
Chapter 3

Identity Formation in World Religions: A Comparative Analysis of Christianity and Islam

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyse, comparatively, the processes through which the authenticity of the religious founders, extending both to their personality and message, was established in the two main world religions, focusing on the earliest period. Questions of identity formation include the sources of the personal identity of the founding figures, their identification as prophet or saviour, and the way in which the identities of believers and their opponents were characterised and formed in the respective sacred books.

In terms of a theoretical background the paper relies on the works of Max Weber on charisma, and Alessandro Pizzorno on identity formation, emphasising the role of processes of recognition in the formation of identity. Pizzorno's ideas will be complemented in two ways: by Victor Turner's studies on liminality and performative experiences, and René Girard's ideas on the mimetics of desire.

Theoretical background

1. Max Weber: prophetic charisma

The identity of the prophet, or the 'founder of religion' in general,¹ is a problem ridden with difficulties. Max Weber has the unique merit of placing the question of prophecy and prophetic religions, beyond any overall evolutionary scheme or

1 Any attempt at a comparative study of Christianity and Islam, and especially their founders, is rendered difficult by a problem that is not merely terminological: while Mohammed is identified as a prophet by his followers, Jesus is considered much more; so the claim that Christianity is a 'prophetic religion' already implies a partisan position that is not compatible with the methodological considerations outlined above. As a result, I will have to use the technical term 'founder of a world religion.'

simplistic contrast between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ societies, at the centre of historical sociology and social theory, and developed the concept of charisma first of all to analyse this problem. Weber considered prophecy as the clearest example of charisma, and while defining charisma in terms of personal characteristics as a ‘gift of grace,’ he also emphasised that prophets need to be recognised, connecting identity formation to processes of recognition.

However, in spite of its pioneering achievements, Weber’s work on charisma has a series of shortcomings. First of all, Weber never tackled satisfactorily the exact relationship between charisma as a pure gift, a strictly personal quality, and as a result of a process of recognition. This is a serious shortcoming, as highly charismatic persons, even geniuses possessing clearly extraordinary gifts, might go unrecognised under certain conditions, as it happened with the great ‘madmen’ of the 19th century, like Hölderlin, van Gogh or Nietzsche. Second, concerning the special case of religious charisma, prophets or saviour declare themselves, with considerable effect, as mediators of divine will or messages, not simply possessors of unique personal qualities, whether recognised or not. Finally, while Weber’s concept starts with extraordinary situations and the singular ability to resolve them, the founding of a religion requires different qualities: a stable, durable identity which is recognised generally as an authentic carrier of divine will.

It is here the work of Alessandro Pizzorno, focusing on the manner in which identities are recognised, complements Weber’s approach.

2. Alessandro Pizzorno: identity and recognition

The term ‘recognition’ is increasingly used in contemporary social theory, mostly through the works of Charles Taylor (1994) and Axel Honneth (1995). Pizzorno’s approach, however, while compatible with them, was developed earlier and goes much further (see Pizzorno 1986, 1987, 1989, 1991, 1993, 2000). Following Levinas and the early Jena work of Hegel, Taylor and Honneth restrict their attention to the importance of the emotional and moral reconfirmation provided by the recognition of the other, emphasising mutuality, reciprocity, rights, symmetry, and the development of a legalistic moral philosophy. Pizzorno, however, argues that processes of recognition not only reconfirm but form and transform identities, both personal and collective.²

Recognising the other in this sense is not restricted to the granting of a positive emotional evaluation or acknowledgement. Illustrating Pizzorno’s point through the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault on the three axes of experiences one can argue that processes of recognition involve knowledge, power

2 As a particularly pertinent example, he evokes the recognition of states, a central element of the system of international relations after the treaty of Westphalia.

and ethics at the same time (Foucault 1984, 1986). At the cognitive level recognition implies not simply the knowledge of something, close to familiarity, but the identification of an object as belonging to a certain class, or of an unknown phenomenon as being identical to something already familiar. However, the entire Kantian object-subject logic is bypassed by Pizzorno when he introduces the Hegelian dialectic of the master and the slave (or rather serf). Casting a novel eye on this idea worn out by Marx and conflict theory approaches, Pizzorno reads the confrontation as a struggle for recognition. A search for recognition between two subjects always has the aspect of a testing. According to Pizzorno, the 'slave' for Hegel is by no means in a hopeless position, justifying the need for an all or nothing revolution. Quite on the contrary, Hegel's aim is to show that even in such an extreme situation of inequality, the specifically social logic of recognition by itself will lead to an eventual turning of the sides.

This is because the identity of a person can only be acquired if it is recognised by other human beings. Approaches arguing for the eternal fixity of personal identity simply fail to notice, taking for granted, the subtle processes of recognition that contribute to establishing a stable identity. Thus, of course much of our identity is acquired in family; and there is no reason to take up an extreme social constructionist position denying the importance of purely biological factors. But the family is also a main source of emotional recognition. However, as blood relationships and emotional recognition normally coincide in a family, the latter's formative impact on identity often goes unacknowledged. Similarly, rational choice approaches simply take for granted the subtle processes of peer pressure that is exerted on the preferences a person has, extending even to his or her identity, and which are especially strong in certain 'liminal' moments and situations.

While the term recognition is central for Pizzorno's sociology, for a better understanding of the processes of recognition we need to make a subsequent step, moving from 'recognition' to 'circles' of recognition. Given their 'mutual recognition,' human beings 'have received an identity, and they may count on being recognised by some circles of others. These circles make recognition durable and, hence, trust rational. Individual interests grow out of different positions in the networks and circles of recognition' (Pizzorno 1991: 219). This is why Pizzorno's work is foundational for a properly social theory; and why his theoretical considerations end on an ultimately both refreshing and reassuring note: 'A too fierce self-reliance can be scary or pretentious. The principle of autonomy of self, if it is not meant to operate temporarily, cannot stand alone and not be a sham. Behind "autonomy" some other self recognizing me is necessary. I now know that beyond every decision of my current self, "some other kind of otherness" must be sought' (Pizzorno 1986: 372).

At this point Pizzorno's ideas can be complemented by ideas from two other contemporary social thinkers, Victor Turner and René Girard.

3. Victor Turner: liminality and performative experiences

Turner's work focuses on the experiential side of the processes of identity formation and transformation (Turner 1967, 1969). The most important part of his work is based upon Arnold van Gennep's classic study on rites of passage (van Gennep 1960). The most paradigmatic examples are initiation rites, which guide individuals (and their families) through the major moments of transition in the human life cycle, like birth, puberty, marriage, or dying. These rites follow a strict sequential order, starting with the rites of separation in the stage of preparation, consisting of various deprivations, endurance tests and ascetic exercises; followed by the actual ritual performance in which the candidates are tested; and concluded by the rites of re-aggregation that celebrate the successful performance and the return to normality and order. In order to characterise the fluid, malleable character of the ritual, created by the artificial suspension of the normal conditions of everyday life, van Gennep and Turner came up with the concept 'liminality,' which by now gained a very wide use in the social and human sciences.

Much of Turner's later work is devoted to the broader significance of the concept of liminality. Two of these directions are of particular importance for this paper. The first concerns the link between rituals and experiences. Rituals are not simply formal ceremonies, but require involvement and participation; but this is because they themselves are based on experiences. Rituals for Turner have a preventive character; they are deployed to ease transitions, or to prevent the outbreaks of conflict and crisis. However, exactly because of this evocation and incitement of emotions such rituals are dangerous, and can be performed solely under the guidance of special 'masters of ceremonies.'

In some of his last writings Turner recognised basic affinities between his approach and the work of Wilhelm Dilthey on events and experience (Turner 1985a, 1985b). In most of his studies Turner emphasised the creative, transformative potential of liminality, and the sense of community (called *communitas*) created between those who have jointly underwent such rites.

Second, the term liminality can be used in general to characterise fluid, transitory conditions. The collapse of the taken for granted order in real-world conditions creates a genuine betwixt and between situation, one which is not under the control of 'masters of ceremonies,' thus – in Weberian language – requires the emergence of a charismatic leader. Here Turner's work can be used to better understand the dynamics of major crisis moments in world history, including the concept of 'charisma,' and its contrast with its opposite, the Trickster (Horváth 2000; Radin 1972).

In real-world large-scale liminal situations historical events are experienced at the same time by a large number of individuals; thus, the approach can help to study jointly the formation of personal and collective identities.

4. René Girard: the mimetics of desire and rival brothers

If Turner often celebrated liminality, Girard called attention to its dangers (see Girard 1976, 1977, 1987, 1989). If Turner emphasised the preventive aspect of rituals, for Girard they rather only staged, without fully understanding, the original events of a sacrificial crisis. According to Girard, situations of crisis in small-scale communities easily degenerate into full-scale violence, due to the imitative aspect of human nature, and such an escalation of violence can only be stopped by the eventual identification and sacrifice of an innocent victim, or scapegoat. Human culture is founded on such mechanisms of scape-goating, repeated in rituals of sacrifice.

There are two aspects of Girard's framework that will be important for this paper. First, Girard calls attention to the crucial role distinctions play in social life, both at the level of social relations, and concerning the ability of individuals to make such distinctions and thus prevent descent, through imitation and mimetic rivalry, into a full-scale sacrificial crisis. Without social distinctions, and without individuals who have a good sense of judgment and are able to discriminate, society is always on the brink of descending into a liminal crisis. Second, in this context the anxiety created by the birth of twins in any small-scale society becomes intelligible. Due to their indistinguishable identity, twins threaten the delicate balance of social order. On a more general scale the problem is reflected in myths about fraternal rivalries; and for Girard it is by no means accidental or irrelevant that foundation stories very often involve rival brothers, of which one has to die for a successful foundation of the city.³

5. The spiral as a model of change

Finally, the paper will make use of the metaphor of the spiral, particularly suitable for a properly social analysis of processes of historical change. The meaning of the term 'social' is taken from Mauss (2002) and Simmel (1971), in distinction to both Durkheim and Marx.

The model of the spiral is different from non-social models of evolution or linear growth, whether taken from biology or from thermo-dynamics; and from the anti-social models of conflict. Conflict models are anti-social in the sense that society, or community substance in any meaningful sense, is dissolved in the moment conflict breaks out, and cannot be re-established unless it ends. Conflicts of course do happen, and the study of the rhythm in which conflicts break out and escalate is central for understanding historical processes; but to explain society, and processes of social change, through conflicts as the purported 'engine' of

3 See for e.g. Cain and Abel, Romulus and Remus, Joseph and his brothers, or Eteocles and Polyneikes.

social change, thus in some way ‘beneficial,’ is not simply untenable, but deeply nihilistic in its outcome.

Though rarely if at all theorised explicitly, the metaphor of spiral does surface occasionally in explanations of socio-historical dynamics. It is present in milestone works of arts, written at crucial historical junctures. Thus, it is central for two of the most important poems of the 20th century: ‘The Second Coming’ by William Butler Yeats,⁴ and ‘I Live in Expanding Rings’ by Rainer Maria Rilke.⁵ The former was written in January 1919, thus just after WWI, while the latter in 1905, or at the moment when the clouds leading to the storm of WWI started to gather. The metaphor of the storm, by the way, is also central for Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, also written during and around WWI. At a different but similarly liminal moment, the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci also came to a similar conclusion, when he ‘had come to identify every action in nature as occurring along spiral lines’ (Pedretti 1973: 15).

The metaphor was also used, and in some crucial junctures of their works, by major contemporary social theorists. Thus, in Volume 1 of his *History of Sexuality* Michel Foucault talks about the ‘perpetual spirals of power and pleasure’ (Foucault 1980: 45; emphasis in original); while Norbert Elias introduces the argument of his most important methodological book *Involvement and Detachment* through Poe’s short story about fishermen in the maelstrom (Elias 1987: 45-6). Examples could be continued from various analyses of phenomena like panic, terrorism, the stock market, or the logic of expectations in general.

One might argue that such a model is not specifically social either, as models taken from medical epidemics or chaos theory perfectly capture the spiralling character of events. However, by combining experience-events and processes of recognition it is possible to formulate a specifically social model of spiralling processes. While epidemiology or meteorology provide us with important metaphors for illustrative purposes, there the outburst gathers momentum solely due to an originally random encounter of particles, or a purely physical interaction between viruses and their hosts. In human history, such ‘storms’ also start with humble beginnings; however, here we have to study the exact manner in which such minute beginnings establish themselves through the unique interaction of human experiences that are always strictly personal; and processes of recognition that contribute to the formation of personal and collective identities, and that are always social.

This paper will apply these considerations for analysing, in so far as it is possible, the very first instances in the rise of Christianity and Islam.

- 4 ‘Turning and turning in the widening gyre/The falcon cannot hear the falconer;/Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.’
- 5 ‘Round God, the old tower, my gyres I perform,/and I’ve gyred there centuries long;/and don’t know whether I’m falcon or storm/or, maybe, a mighty song.’

The comparative analysis

1. Prelude

A methodological note

There are two guiding methodological principles in this paper that need to be pointed out explicitly, being particularly important for the study of religion: the paper is comparative and non-judgmental. The first is rather obvious, follows from the basic principles of scholarly analysis, and distances itself from the claim that a specific tradition, whether religious, cultural, national or political, can only be understood from the ‘inside.’ The second may be more controversial, as by this I mean the principle, fundamental for any serious study of religion, that transcendental experiences are accepted as possible. This is not equal to indiscriminate credulity, only recognises the limits of scientific knowledge and the legitimacy of non-scientific traditions which can be genuinely serious, with their own principles of verification; and in this regard it is fully compatible with the basic principles of Kant’s thought, not to mention the founding figures of academic reasoning, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. What it clearly repudiates, however, is the tradition identified by Jonathan Israel (2000) as the ‘radical Enlightenment,’ and which he traces back to Spinoza. Science must overcome its hubris and re-learn to be humble.

Historical context: liminal conditions

Temporal and spatial liminal conditions exerted a huge impact on the rise of axial age systems of thought.⁶ The rise of Christianity, however, took place in a place and time that cannot be defined as liminal. This is already indicated by the fact that it is situated outside the time horizon of the axial age, even in the broad sense of Jaspers. More particularly, Jesus lived at a rather stable and peaceful moment both concerning the Roman Empire in general: the rule of Augustus, the high moment of Rome, and the still relatively stable period under Tiberius; and the case of Palestine in particular: well after the Maccabean revolts of BC 167-4 and the Roman invasion of BC 63, and well before the Jewish wars and the Fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. In fact, it was exactly due the relative – though always delicate – calmness of the situation that Jesus was considered as a threat to the peace that led to his condemnation and death. One could even situate some of his most startling claims – ‘Think not that I am come to send peace on Earth; I came not to send peace but a sword’ (Mt 10: 34) –

6 For details, see my ‘Ecumenic Empires, Global Ages and Prophetic Religions,’ in the same volume.

in this particular context. Jesus did not arise out of a liminal moment – he rather created liminality.

In stark contrast, Islam emerged at a particularly liminal moment, and at a specifically liminal location. The moment was the on-dragging war between the two main powers near the Arabian peninsula, the Eastern Roman and the Sassanide Persian empires. Warfare intensified since the middle of the 6th century, with disastrous consequences: ‘In Muhammad’s lifetime they waged the most destructive of all the wars waged against one another in all their centuries of fighting, and at his death both empires were financially and politically exhausted’ (Hodgson 1974: 145). They were therefore ripe to be overrun – and Mecca, due to its liminal location, was in an ideal position to make use of this opportunity. This was because it was not only situated at the intersection point of the main caravan routes (Guzzetti 2004: 20), a central advantage for any trading community; but also because of its equidistance from the three main centres of power surrounding Arabia: Syria in the West, Yemen in the South, and the Persian Empire in the North-East (Hodgson 1974: 158). The rise of Islam, in a certain way, only realised this ripe opportunity.

2. Personal identity

Personal identity is first of all based on family connections, the genealogical lineage in which one is a descendent, and which on its turn is continued by one’s own descendants. In the case of Jesus this elementary fact of human existence was broken, and in both directions. The Messiah was expected to come from the house of king David; but Jesus is not a descendent of king David. The Gospel of Matthew makes the point clearly, though obliquely, and thus it is often misunderstood. It seems as if its long genealogical lineage was composed in order to make Jesus appear as the descendant of David (Mt 1). However, the next chapter makes it clear that Joseph was not the father.

This poses the question whether the long genealogical story serves a purpose. The answer is that it indeed offers a lesson: instead of identifying a direct lineage of Jesus, it heralds his coming by the times in which he was born, by dividing the long lineage into three phases of fourteen generations (Mt 1: 17). Genealogy or direct blood descent is thus replaced by generation or the question of context, which will have its consequences for matters of recognition as well.

Furthermore, the birth of Jesus is accompanied by a number of further stories that break radically with expectations concerning a prophet or a saviour. These are exclusively contained in the Gospel of Luke – for the simple and good reason that after the ironic take on genealogical lineage Matthew declines any interest in actual birth and childhood stories. The birth is taken place not only out of home (Nazareth), in Bethlehem, but even outside the house, in the stable. Jesus furthermore receives no education worthy of telling, and we do not even know of

any special experience or vision that he would have had, marking his calling as a prophet.

This break is further emphasised in episodes where Jesus would explicitly reject belonging to the lineage of Abraham and David. Thus, he claims that he is lord of David rather than his son (Lk 20: 41-4); even declaring, to much consternation, that ‘Before Abraham was, I am’ (Jn 8: 58). These claims are significant because they go against ‘natural’ expectations: one would expect an emphasis on such descent, especially in the case of a people, like the ancient Hebrews, where such descents were held in particularly high regard.

The situation is very different in the case of Muhammad, which is especially significant in light of the fact that his biographers consciously took the Gospels as models for their storylines. Muhammad was born into a leading family of Mecca, even though its relatively less prestigious side, and his father died before birth and he became an orphan at the age of six. On the opposite end, although – strangely – he had no surviving sons, and even most of his daughters died without heirs, claims about his blood descendents would play a major part in the history of Islam, just as similar genealogical lineages would be central for his main disciples and followers.⁷

3. The identity of the religious founder

Matters of personal identity, however, only became relevant due to the identification of these persons as founders of world religions. Here questions of experiences and recognition play a particularly crucial role. A prophet is not born; he or she must be recognised as a prophet (Weber 1978: 242). Such recognition of course become closely entangled with later ideological fabrications, and stories about the announcing of prophets are especially dubious. Still, the manner in which such announcements were construed can be revealing, especially in a comparative analysis. Related stories can also contain elements of truth that can be established with some degree of certainty. Finally, especially important and revealing is the exact dynamics and sequential order of personal experiences and acts of recognition.⁸

7 The contrast can be perceived realising that the exact equivalent of the Ismaili myth of the ‘true Imam’ (Lewis 1967: 26-8) is the *Da Vinci Code*.

8 While the terms ‘identity’ and ‘recognition’ are concepts taken from contemporary ‘Western’ social theory, it is not anachronistic to apply them for the distant past, and neither do they imply acceptance of the Christian tradition as a starting point. Quite on the contrary, these concepts have a general applicability for the problem of how a new type of non-traditional religion or spirituality establishes itself, through converting people, be it Christianity, Islam or Buddhism. Furthermore, the idea that contemporary theories of identity formation are inherently rooted in the Christian tradition, or that the New Testament somehow ‘anticipates’ these developments,

Concerning the New Testament the first point to notice is that each of the Gospels starts prominently by questions of recognition; and that the manner in which this is done goes way beyond the mere assertion of the status of Jesus, or even the simple story-telling of acts of recognition. There are two particularly important aspects of these acts: the relationship between two prophets and the delicate balance between positive and negative acts of recognition. The Gospels place a particular emphasis on the recognition of Jesus by St John Baptist, a historical figure with disciples on his own, lending further weight to the claim. Thus, there is a direct personal testimony beyond miraculous signs announcing or accompanying recognition. Second, this is underlined by a subtle play with refusals. This first applies to the Baptist, who declines the honour, thus increasing the force of his recognising the other, the real one. But in the Gospel of John this will be applied to the entire age that failed to recognise Jesus; and this age is identified by the same word ‘generation.’ Jesus is not a descendant of the lineage of David, rather came at the proper ‘generational’ moment; but it is exactly this generation that fails to recognise his true, non-genealogical identity (see also Mt 11: 16-9; 12: 34, 39; 17: 17).

Even the question of family background is revisited in this context, closing another circle. It is not only the entire ‘generation’ that fails to recognise Jesus; even more intriguingly, he would be rejected (not recognised as a ‘prophet’) by exactly those who were closest to him: ‘no prophet is accepted in his own country’ (Lk 4: 24).⁹ This is further reinforced and closed from the other end: far from relying first of all on his own kin, Jesus repudiates blood relationships as being secondary to spiritual ties (Mt 12: 46-9), just as he would identify ‘second birth,’ spiritual birth or conversion to be more important than physical birth (Jn 3: 3-8)

Thus, positively, the Gospels start by acts of recognition; and negatively, they simply do not contain anything concerning the experiences of Jesus: sources of his call or mission; formal learning, or even endurance tests in the form of hardships and sufferings. The early tribulations told by Luke are all related to his birth and infancy, endured by his parents, thus could not have left a trace on his being.

There were a few visionary experiences referred to in the Bible; allusions to the future tribulations. They are often connected to acts of recognition. The sequential order of experience and recognition, however, is singular, even perplexing, the exact opposite of what one would expect on the basis of Dilthey’s or Turner’s theories. The starting point is not an experience, followed by the attempts to make sense of it, recognising its exact meaning; quite on the contrary,

thus that there is some kind of partisan affinity between the religious text and contemporary theorising, outside truth, is simply not tenable.

9 The passage in Matthew is even more striking for the purposes of the paper: ‘A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house’ (Mt 13: 57).

it is the recognition that is followed by a specific type of experience; even further – and in this sense very close to Turner’s framework – this experience has the specific character of a trial or testing.

It is well worth examining a few cases in some detail.

As a first example, let’s take the scene of baptism. The three main elements of the episode, the recognition by the Baptist (Mt 3: 14-5), the visionary experience with the voice in the Sky and the bird descending from above (Mt 3: 16-7), and the fasting in the desert and the temptation by the devil, including the travel to the Temple and the invitation to throw himself down (Mt 4: 1-11), are told in a reverse order, compared to the standard narrative of rites of passage. The story is supposed to start with a rite of preparation, the fasting in the desert; crowned by the visionary experience, the rewarding of the ascetic for his labours; and end with the recognition of the authentic quality of the vision by a ‘master of ceremony,’ the widely recognised prophet of the desert. Still, the initiation ceremony worked, as Jesus starts his preaching mission after this episode, paradoxically concluded by an ascetic rite of preparation (Mt 4: 17).

This is by no means an isolated case. Let’s take another important scene of recognition, when Peter would identify Jesus as ‘the Christ, the Son of the living God’ (Mt 16: 16). The following verses, containing Peter’s ‘reward,’ the foundational narrative of the papacy is famously missing from the other Gospels;¹⁰ however, all three synoptic Gospels agree that this recognition is followed by the first time Jesus announced his own sufferings. The same sequence is repeated in the next chapter, where the Transfiguration is followed by the healing of the sick child, and then with the second announcement of sufferings.

Such an emphatic reversal of the experience-recognition sequence must serve a purpose. This can be explained in the following way. The purpose of the post-recognition trial is not to prepare for a performance-experience or to reaffirm its content, acknowledging the genuine morality or even sanctity of the person, as there is no trace of such experiences in the Gospels. It serves rather to counter-balance the act of recognition that has just happened. Instead of celebrating and thus further confirming this recognition, which might lead to excessive self-confidence and hubris, the events are followed rather by a real tribulation, or allusions to such a trial, in order to prevent emotional loosening and self-relaxation. A further reason can be that each of the three advanced warnings are immediately followed in the text, going further back in the sequence, by a ‘birth’: the resurrection.

The situation is radically different for the case of Muhammad, where the basic facts of the accepted storyline can be arranged according to the standard sequential pattern, though revealing some unique peculiarities.

10 This is not so surprising, given that Luke is connected to Paul, while Mark to those who remained in Jerusalem.

Muhammad had lived the life of a normal merchant until his mid-to-late 30s when he suddenly became preoccupied about living a life of truth and purity (Hodgson 1974: 158). The moment is quite typical, whether identified as a Dantean mid-age crisis, or the time in which the shamans or magicians usually receive their calls.¹¹ In his exalted state Muhammad performs various ascetic exercises, goes to the desert, meditates in the cave. He is not alone in having such a troubled mind; given the liminal character of the time and place, it should not be surprising that there were several other prophets around engaged in similar activities (Hodgson 1974: 160). For a time he finds no solace, his desperation is increasing, and seriously considers jumping off the mountain. Suddenly, at this very moment, according to the historian at-Tabari (Guzzetti 2004: 46), in the ‘night of destiny,’ something happens to him: he hears a voice and has a vision (K 93: 3-8).¹²

Thus, eventually, the rite of preparation lead to a result; the experience arrives. But he had gone through everything all by himself, and is terrified by this experience, which further propels him into a tremendous crisis (Guzzetti 2004: 45). It is also accompanied by a series of apocalyptic visions, that belong to the oldest layers of the Koran (K 54: 1, 47-8; also 102: 1-8, 104: 1-9). He has doubts, not being so sure whether he is not just tormented by demons or jinns; he needs reassertion and recognition. But there is no ‘master of ceremony’ around; no other prophet who would willingly identify his experiences and recognise his status. Other prophets would enter the scene later, but only as his mortal rivals. Instead, he is consoled by his wife, but this is done not due to specific prophetic signs, rather to his general human qualities: as he is sincere and good, he just cannot be visited by demons. Some further recognition is given by a Christian, but even he is a cousin of his wife. Recognition therefore, in exact opposite to the Gospel story, started at the ‘most intimate level’ (Hodgson 1974: 167).¹³

It also continued there, and for a long time. The first male person believing him was his ten years old cousin, Ali, followed by his adopted son, Zayd, a liberated slave, and his future father-in-law and the first kaliph, Abu Bakr. For a gap of about three years the visions also stopped, and he only privately talked about his revelation. Thus, for a long period Muhammad was exactly a prophet in his own country, and even more, in his own house.

- 11 Dante was about 35 years old when composing the *Divine Comedy*; about the shaman’s calling, similarly around the age of 37, see Turner (1975).
- 12 The abbreviation ‘K’ will stand for the Koran.
- 13 While, following the Weberian distinction between ethical and exemplary prophecy, one might argue that in Muhammad’s case all that mattered was the recognition of the word of God, and not the person of the messenger, a strict separation along these lines is problematic. The entire question of believing in the Koran has only become possible because Muhammad as a person was first believed to have told the truth about Allah speaking to him.

This storyline must now be interpreted in light of the theoretical perspective outlined. While the relative perspectives of Turner and Pizzorno are quite different, focusing respectively on performative experiences and the struggle for recognition, they both agree that an alteration of identity, which is certainly involved in the calling of a prophet, can only be based on a genuine testing and trial. An initiation rite, or a passage from childhood to adulthood, for example, implies the leaving of the family, the world of the home, and the entry into the world at large: the broader community of the village or the tribe. It cannot be administered by family members; quite on the contrary, in most cases such rites can only be conducted by persons who do not even belong to the village. Similarly, recognition in the sense of Pizzorno implies a challenge and measuring, close to the Biblical sense of *mene tekel*. As we have seen earlier, the world of the family hides the difference between the genetic and the recognitive aspects of identity, as children receive the strongest emotional recognition exactly from persons to whom they are related by blood ties.

Even once Muhammad had decided to go public, about three years after his first vision, for a long time he failed to secure recognition outside his family, and especially outside his hometown. A particularly important event in this context, especially in light of later developments, retaining significance up to our very day, is the famous episode of the ‘Satanic verses.’ In the fifth year of his preaching, thus around 618, Muhammad went to Ca’aba and, surrounded by friends and foes, narrated them his first revelation (Guzzetti 2004: 78-9). Then, trying to use the occasion to secure further converts, he posed a question about the assessment of three main female deities of the region, and himself gave the answer: they are brave virgins, and their intercession is much appreciated by God. This was a clear concession towards paganism, but failed to bring success. In consequence the passage was edited out of the Koran, though transmitted by tradition. There are two aspects that I would like to emphasise about this story: the joint evocation of three virgin female goddesses, an image which clearly evokes the Three Graces; and their identification as intercessors or mediators of grace, a role comparable to the Virgin Mary. The editing out of this episode will result in the systematic ignoring of the qualities associated in other (among others, Greek and Christian) traditions with female deities or saints.

The success of his external mission, however, only came after another, and in a way last, experience-recognition complex.

This happened around 619, leading to the extension of his mission out of its local character. There is a quite general scholarly consensus about the exact sequence of events, with a number of striking elements. It starts with a new liminal crisis, this time related to purely this-worldly experiences of sufferings, as within a short time both Muhammad’s wife and stepfather have died (Hodgson 1974: 171). While loss of close relatives is always taxing, especially when taking place together, in the case of Muhammad such grievances were exacerbated by the unique character of the loss. Khadijah and Abu-Talib were not just close rela-

tives, but were the two emotionally closest family members for Muhammad; furthermore, the two persons on whom his material existence relied upon; and finally, even his major sources of recognition as prophet. Thus, apart from the emotional hardship caused, and the liminal situation of mourning, the two deaths also forced him to look for new sources of support, trying to move outside Mecca.

He visited the nearby oasis of Ta'if, but the mission proved to be a failure (Hodgson 1974: 171), though one Christian slave there evidently believed in him (Cook 1986: 310). On the way home, however, he encountered a few *ginns* (sprites), and managed to convert them (K 72: 1-2). Thus, while men repudiated him, the spirits brought him comfort. This is an extremely strange, even disturbing account, with no parallels in the New Testament. Recognition to Jesus was never given by spirits; quite on the contrary, it was very often the driving away of demons that led to his recognition. Another contrast can be given from the life of St Francis, the 'second Christ' and a crucial comparative reference point. Whenever turned away by man, according to his biographers Francis preached to birds or even the fish; never to spirits.

The next episode in the storyline only renders this aspect even more perplexing. As, after meeting the sprites, he also had a new vision that would be 'given a central place in Muhammad's legend' (Hodgson 1974: 171). This vision seems to consist of two parts: in the first part he was ravished to the Temple (K 17: 1; usually identified as Jerusalem); in the second, to the throne of God, or the 7th Heaven (K 53: 13-18).

Once back to home, after such taxing and peculiar experiences, he needed further recognition, both in the sense of confirmation and consolation by human beings, and this he obtained in two different ways. The first came still from the small circle of relatives and friends. Becoming a widow, he took two new wives, one being Aishia, the daughter of one of his most faithful disciples, Abu Bakr. Aishia was only six years old then, the only one of his wives who was a virgin, and though Muhammad did not immediately go to her, he did so about three years later – which makes it coincide with another taxing, liminal experience, the flight to Medina – and which still leaves much room for perplexity about this entire affair.

The second type of recognition, finally, came from the outside. A few Muslim converts left already earlier to Medina, a town in which there were three important Jewish clans, and they managed to make some further converts. Between 619 and 622 occasionally, and in increasing numbers, these converts came to visit Muhammad, and this convinced him that, especially given the increasingly hostile atmosphere in his native town, he needed to move there.

The pattern of the sequence is again very clear. The intensification of Muhammad's mission is stimulated through liminal experiences of suffering and uncertainty. He is looking for human recognition and sources of support, but is turned away; and at this very moment, while on the road – another typical liminal

situation – he is visited by spirits and visions. Human recognition and consolation only comes later, on the basis of them, and still in a predominantly local setting.

4. Who is recognising?

The missions of Jesus and Muhammad differed not only in the exact sequences of experiences and recognition, but also in the behaviour of the different types of persons involved in these acts.

Prophets

Recognition of a prophet by another prophet carries additional weight. In the case of Christianity, in all Gospels the charisma of Jesus is first recognised by St John Baptist. Even further, the Gospel of Luke makes Jesus and St John Baptist relatives. Irrespective of the veracity of kinship, the story actually reinforces the weight of the recognition. From the perspective Girard's the mimetic theory the Baptist has two strong reasons not to give such recognition: as he is both a rival brother and a rival prophet. In the case of Muhammad, however, the various prophets of the region would become rivals, and the contestation will only end by the complete submission or death of the rivals (Guzzetti 2004: 169-71).

Women

In the case of Muhammad, as we have seen, one woman played an extremely important, pioneering role in recognising his mission: his wife, Khadijah. The other significant women in his life, mostly his later wives, however, had no such roles to play: they only provided sources of support and pleasure. This was much related to the fact that after his move to Medina the defence and proliferation of Islam shifted from questions of recognition to the use of physical force, or from religion to politics.

In the case of Jesus the role played by women in the recognition and proliferation of his mission is widely considered as negligible. After all, the famous genealogy in the opening chapter of Matthew is purely male; he was recognised by the male prophet St John Baptist; and all his disciples were male. Yet, a more careful reading, with the help of the theoretical perspective exposed and used above, leads to a quite significant shift of perspective.

The Gospels start with an act of recognition and submission by a woman, before Jesus is even born. This, of course, is the famous episode of Mary's conception by the Holy Spirit. Two points are relevant in this episode for our purposes. First, recognition not only marks the starting point of the mission of Jesus, but his very existence. According to the Biblical narrative Jesus could only come into the world if the Spirit was recognised by Mary; and if she willingly gave her assent to conceive a child from the Spirit. Free, unforced submission and an un-

spoilt, childlike innocence capable of recognising is the real starting point of the Biblical narrative, after the ironical male genealogy.

Second, the normal sequential order between experience and recognition is reversed even here. In practically any narrative about the birth of a famous person, recognition follows the actual events. A child is born, and somebody – the midwife, a prophet or a sage – makes some pronouncements about the unusual qualities and future heroics of the newborn. Here, however, recognition is presented as the condition of possibility of birth; and this recognition is given not simply by a close family member but the mother herself, or exactly the person who, in any other narrative, after the childbirth, is disqualified from making such claims.

In concluding this episode I would like to stress that from the perspective of recognition and identity the significance of the female gender in the New Testament narrative must be reassessed. Far from being secondary, overshadowed by male prophets and disciples, this recognition by Mary is the condition of possibility of the entire narrative. The quantitative preponderance of males and the few references to Mary are irrelevant from this perspective; even further, it can be explained by the fact that after the birth, the logic of the narrative required the underplaying of such blood lines. The aim of the narrative was not to replace patriarchal genealogy with matriarchal genealogy.

Still, even though all his disciples were male – and for various reasons had to be – Jesus was also followed, or recognised, by females as well, and some of these recognitions carried exceptional significance. I do not have in mind the general reference to female followers (see Lk 8: 1-3), rather two singular episodes: the case of the Phoenician and the Samaritan women (Mt 15: 21-8, Mk 7: 24-30; Jn 4: 5-30). The particular significance of the first encounter is widely recognised, though interestingly enough the episode can be interpreted in two radically different manners. On the one hand, this is one of the cases in which Jesus makes the claim that his mission is restricted to ‘the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (Mt 15: 24). It is thus central, together with related passages like Mt (10: 5-8), for the claims of Géza Vermes (2004: 328-9) about the purely Jewish character of the original mission of Jesus.

The passage, however, can be read in the exact opposite manner. For this, we first need to recognise that this episode, the meeting of the Canaanite woman in Tyre, is the first case in Matthew when Jesus leaves the land of Israel. He furthermore does so in a very particular context. Tyre, together with neighbouring Sidon, is already mentioned in Mt (11: 20-1), where Jesus was reproaching the cities of Israel that they failed to repent though he was working miracles there. Further on, and still alongside the same dynamics of failing recognition, a series of events take place: Jesus is not recognised at home (Mt 13: 53-8); St John Baptist, who recognised his mission first, is beheaded (Mt 14: 1-12); Peter lacks faith (Mt 14: 30-1); and his conflicts with the Pharisees get more and more bitter (Mt 15: 1-20). This is the context in which, for the first time, he leaves Israel and enters the region of Tyre and Sidon.

It is by no means insignificant that the first contact Jesus has with the non-Jewish world is actually the city of Tyre, as Tyre has a very special place in mythical history. Tyre is the home-place of Europa, daughter of Agenor, the Phonician king of Tyre. It is from the coast of Tyre that Europa was ravished by Zeus,¹⁴ and taken to Crete. In the text it is specifically emphasised that the woman was pagan, even Greek (Hellenic), or ‘Syrophonician by nation’ (Mk 7: 26). It is therefore particularly significant that the first step of Jesus outside the boundaries of Israel can be connected with the continent, Europe, that would play a particularly significant role with the further spread of Christianity.

From this perspective the otherwise perplexing aspects of the story become intelligible. After all, Jesus not simply went outside Israel but encountered, all alone, a woman in Tyre, the situation was therefore liminal in multiple ways. The fact that he ‘had’ to encounter a woman there can be understood by drawing parallels with the case of Mary and the annunciation. There, the emphasis was on breaking the genealogical lineage, underplaying the role of man and giving and exalted place, through a unique act of recognition, to a woman. Here, the problem is identical, the breaking of the exclusive character of the mission. Just as earlier, a woman is put to a test. There, she had to consent to carry the child of the Spirit. Here, she has to persist in her request that Jesus cure his child. In his attempt to prove the purely Jewish character of the entire mission of Jesus Vermes simply fails to understand what is going on: that the character of the encounter is a testing.¹⁵ I need to remind again that the situation is highly liminal, the proper condition for testing: the first time the borderline of Israel is breached by Jesus, and the first time he is talking after his mission has started, alone, without his disciples, to a woman. The woman, however, passed the test, in opposition to so many of the compatriots of Jesus who failed; so therefore the nature of the mission mutated. Vermes wants to fixate the mission of Jesus, and fails to realise that such fixity, in this case exclusivity, even if it existed before, in liminal conditions becomes malleable.

Finally, it is shortly after this allusion to the extension of the mission that Jesus asks, and receives, recognition by Peter in the famous scene (Mt 16: 15-9), and which would be interpreted as the foundation of the Church. The sequential order is the same in Mark; and it is important to underline here that exactly Matthew and Mark are considered as the more traditional or ‘Jewish’ Gospels, in opposition to the more ‘Greek’ Luke and John.

What has been stated about the encounter with the Phonician woman is Tyre

14 In many European languages rape, ecstatic-mystic rapture, and kidnapping/ravishing have the same etymological root.

15 About Vermes, see the following recently made claim, amazing in many ways: ‘As a former Catholic priest who has returned to his Jewish roots, he tends to see the events described without party political bias.’ See Peter Stanford, ‘The Jesus jigsaw,’ in *The Sunday Times*, 20 March 2005, Culture, p. 41.

is fully confirmed by another major and quite unique Biblical episode, the encounter with the Samaritan woman in the city of Sychar (Jn 4: 5-30). This episode, in many of its details, is so stunning that its authenticity is often questioned. Following the excellent discussion of Michel Henry (2002), who calls attention to the exceptional significance of this passage, I will only focus on a few aspects of the episode.

Henry starts by recognising the problematic, late character of the episode, but argues that the message it contains is supported by a series of passages in the Synoptic Gospels (Henry 2002: 64-6). Its significance is also undermined by aspects of physical and literary context. In the Gospel of John this is the first time Jesus leaves Israel, meeting all alone a woman who is also a foreigner, member of a hostile ethnic group, the Samaritans. The meeting furthermore takes place at Jacob's well, obtained by the Patriarch on the occasion of a peculiar episode in the Book of Genesis, the rape of his daughter Dina (Gen 33: 19). Jesus asks the women to give him drink from the well, and it is in the ensuing conversation that one of the most striking words of the Gospel are uttered, with Jesus identifying himself as the Messiah: 'I am who are speaking to you' (Jn 4: 26) – a statement whose significance is only underlined by the abruptness of its uttering (Henry 2002: 63-4).

The passage directly evokes the famous tetragrammaton YHWH, or 'I am that I am' (Ex 3: 14). The self-definition, however, is altered, and in two significant ways. Definition by being is changed to definition by speech (logos); and furthermore, the speech is addressed to a second person, this person being female, and non-Jewish.

Due to this emphatic reference to words, the verbal context of the statement should be carefully revisited. While the self-revelation is about words, the passage is satiated with references to the most physical needs: Jesus asks for water; from a woman; and immediately after references are made to bread and eating (Jn 4: 30-4). All this serves to undermine the extraordinary revaluation the passage operates (Henry 2002: 66). Finally, the episode starts and ends with problems related to recognition: the conflicts with the Pharisees (Jn 2: 25, 3: 1, 4: 1), and one of the most famous declarations about the failure of recognition: 'A prophet is not valued in his own country' (Jn 4: 44) – a claim which, strikingly, is immediately qualified by the evangelist (4: 45).

The significance of this episode is further underlined by broader issues of context: the episode serves as a conclusion to the long 'recognitive' part of the Gospel of John. The question of recognising the identity of Jesus is central for all four Gospels, discussed at the very beginning of each, taking up increasingly more and more space. It is dealt with by Mark in a few verses at the start (Mk 1: 7-11), while in Matthew and Luke in their first two chapters. In John, this extends to four chapters, thus a significant part of the entire book. These four chapters summarise and further elaborate the arguments of the previous evangelists. Mark starts in the middle, placing the emphasis on the Baptist. Matthew and

Luke take the storyline further, singling out for attention the break in the genealogical lineage and the importance of Mary. John takes the argument even further, giving a particularly Greek twist. Each of the first three chapters focuses around a single concept, or phenomenon, that is specifically Greek. Chapter 1 is about logos, and it is this logos that is at the origins, thus replacing the genealogical-patriarchic lineages and the emphasis on blood or 'seed;' the logos that is associated with the Holy Spirit. It is this Greek-philosophical lineage that is carried further in Chapter 3, with its emphasis on second birth, or conversion, another central term of Greek philosophy, and another area in which Christian theology would decisively rely on such philosophical sources, crowned by the work of St Augustine. Chapter 2 on the wedding in Cana and the transfiguration of water into wine, seemingly breaks this smooth link between Chapters 1 and 3, and is often considered as being out of the narrative line. Its position, however, can be understood together with Chapter 4, to which it rhymes, and with which it closes the introductory-initiatory circle of recognition. Taken together Chapters 2 and 4 are clearly Greek, though not so much philosophical as Minoan-Dionsian.

Children

The role played by children in recognising charisma is again radically different in the two cases. In the case of Jesus, they simply have no such role. Of course, children are extremely important for the message of the Gospel, and are often identified as favourite themes for Jesus, either in concrete physical reality when Jesus plays with them or indicates them as model for behaviour (Mt 19: 13-4, 21: 16; Lk 18: 15-7); or, in a sense related to the latter, when he exhorts the listeners to be like children (Mt 11: 25, 18: 2-10; Mk 9: 36-7). But children never feature among his disciples, which is really as it should be, as children have no business of identifying a prophet as a prophet. The recognition of charisma is a matter for adults.

It is all the more surprising then that children do play a fundamental role in the recognition of Muhammad as a prophet. This is even underlined in the most authoritative narratives, stating that his first male disciple was a child of mere ten years of age, and who was by the way his cousin. This is further reinforced by the fact that the first female person who recognised him was his wife Khadijah; and that upon her loss, and in another the context of liminal experience of suffering, it was again a child who would comfort him – this time Aishia who would become her wife at the age of six. It needs to be emphasised that such a conflation of personal recognition by family members – and especially by children – is highly problematic if at stake is the recognition of the prophet as a prophet. Children, of course, are extremely important sources of support, and do have a quite sharp sense of distinguishing good and bad persons. However, apart from their volatility and defencelessness, they simply cannot be relied upon in identifying the qualities of a prophet.

Disciples

For Jesus, three instances will be stressed. First, disciples have a central role in recognising and identifying the charisma of Jesus. In this role they are not only outside the circle of family members or immediate personal acquaintances, but the distinction is explicitly emphasised. The contrast is so strong that one could even take offence of it, especially if Mary is pictured among those ‘rejected’ in this way (Mt 12: 46-50); but the scene only draws the implications of the very first chapters of Matthew, and is therefore a fundamental part of the message.

Second, while Jesus is recognised and followed by the disciples as an unquestioned master, elements of mutuality and reciprocity are introduced in the narrative. Occasionally this is explicit (see Jn 1: 35-41). More importantly, at least some of them are called by Jesus in some central episodes to share with him the experience and the burden (transfiguration at Mount Tabor, vigil at the Gethsemane garden), while in others to follow his actions (Peter walking over the sea), though they usually fail, leading him to exhortation. The structure of these episodes, and the moral of the exhortations, is very specific. The disciples are not threatened by choice punishments for failing to evaluate his special qualities, or unique and distinct character; rather they are taken to task for not being like him. They are offered equal status, but fail to capture and maintain the opportunity. These are part of the failings identified at the start of John (1: 7-11).

Finally, though only in John, the first disciples of Jesus are also identified as former disciples of St John Baptist. Whether the episode is authentic or not, the crucial point is the emphasis on mutual recognition, this time between prophets; instead of a rivalry, the earlier prophet is identified as bowing to the more recent one. Thus, from the recognition of disciples, we are back to our first point, the recognition of the heralding prophet with which our analysis, and the Gospels, start. The circle is closed.

The case again could not be more different from Muhammad. The recruitment of disciples, especially outside the closely-knit family circle, was very slow.¹⁶ Even after the move to Medina, stimulated by increasing number of people coming from Medina converting to his prophecy, progress was slow. Its pace only increased once Muhammad started to organise raids on caravans, in order to support himself; and even then, after initial failures, the radical breakthrough happened when – in violation of the holy truce – his men attacked and defeated a caravan (Hodgson 1974: 175). In response to widespread initial outcry, Muhammad justified the blatant breach of agreements on the basis of a new revelation that ‘while violation of the truce was bad, persecution of the faith was worse and

16 In contrast, in his recent book Vermes estimates that the entire preaching of Jesus was about six months’ long (Vermes 2002: 371). Whether it is true or not, the point concerns the *possibility* of making such a claim; and at any rate even the classical account is only talking about three years.

justified the violation' (Hodgson 1974: 175). On this basis he then succeeded to recruit, for the first time, a larger raid force, and at the wells of Badr inflicted a huge defeat on Quraysh opponents of vastly superior numbers. This victory was considered to confirm divine support for Muhammad, and from now onwards the march of Islam was more or less unstoppable. The significance of events is shown by the fact that presence at Badr would be later considered as 'a patent of nobility' (Hodgson 1974: 176).

Thus, in contradistinction to Jesus, the main external disciples of Muhammad were recruited not through the recognition of a prophet but of a successful raider; they were never offered an equal status, only unconditional submission to accepting him as the one and only messenger of Allah; and they were not disciples of other prophets – these other prophets rather were forced to submit, or were simply murdered (Guzzetti 2004: 170).

The image of the enemy

In his theory of recognition Pizzorno emphasises the importance of rivalry and adversity. Contrary to the approach of Honneth, recognition is not necessarily identical with positive acknowledgement and emotional support; it might well be given by accepting the person as a rival, even as an enemy. From a different angle, this approach can be supported by the theoretisation of labelling or stigmatisation offered by Goffman. In both approaches a central question is the exact balance between the identity of the self and the other. What is the exact dynamics of recognition? Is it a contest, an agonistic duel, in which the other provides a way to test oneself, to measure oneself against an opposition which is respected, and therefore ends by the acceptance of the other, which does not necessarily imply full-scale victory, not to mention the annihilation of the opponent, being rather a re-confirmation of self-esteem; or is the other vilified and blamed, threatened with all kinds of punishments, torture and death, forcing a life-and-death struggle?

In the case of Jesus, exhortations against the unbelievers are rare, and not connected inherently to the message. They remain vague and general, blamed on inherent human weaknesses, and connected to not those who are actually physically present – as most of them, according to the narrative, are instantly converted by his miracles – but rather to the weakness in maintaining and transmitting faith, or what they have witnessed or heard. The contents of his speech, and the targets of his acts, are hardly ever the unbelievers or the unfaithful, those who fail to recognise him; they are only identified afterwards, and usually only for the disciples. Even when perhaps the strongest of such threats of punishments is issued in instructing the disciples, they are only advised to 'shake off the dust of [their] feet' (Mt 10: 14); the punishment is left to God and the Day of Judgment. The punishment is therefore not physical violence, just a parting of ways, whether it is the leaving of the city, as advised in this passage, or the excommu-

nication of the ‘sinners,’ as practised by the Church. This practice is a return to the very old communal practice of ban or exile,¹⁷ in opposition to the capital punishment characteristic of large-scale bureaucratic empires.¹⁸

There is one crucial difference from this general practice; one case in which Jesus is going out of his way to attack and vilify a particular opponent: these are the Pharisees. This is a practice that at a first look seems strange, aggressive, intolerant, even incantatory, highly incompatible with the mostly non-violent and non-conflictual message of the Gospels. Luckily, we can start our analysis with one of the most underused writings of Max Weber, who interprets the Pharisees as sect religiosity whose main character was a reaction against Hellenisation, especially the Sophists.¹⁹

The Pharisees are neither prophets nor priests. They do not show or even pretend the attributes of prophets, and are also different from the Sadducees, the high priests, who were their main opponents. They possess three distinct identifying features. They are the pious purists, maintaining tradition in the strictest possible sense, and separating themselves, physically and morally, from those who do not live according to the letter of their strict moralising rules. The novelty in this respect is that they no longer do so only with respect to the Hellenes, but also the Jews (Weber 1952: 386-7).²⁰ Second, they are mostly members of the literate intellectual elite, often referred to as the Scribes. Due to these two factors, and their joint hostility to both the high priests and the broad populace, they would build up structures alternative to the Synagogue, devaluing priestly rituals, as if transforming themselves into an alternative elite, waiting in the shadows to capture power. In fact, according to Weber, the true significance of the Pharisees would only become visible after the Fall of the Temple, when ‘all Judaism became Pharisaic’ (ibid.: 391). Finally, because of their education and skills, in

- 17 There is a close parallel here between punishment meted out by the Pygmies of the rainforest (Turnbull 1968), exile by ostracism in democratic Athens, and ban in ancient German or Roman legal practices (Agamben 1998).
- 18 Inquisition is mostly a legacy of Spain, and therefore an often ignored consequence of the ‘multicultural’ situation of the peninsula, the joint presence of Christians, Muslims and Jews. Furthermore, the crucial issue in this case, just as with the end of the Renaissance in general, is the collapse of the separation between temporal and spiritual powers, the foundation of medieval European culture, and the ensuing power invested in secular authorities to further persecute religious heretics, after their excommunication.
- 19 It is little short of a miracle that this text is available, one of the very few surviving manuscripts from Weber’s *Nachlass*, somehow escaping the ‘treatment’ of Marianne Weber.
- 20 It is important to notice that up to the very last scene of the Gospels, the Passion, if occasionally Jesus uses the word ‘Jew,’ it always refers to the Pharisees. This is partly because only they spoke Hebrew (the populace used Aramaic); and partly an ironic take on their pretence of being the only ‘true’ Jews.

spite of their critical stance they had easy access to the central corridors of power.²¹

The attacks by Jesus start with the excessive importance attributed by them to the law and ritual purity, but go much further and turn directly against their own character, reaching its highest pitch and coherence in Matthew 23. Though putting excessive burden on common people (Mt 23: 4), they themselves often fail to live according to their own principles (see also Mt 7: 4). This is because they confuse the letter and the spirit of the law: being preoccupied with the former, lose the latter: ‘Ye fools and blind, for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift?’ (Mt 23: 19). This is why they are repeatedly identified as hypocrites, charged with the highest possible sin, the unique that cannot be forgiven: ‘whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him; but whosoever speaketh against the Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come’ (Mt 12: 32). In the framework of this paper it is especially important to emphasise that this highest of charges is explicitly made not concerning offences committed against the person of Jesus.

This already shows that these attacks cannot be identified as charges voiced against rivals. Jesus is not trying to out-perform the Pharisees in what they are doing, rather preaches something completely different. It is true that he attacks them exactly as false guides, offering a different kind of guidance; but does so not by using existing liminal conditions of confusion, rather by creating a liminal storm on its own in order to overtake spiritual leadership from the hands of a pseudo-elite that in a way tries to make use the best of both worlds, being comfortably inside power and still pretending outsider status, criticising everybody and not taking responsibility for anything. The attempt, by conventional measures, completely fails. Jesus only manages to bring together former enemies, like the Pharisees and the Sadducees who conspire in his death sentence, or Pilate and Herod (Lk 23: 12), and ends his life on the cross, derided as ‘king of the Jews.’ Yet, exactly in this way, through complete failure and dejection, somehow the momentum was generated for the rise of a new world religion.

The situation again could not be more different in the case of Islam. First of all, since the earliest revelations (see Suras 102, 104) the Koran is exhorting in

21 The unique characteristics of the Pharisees invite broader generalisation and contemporary comparison. They condense, in a genuinely archetypical sense, two types that would have a huge impact of the dynamics of the modern world: the Puritanic sects, already mentioned by Weber, and the educated elites of court societies (like 18th-century France or Communist East-Central Europe) who stay close to the centres of power, enjoying all the privileges, though maybe having some frills out of mocking and criticising the dictatorial rules, while being convinced of their own special status and deeply despising the general populace, considered at best the passive targets of the enlightening mission. For some details in this regard, see Szokolczai (2005).

the strongest possible sense against those who failed to believe in the prophet. In the original language these exhortations are delivered in an extremely powerful, poetic, incantatory language, where the content of the message, the evocation of strong choice punishment; the formal artistic devices used, the rhymes, repetitions and alliterations; and the fact that this was hurled at a loud language against the opponents all contributed to intimidate or force the opponent into submission, and where such verbal violence could always easily turn into actual physical conflict. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that the message of the Koran operates at two levels: one is the actual call for a pious, pure, chaste, upright, moral life; and the other is the reinforcement of this message by the rewards and punishments to be meted out each according to what they deserve. The reference point is singular and always the same: the person of Muhammad as the unique voice of God and the revelations transmitted by him as the sole fountain of truth; and violence should be applied, as a duty, to those who fail.

The contrasts are stark even related to the concrete example discussed. There were no Pharisees in early Islam, but the adjective 'hypocrite' is often used to translate the term *munafiqun*, denoting a group of Muhammad's opponents who were supposedly particularly vicious (Hodgson 1974: 178). They are, however, not an established group pre-existing the preaching of Muhammad, with access to the official circles; rather those who have only superficially adhered to the new faith.²² Far from being a powerful group external to the prophet, challenged purely due to fundamental questions of religious and practical conduct, even character, they are a group of people who were forced to submit to the new faith, but trying to maintain a degree of independence under external conformity. The attacks on the hypocrites is therefore part of a powerful but extremely questionable two-step strategy of oppression that would be used by many similar regimes to hammer opponents into full submission: the first step is physical conquest, the subduing of an entire population by force; while the second step is the gradual extermination of all inner sources of resistance, by requiring a genuine belief in the conquerors. It was this two-step strategy that, as shown by Goddard (2000: 68-74), led to the gradual Islamisation and Arabisation of the entire near East and North Africa.

With this point, however, the paper moved from the dynamics of experience and recognition, central for the early stages of the new religion, to the subsequent question of the dynamics of conversion and conquest, which is outside its proper theme, though to which it hopefully prepares the ground. The analysis suggests that even here, the radical contrast between Christianity and Islam can be clearly observed. While in the latter case conversion followed conquest, already in the life of the prophet, in the former case, for about three centuries after the death of

22 A main sign of this hypocrisy was the failure to take part in warfare. I thank Stefan Leder for this comment.

Jesus, conversion took place without any coercive force; rather, on the contrary, in the face of mortal risks. The situation would change later; and given that this change happened almost 1700 years ago, it is all-too easy to forget the exact dynamics of emergence.

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