul’s declaring the cessation of the distinction between slave and free, it must be admitted that slavery was taken for granted as a fact of economic and political life in the Roman era, as several other passages in the New Testament make clear, although Paul’s letter to Philemon begins to offer seeds for a justification of abolition.18 Genuine abolitionism—total opposition to slavery in any form—arose in Pietist and Quaker circles and became more general throughout Europe in the early 19th century and later in that century in the Americas.19
If the reception of Paul’s teaching on the abolition of the distinction between slave and free took a long time to be accepted among Christians, his assertion that in Christ Jesus “there is no longer male and female” has, like Thursday’s child in the nursery rhyme, “far to go.” You will think, perhaps, that I am talking about the question of the ordination of women in the Christian Churches. Although most Churches in the Reformation traditions do ordain women to all ranks of the ministry, Catholicism in all its branches and the Christian Churches of the East do not. Will these latter Churches ever change their discipline? I am a historian of religion, not a prognosticator of possible future theologies.

But this much must be noted. The Christian tradition in all its forms celebrates a vast company of saintly women who have exercised the prophetic charism in ways that are quite extraordinary. This Christian tradition, at least partly derived from the Hebrew Bible’s accounts of prophets like Miriam (Ex 15:20), Deborah (Judg 4:4), and Huldah (2 Kgs 22:14, 2 Chr 34:22), starts with Elizabeth’s and Mary’s prophetic words and the unspecified prophecy of the widow Anna in the infancy narrative of Luke (Lk 1:41-55; 2:36). In the history of Christianity, and especially in the Catholic tradition, women saints have often spoken out prophetically. They have criticized and rebuked popes, when necessary, and they have stood up to lesser male ecclesiastics from time to time as well. Catherine of Siena in the fourteenth century, Teresa of Avila in the sixteenth century and Thérèse of Lisieux in the nineteenth century have in recent years been officially recognized as doctors of the Church: belated acknowledgment of the prophetic roles they have played in teaching the whole Church. These valiant women were not always so recognized in their own life times.

On October 17th of this year Pope Benedict canonized Mary MacKillop (d. 1909), the Australian co-foundress of a congregation of religious sisters and an educator of the poor, a woman once excommunicated for a period of five months by an Irish bishop in 19th-century Australia who thought he knew some Canon Law. That excommunication was at least in part revenge for the fact that some of Mary MacKillop’s religious sisters and the co-founder of her congregation, the Australian priest Julian Tenison Woods, had exposed a priest who was a sexual predator on minors. The excommunication was eventually reversed when the Bishop who enacted it was dying. Extraordinary women like MacKillop and many others exemplify what Peter, quoting the prophet Joel, proclaimed in his sermon on the day of Pentecost: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy” (Acts 2:17a). In this context I think of the Chinese proverb variously ascribed to both Confucius and Mao Zedong: “Women hold up half the sky.” They certainly hold up half—and maybe more than half—the Catholic sky.

III. PROPHETIC CRITIQUE IN THE MUSLIM TRADITION

The Qur’an itself and the whole prophetic life of Muhammad (610-632 CE) can be construed as a critique of what has gone before in the traditions of the Arabs, and also, but to a lesser extent, what has gone before in the traditions of Judaism and Christianity. Growing up in the mercantile environment of an entrepôt that connected the Persian,
Byzantine and Ethiopian worlds, Muhammad had identified himself, even before he received revelation, with a small moral elite in Mecca, the Confederacy of the Virtuous. These confederates were Meccan merchants who stood up for the rights of non-Meccan merchants who had suffered at the hands of some of the less scrupulous Meccan entrepreneurs.22

Muhammad was attracted to the faith traditions of Jews and Christians, but these traditions were only partially understood in the Meccan situation of the early 7th century. Muhammad identified himself with the ḥunafāʾ (singular, hanīf) a term that approximately means ‘righteous Gentiles.’23 It would seem that even before he experienced revelation Muhammad had rejected the polytheistic worship of Mecca centered on the Ka’bah. This great cubic shrine is said in the Qur’an to have originated many centuries earlier as a place of worship dedicated by Ibrahim (Abraham) and his son Isma’il (Ishmael) to the worship of one God (Qur’an 2:125-129). Over the centuries between Ibrahim and Muhammad, however, the Ka’bah had gradually accommodated every cult in Arabia, possibly as a way of welcoming trade from any quarter. A central goal of Muhammad’s prophetic career, achieved two years before his death, was the purification of the idolatrous Ka’bah and its rededication to the worship of God alone. A return to monotheism for the Ka’bah would also ideally entail a return to upright behavior by those who worshiped there, Meccan and non-Meccan alike.

When Muhammad began to share the revelations he was receiving with the Meccan public after the year 613 CE, some of his fellow citizens immediately perceived the monotheistic drift of his preaching as a challenge to the Ka’bah and its pluralistic religious practice. As the years of his Meccan preaching continued Muhammad experienced a great deal of resistance by the devotees of various divinities worshiped not in Mecca but in some other Arabian cultic centers. Two goddesses, al-Lāt and al-‘Uzzā, venerated in al-Ṭāʾif and Nakhlah near Mecca, as well as another goddess named Manāt, venerated along the route between Mecca and Medina, exercised a particularly strong attraction for many of Muhammad’s contemporaries.24 Referred to as the “daughters of God,” they were a major distraction from genuine monotheism, a distraction that Muhammad fell into briefly under pressure from forces that urged such a compromise if his new religious community were to survive. This distraction or temptation may have been strengthened by the fact that these three “daughters of God” were apparently not venerated in the Ka’bah.25 Their inclusion in Muhammad’s preaching as possibly legitimate but definitely secondary celestial powers might make friends for Muhammad in the towns where they were venerated—or so he thought.

The three brief verses about the “daughters of God” that Muhammad received and construed at first to be revelation suggested a slight modification of absolute monotheism. Of the three “daughters of God” these verses declared: “These are the exalted swans,/ Whose intercession is to be expected:/Their like is not to be forgotten.” What ever hope for allegiance Muhammad had been tempted to expect from the devotees of these “daughters of God” was soon disappointed and Muhammad recognized the serious mistake into which he had fallen. These three verses about the exalted swans and their intercession emanated from Satan and were abrogated by God, with genuine
revelation substituted for them: “They are only names which you have called them, you and your ancestors: God has not sent down anything authorizing this” (Qur’an 53:23a).

The abrogation (*naskh*) of these verses in the Qur’an and the substitution of other verses for that which was abrogated may be taken as an example, within the revelation Muhammad experienced over a period of 22 years, of divine critique and revision, and therefore prophetic critique and revision, of what has gone before. Later Muslim orthodoxy developed a doctrine of the ‘*‘ismah* of Muhammad, the sinlessness or impeccability of the Prophet, but the Qur’an itself insists that Muhammad was capable of sometimes straying, as when “he frowned and turned away when the blind man came to him” (*Surat ‘Abasa* [Qur’an 80: 1]). Not unlike figures in the prophetic history of Israel like Isaiah and Jeremiah who needed purification by God (Isa 6: 5-7; Jer 1:6-7), Muhammad was led by God to a clearer and purer understanding of the implications of his core experience of the oneness of God. The Qur’an provides many examples of Muhammad’s receiving revisions of revelations previously communicated, each revision serving to deepen Muhammad’s understanding of God’s Self-disclosure. In the tradition of Quranic scholarship the understanding of these revisions has been called “the science of the abrogating and the abrogated” (‘*‘ilm al-nāşıkh wa’l-mansūkh*). The subject of this science bears a family relationship, however distant, to the radical revisions both Ezekiel and Jesus made to the Ten Commandments.

In the later history of Islam, some of the great mystics took on themselves the unenviable task of revising accepted interpretations of the Qur’an. Al-Ḥusayn ibn Mansūr al-Ḥallaj, the great Muslim mystic of the tenth century CE, courted danger with the guardians of orthopraxy when he reinterpreted the story of Iblīs, the angel who in Quranic tradition refused to bow down at God’s command before Adam. The Qur’an summarizes the rebellion of Iblīs with the angel’s defiant words about the inferiority of Adam to an angel: “I am better than he: You created me from fire and him from clay” (Qur’an 7:12). Most Qur’an interpreters consider Iblīs the quintessential fallen angel. Al-Ḥallaj and some other Muslim mystics quixotically looked on Iblīs as the greatest monotheist of them all, one who endures God’s wrath rather than bow down before anything less than God. Al-Ḥallaj imagines a dialogue between the disobedient angel and God: “[Iblīs] was told: ‘Bow down!’ [Iblīs] said ‘[to] no other!’ [Iblīs] was asked, ‘Even if you receive my curse?’ He said, ‘It does not matter. I have no way to an other-than-you. I am an abject lover.’” It was not for nothing that al-Ḥallāj, the author of these daring words, was executed—some say crucified—in Baghdad in the year 922 CE.

Some latter-day revisers of the Qur’an have also suffered a martyr’s fate not unlike that of al-Ḥallāj. The Sudanese thinker Maḥmūd Muḥammad TāHā (1909-1985) distinguished a Meccan and a Medinan message of Islam. The Meccan message of Islam Muḥammad received from God between 610 and 622 when he had no political role. The Medinan message of Islam Muhammad received during the last decade of his life when he found himself exiled from Mecca and catapulted into power over a fractious community in Medina faced with military, political and economic challenges. TāHā maintained that many of the Medinan passages in the Qur’an, and especially the regulations they enshrine for male-female relations, criminal law and other civil matters,
need to be understood in their historical setting and do not represent the most basic message of Islam first received in Mecca.

Only the Meccan message continues to be of enduring religious importance, according to TaHā. Somewhat counter-intuitively TaHā refers to Medinan Islam as the first message of Islam and Meccan Islam as the second message of Islam, the one that needs emphasis today.

The Meccan and Medinese texts differ, not because of the time and place of their revelation, but essentially because of the audience to whom they are addressed... After the migration to Medina, and the abrogation of the verses of peaceful persuasion, the verses of compulsion by the sword prevailed.

Thus TaHā denied that jihād, slavery, capitalism, male-female inequality, polygamy, divorce, female veiling and male-female segregation were integral elements of “original precept[s] in Islam.” Alas, TaHā was put to death in 1985 for his opposition to the rigorist enforcement of Islamic law in the late part of the Numayri (Nimeiri) dictatorial regime in Sudan.

The tragic ending of TaHā’s life has not discouraged his disciples and many other prominent reformist and modernizing scholars in the contemporary Muslim world, about whose prophetic inner critique of Islam we hear too little in the United States. Let me name just a few of these scholars: Abdullah al-Na’im, a disciple of TaHā now a professor of law at Emory University; Muhammad Arkoun, the recently deceased Algerian professor of the University of Paris-Sorbonne; Abdelwahab Meddeb, a Tunisian professor of comparative literature currently at the University of Paris-Nanterre; Tariq Ramadan, a Swiss philosopher presently at the University of Oxford; Khaled Abou El-Fadl, an American professor of law at the University of California at Los Angeles. Let me pay tribute as well in this forum to the Egyptian scholar driven into exile from his homeland who died suddenly this past summer, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. Last but not least I wish to mention a woman who has spoken here at Fordham just a few years ago, Nadia Yassine, the Moroccan democracy campaigner and spokesperson for an Islamic feminism who has in the past faced legal charges in her homeland where she continues to live. These scholars, like TaHā, have remained within the faith tradition of Islam but have ventured to raise critical, prophetic voices. Like the prophet Muhammad, too many of them have been driven into hijrah, exile from their homelands. I hope, however, that they or their disciples will return someday to their homelands on yawm al-fath, the day of victory.

IV. SELF-CRITICAL FAITH AND DEVELOPING FAITH

What Pope John Paul II and the seven prelates of the Roman Curia did in the liturgy for the First Sunday of Lent in the year 2000 was a frank admission that sinful human action has all too often distorted the faith of the Church, its fidelity to God and to Christ. Their action might be construed as a response to a prophetic critique of the
Church; their response became itself prophetic, human speaking on God’s behalf to all of us who are Christians, indeed, to all of us who try to live faithful lives in any monotheistic tradition. Sometimes we sinfully betray our faith, we betray our God, and we need to repent.

How far can a faith tradition go in its self-critique? Is there a limit beyond which a people of faith cannot go without renouncing one form of faith and embracing another—or embracing no form of faith whatsoever? One of the most radical self-criticisms of Judaism developed into Christianity. So radical was the criticism as to give birth to a separate community and the development of something utterly new. Rabbinic Judaism, on the other hand, criticized the tradition enshrined in the Hebrew Bible, especially the priestly elements in the Torah, but continues within the tradition of Israel right down to the present day.

Precisely by their rejection of the Oral Law and their total commitment in faith to Jesus as much more than a teacher, Christians eventually departed from the ranks of Judaism. Centered not on the Law of Moses but on an inner Law enfleshed in the person of Jesus, Christians rely in faith on the saving fidelity of Jesus to effect their reconciliation with God. That fidelity of Jesus is made accessible to Christians by faith and baptism into the dying and rising of Jesus and the gift of God’s Spirit that creates the Church. Any offshoot of Christianity that compromises this graced identification of the Christian with Jesus, for instance, by rejecting the concreteness of the historical Jesus, as did Marcion and the Gnostics of the second century CE, ceases to be Christian.

Islam began as a critique of Arab paganism, theological and moral, but also (but on a secondary level) as a critique of Judaism and Christianity as they were known in 7th-century Arabia. Rejecting plurality in God, Muhammad and the first Muslims also rejected divisive plurality in the human race, calling all people to acknowledge their unity and the moral obligations this unity entails as the less than perfect reflection of God’s absolute unicity. Muhammad’s exemplarity—the path (sunnah) he trod in his prophetic life—offers men and women of faith a way to come close to the one and only God of creation. Those who have departed from the unique Word of God that is the Qur’an and the path of Muhammad, and especially the adherents of such offshoots of Shi’i Islam as the Bābīs and the Bahā’īs in 19th century Iran,32 have ceased to be Muslim and have become a new tradition of faith.

There are limits to the critique of faith traditions: beyond a certain frontier the critic is entering into a new homeland of faith, or is wandering into a limbo of unfaith. Saint Vincent of Lerins in the 5th century CE first sketched the outlines of what can be seen as legitimate development of a faith tradition—development that does not distort the core of the tradition but that may involve what I have called prophetic critique of the tradition. Needless to say, he was writing about the Christian tradition of faith, but I think his words can shed light on the faith traditions of Judaism and Islam as well.

The religion of souls should follow the law of the development of bodies. Though
bodies develop and unfold their component parts with the passing of the years, they always remain what they were. There is a great difference between the flower of childhood and the maturity of age, but those who become old are the very same people who were once young. Though the condition and appearance of one and the same individual may change, it is one and the same nature, one and the same person.33

There are vast possibilities within each of these monotheistic traditions for faithful and legitimate critique, faithful and legitimate development and change. But in the arid lands of the Middle East, the birthplace of each of these faith traditions, it is not hard to go astray in a sandstorm. There are few landmarks in a desert to guide the voyager. Only by looking up at the stars—celestial navigation—can travelers find their way to their destination, their ultimate home. Each of us—Jew, Christian and Muslim—must look upwards for guidance in the sandstorms of life, the desert through which we travel. Our only God, we pray, will guide us home along the ways of truth, the paths of peace.


3 Exodus 20:5. In citing the Hebrew Bible I use the Jewish Publication Society’s JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999/5759), unless otherwise noted. For thematically similar citations see Exodus 34:7, Deuteronomy 5:9, Leviticus 26:39-40. Further citations from the Hebrew Bible will be included parenthetically in the text.

4 Scripture scholars generally ascribe to the influence of Ezekiel the probably Exilic passage in Jeremiah’s Book of Consolation that rejects multi-generational guilt: “In those days, they shall no longer say, ‘Parents have eaten sour grapes and children’s teeth are set on edge. But every one shall die for his own sins; whoever eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge.” The JPS translation favors for the phrase “set one edge” the more puzzling “are blunted” or “shall be blunted.” I cannot imagine the mastication of sour grapes leading to such a permanently dire result. The translation of the phrase as “set on edge” is proffered in a marginal note in JPS.

5 “This axis of history is to be found in the period around 500 B.C., in the spiritual process that occurred between 800 and 200 B.C. It is there that we meet with the most deepcut dividing line in history. Man, as we know him today, came into being. For short we may style this the ‘Axial Period’” in The Origin and Goal of History, tr. Michael Bullock (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 1. Jaspers recognizes Ezekiel as an actor in this age, quoting to this effect the 19th-century German translator and commentator on the Chinese classics, Viktor von Strauss und Torney: “During the centuries when Lao-tse and Confucius were living in China, a strange movement of the spirit passed through all civilised peoples. In Israel Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Daniel and Ezekiel were prophesying . . .” (Both Jaspers and his 19th-century source seem to have been unaware of the Seleucid era provenance of Daniel.) Jaspers shies away from asserting that the Axial Period led to the development of individualism.


9 In his introduction to selections from this Tractate in The Talmud: Selected Writings, tr. Ben Zion Bokser (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989), 213.


11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., n. 106.

13 Prophetic Inspiration, 67.

14 Three scholarly papers—by Marvin A. Sweeney, Marc Zvi Breitler and the late Lawrence Boadt, CSP—were delivered at a consultation of Jewish and Christian scholars held at Georgetown University, February 28-March 2, 2010, on the differing interpretations of this text by Jews and Christians. It is hoped that these excellent papers will be published in the near future.

15 John’s Gospel narrates how Jesus encountered a Samaritan woman, who had first thought of him as nothing but a thirsty Jew. She eventually recognized his prophetic status to her chagrin when he disclosed his knowledge of her complicated marital history. See John 4:5-42, esp. 4:19. See also the Elijah and Elisha imagery of Jesus in Luke.


17 Seventh-Day Adventists are connected with the promotion of vegetarianism, and they popularized breakfast cereals first in the nineteenth century. Their Church Manual notes that “God has furnished man with a liberal variety of foods sufficient to satisfy every dietary need. Fruits, grains, nuts, and vegetables prepared in simple ways “make, with milk or cream, the most healthful diet” (Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual, 173, available at www.sda.org. They promote ovo-lactarian vegetarianism as well as abstention from alcohol and tobacco. See the website of the Seventh-day Adventist Dietetic Association at www.sdada.org/biblical.htm

18 The Epistles to the Ephesians (6:5-9) and Colossians (3:22-4:1) take for granted the continuance of slavery in the Christian community. But see the Epistle to Philemon (15-16).


See the editorial, “A Saint for Our Time,” *America* 203, no. 13 (October 18, 2010). More information on Mary MacKillop can be found in Alana Harris, “MacKillop—a holy pioneer,” *The Tablet* [London] (October 23, 2010). For a clarification on the involvement of some of Saint Mary MacKillop’s fellow Josephites, along with her co-founder, Father Julian Tenison Woods, in the exposure of this priest, and the only indirect connection of this matter with the excommunication of MacKillop, see the October 15 interview on Vatican Radio with the Australian Josephite sister who was the promoter of MacKillop’s cause, Maria Casey, RSJ. See “‘Whistleblower’ label for St. Mary MacKillop called inaccurate and wrong” available at [www.catholicnewsagency.com](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com) (October 18, 2010). Sister Maria Casey is quoted in the news story as saying that the exposure of the Irish priest who was involved in the crime caused Irish priests in Australia who were the criminal’s friends to begin “a campaign of slander and false accusations against Sister MacKillop, the head of the Josephites at the time. The slanders included charges that the future saint had a drinking problem and was mismanaging the affairs of her religious order” (Ibid.).


24 See *Muhammad at Mecca*, 103-104.

25 Ibid.

26 In referring to a certain parallelism between divine critique and revision and prophetic critique and revision I am influenced by the thought of the late Professor Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) who noted that most medieval Muslim thinkers “lacked the intellectual capacity to say both that the Qur’an is entirely the Word of God and, in an ordinary sense, also entirely the word of Muhammad.” See his seminal work, *Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 31.


31 Ibid., 132-145.

32 On the Bābīs, see Alessandro Bausani, “BĀB” and “BĀBĪS” in *EI* 2 I (1960): 833a-835b, 846b-847b. On the Baha’is, see Alessandro Bausani, “BAHĀ’ ALLĀH” and “BAHĀ’ĪS,” also in *EI* 2 I (1960): 911a-912a. 915b-918b.