

The parable of the Three Rings: a revision of its history¹

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Abstract

The paper provides evidence for the non-Western origins of the Three Rings parable, on the basis of a full account of the history, and the literary and allegorical origins of the parable. The parable, known in Western culture mainly through Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* and Boccaccio's *Decameron*, contains in some versions the idea of religious relativism. The paper tracks the idea—presented in a similar allegorical form—back to its Muslim origins, also pointing to the Eastern origins of the parable's literary framework. The discussion follows the evolution of the parable and its entrance into Catholic Europe, analysing its contextuality and the twists given to its message by Muslims, Jews, and Christians between the eighth and the sixteenth centuries.
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Introduction

Lessing's well-known parable of the three rings, based on Boccaccio's novella in the *Decameron*, is known in the Western culture as reflecting values of religious toleration and relativism inherent in the term 'religious truth'. These values are commonly regarded as part of the humanist legacy of the Renaissance, fully developed in the Enlightenment era. The parable has been subject to research for a hundred years or so. Scholars have investigated its religious and cultural connotations as well. It is generally accepted that the Enlightenment version, told by Lessing through Nathan the Wise, and its famous predecessor in the *Decameron*, were generated from a non-Catholic origin.

This paper aims to provide evidence for the non-Western origins of the Three Rings parable. It tracks the Eastern origins of the parable's literary components, and places the emergence and development of the parable within the context of intercultural and inter-religious contact. The parable's form and message are therefore perceived as vitally associated with circumstances in which religion is thought of in relationship to other religions, whether in a competitive-dogmatic or a comparative-pluralistic representation. The idea of religious relativism as formulated in some, especially later European, versions of the parable, will be traced by drawing attention to sources hitherto

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¹I am grateful to B. Z. Kedar for his good advice and comments throughout the preparation of this paper.

unaccounted for by the parable's researchers. This is especially true of Mario Penna, the Italian scholar who in 1959 made the fullest survey of the history and versions of the parable, but nevertheless missed important material. By reconstructing a fuller catalogue of the parable's versions, it will be asserted that the parable's history is an illustrative example that the idea of the relativity of religious truth germinated in areas where inter-religious relations were practised and discussions were held between devout of different faiths. Furthermore, the history of the parable suggests that it was Islam, with its teachings from the Koran and from other authorities, that originally permitted the expression of such openness.

I

The parable, as told by Lessing, relates the story of Saladin, the Muslim ruler, turning in need of money to his Jewish subject Nathan the Wise. Presuming that the Jew will not give away his money readily, Saladin attempts to trick him. He poses a question to Nathan, to which no answer, Saladin thinks, will be acceptable, and this will justify extracting money from him. Saladin asks Nathan which of the three religions—Judaism, Islam, or Christianity—he considers the best. Nathan's answer is the parable of the three rings:

Vor grauen Jahren lebt' ein Mann in Osten,
 Der einen Ring von unschätzbarem Wert
 Aus lieber Hand Besaß. Der Stein war ein
 Opal, der hundert schöne Farben spielte,
 Und hatte die geheime Kraft, vor Gott
 Und Menschen angenehm zu machen, wer
 In dieser Zuversicht ihn trug. Was Wunder,
 Daß ihn der Mann in Osten darum nie
 Vom Finger ließ; und die Verfügung traf,
 Auf ewig ihn bei seinem Hause zu
 Erhalten? Nämlich so. Er ließ den Ring
 Von seinen Söhnen dem geliebtesten;
 Und setzte fest, daß dieser wiederum
 Den Ring von seinen Söhnen dem vermache,
 Der ihm der liebste sei; und stets der liebste,
 Ohn' Ansehn der Geburt, in Kraft allein
 Des Rings, das Haupt, der Fürst des Hauses werde.
 So kam nun dieser Ring, von Sohn zu Sohn,
 Auf einen Vater endlich von drei Söhnen;
 Die alle drei ihm gleich gehorsam waren,
 Die alle drei er folglich gleich zu lieben
 Sich nicht entbrechen konnte. Nur von Zeit
 Zu Zeit schien ihm bald der, bald dieser, bald

Der dritte,—sowie jeder sich mit ihm
 Allein befand, und sein ergießend Herz
 Die andern zwei nicht teilten,—würdiger
 Des Ringes; den er denn auch einem jeden
 Die fromme Schwachheit hatte, zu versprechen.
 Das ging nun so, solange es ging.—Allein
 Es kam zum Sterben, und der gute Vater
 Kömmt in Verlegenheit. Es schmerzt ihn, zwei
 Von seinen Söhnen, die sich auf sein Wort
 Verlassen, so zu kränken.—Was zu tun?—
 Er sendet in geheim zu einem Künstler,
 Bei dem er, nach dem Muster seines Ringes,
 Zwei andere bestellt, und weder Kosten
 Noch Mühe sparen heißt, sie jenem gleich,
 Vollkommen gleich zu machen. Das gelingt
 Dem Künstler. Da er ihm die Ringe bringt,
 Kann selbst der Vater seinen Musterring
 Nicht unterscheiden. Froh und Freudig ruft
 Er seine Söhne, jeden insbesondere;
 Gibt jedem insbesondere seinen Segen,—
 Und seinen Ring,—und stirbt.
 Kaum war der Vater tot, so kömmt ein jeder
 Mit seinem Ring, und jeder will der Fürst
 Des Hauses sein. Man untersucht, man zankt,
 Man klagt. Umsonst; der rechte Ring war nicht
 Erweislich;—
 Uns itzt-der rechte Glaube²

²G. E. Lessing, *Nathan der Weise* (Stuttgart, 1980), 71–3. In days of yore, there dwelt in eastern lands / A man who had a ring of priceless worth / Received from hands beloved. The stone it held, / An opal, shed a hundred colors fair, / And had the magic power that he who wore it, / Trusting its strength, was loved of God and men /. No wonder therefore that this eastern man / Would never cease to wear it; and took pains / To keep it in his household for all time /. He left the ring to that one of his sons / He loved the best; providing that in turn / That son bequeath to his favorite son / The ring; and thus, regardless of his birth, / The dearest son, by virtue of the ring, / Should be the head, the prince of all his house /. At last this ring, passed on from son to son, / Descended to a father of three sons; / All three of whom were duly dutiful, / All three of whom in consequence he needs / Must love alike. But from time to time, / Now this, now that one, now the third—as each / might be with him alone, and other two / not sharing then his overflowing heart / seemed worthiest of the ring; and so to each / He promised it, in pious frailty /. This lasted while it might. Then came the time / For dying, and the loving father finds / Himself embarrassed. It is a grief to him / To wound two of his sons, who have relied / Upon his word. What's to be done? He sends / In secret to a jeweler, of whom / He orders two more rings, in pattern like / His own, and bids him spare nor cost nor toil / To make them in all points identical /. The jeweler succeeds. And when he brings / The rings to him, the sire himself cannot / Distinguish them from the original. / In glee and joy he calls his sons to him, / Each by himself, confers on him his blessing / His ring as well—and dies— / Scarce the father dead when all three sons / Appear, each with his ring, and each would be / The reigning prince. They seek the facts, they quarrel / Accuse. In vain; the genuine ring was not / Demonstrable; — almost as little as / Today the genuine faith. Trans. B. Q. Morgan, *Nathan the Wise* (New York, 1955), 75–7.

The first medieval European version of the parable appeared in 1260 as an exemplum. It was incorporated by the French Dominican preacher Stephen of Bourbon in his *Tractatus de diversis materiis praedicabilibus*. This version of the allegory is in no way tolerant. The exemplum tells of a rich man, who had one legitimate daughter, as well as several other illegitimate daughters, born from his adulterous wife. The father possesses a unique and precious ring that he intends to bestow upon his only daughter, and in his testament he designates the whole inheritance to the daughter who will, after his death, present this ring. He then gives the ring to his genuine daughter and dies. Having learned about the ring, the stepdaughters order identical rings to be fabricated for them. When the testament is read before a judge, each daughter holds out her own ring, claiming a birthright to the father's inheritance. The judge, the exemplum maintains, is a wise man. He bids that the rings be examined by their virtue of healing. Having found no value in the fake rings, the judge designates the true daughter as the authentic heiress of the father, and the others he calls *reputandas*. The moral of the exemplum contends that this story is about the proving of the true faith. And whereas the name of the true faith is not stated explicitly by Stephen of Bourbon, the reader can securely infer that it is Catholic Christianity. It should be noted that while the number of the daughters-faiths is left undefined, the exclusive validity of a single one is firmly asserted.

II

Scholars have speculated that there is an oriental origin for this parable. Some proposed to track literary elements singled out from the story, like the ring, the gem as a symbol for faith or wisdom, the quest for a concealed wisdom, and sibling rivalry. However, throughout this century, scholars who studied the parable's history failed to notice a short paper published in 1900 by the French scholar Victor Chauvin. The paper shed light on a passage from a recently published translation of the *History of the Kings of the Persians*, a pseudo-historical text in Arabic, by the Persian historian al-Tha'alibi. Herman Zotenberg, who edited and translated the text, suggested that most of the stories, legends and traditions in this universal history—written probably between 1030 and 1034, originated some time before the actual compilation of the book.³ He emphasised the unoriginal, rather eclectic, nature of the composition. This text contains a non-allegorical story about a certain Persian prince, himself a semi-mythical figure, who supposedly lived in the first century A.D. Here is the story. The prince Djaudharz (or Godarzes) was entreated by his three beautiful and beloved women to reveal whom he preferred and loved the most. The prince promised to give his answer in three days. Meanwhile, he had three identical rings prepared for him, each decorated with a fine gem. He then called each woman secretly, gave her a ring and prompted her vow not to speak of the gift. In three days' time, he gave the women his answer: she who has the

³H. Zotenberg, in his introduction to the book, suggests that most of it is unoriginal material. Some of the works used by the author are cited directly. Some are not traceable, including a universal history on which Tha'alibi relied substantially. See his preface, esp. xix ff.

precious ring is his most beloved. Thus, each confident that the prince was referring to her, all three women were pleased.

Obviously the features of this story correspond closely to those of the parable in its European versions. This is apparently their oldest known literary archetype. We are not able to trace the early circulation of the Persian story, nor can we identify the exact historical moment when this story was converted into an allegory related to religions. It can be argued, though, that the conversion into allegory also occurred in the East. Indeed, not only because travelling westward through Arab cultural centres like Baghdad was a common path for Persian literary material (and al-Tha'alibi himself visited Baghdad on a diplomatic mission), but more importantly because we can assess the presence in the East of allegorical references to religious relativism.

This brings us to the allegory of the lost pearl, discussed in the text of the dialogue between Timothy, the Nestorian Patriarch of Baghdad and the Caliph al-Mahdi. It is probably the earliest **allegorical** appearance of the three rings parable. The text documents a two-day theological discussion said to have taken place in the year 781/2 A.D. in Baghdad. It was written in the form of a letter by the Patriarch Timothy to a fellow Christian. The thirteenth-century manuscript found in the monastery Our Lady of the Seeds in the Mosul region of northern Iraq is the earliest manuscript containing the *Apology of Timothy*. According to A. Mignana, who translated the text in 1928, it was originally composed sometime after 785.⁴ While discussing the differences among the Nestorians and the Jacobites and Melchites concerning the death of Christ, Caliph al-Mahdi agrees with patriarch Timothy that the Nestorians are right in this matter more than other Christians, and wonders: 'Who dares to assert that God dies?'.⁵ However, concerning their entire belief in the Son of God, he observes that all Christians are equally mistaken. To that, Timothy responds with a parable:

In this world all of us are as in a dark house in the middle of the night. If at night in a dark house a precious pearl happens to fall in the midst of people, and all become aware of its existence, every one would strive to pick up the pearl, which will not fall to the lot of all but to the lot of one only; while one will get hold of the pearl itself, another one will hold a piece of glass, a third a stone or of a bit of earth, but every one will be happy and proud that he is the real possessor of the pearl In the same way we children of man are in this perishable world as in darkness. The pearl of the true faith fell in the midst of all of us, and it is undoubtedly in the hand of one of us, while all of us believe that we possess the precious object.

The mystery will clear up when light comes in the End of Days, explains Timothy, and those in possession of the true faith will rejoice; the others will shed tears.

The devouts of different beliefs are paralleled here to men, each holding something which he trusts to be the true pearl. But until the Day comes, this world is comparable to darkness, and it is therefore impossible to tell who possesses it. The claim, the hope, the

⁴A. Mignana, 'The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before the Caliph Mahdi: Preface, Edition and Translation', *Journal of the John Rylands Library*, 12 (1928), 147.

⁵Mignana, 224.

belief are fairly shared by all. In the discussion that follows the parable, the caliph maintains that presently the holders of the pearl are not known; the patriarch on the other hand, attempts to prove that the truth is partly exposed through revelations of God's intentions; the miracles performed by Christ and the apostles, he argues, are examples of the gleaming rays of the pearl, the true faith, and they are the sign for the Christians that they are its holders. Al-Mahdi says that the Muslims hope that they possess the pearl; Timothy replies 'Amen, O King. But may God grant us that we too may *share* it with you God has placed the pearl of His faith before all of us and everyone who wishes can enjoy the light'.⁶

Both protagonists tend to tolerate the uncertainty underlying the parable. Is it an indication of a weakening in the firmness of their beliefs? Arguably not; each rests confident in his own creed. What seems to be momentous is that the encounter between two religions can stimulate religious openness. This evoked openness may, momentarily or not, compete with the presupposed steadfastness of one's own belief; such openness, unlikely to be articulated when among coreligionists, seems more tolerable in an inter-religious context. This of course cannot be said of all encounters. The Apology indicates that this can occur in encounters of scholarly character, and when total, blatant rejection is not the dominant sentiment.

We should bear in mind, though, that the dialogue is recorded in a letter written by the patriarch to a fellow Christian, and his frame of mind was perhaps accordingly modified; furthermore, the fact that the dialogue ever took place cannot be conclusively validated.

I would like to divert briefly from the history of the parable itself in order to review what seems a pertinent cultural and religious atmosphere for its formulation. I refer to the toleration exercised by Islam towards minority creeds, buttressed by the fact that in its early period, Islam seemed lenient toward the expression of sceptical views about its unmatched mastery of truth. The Koran itself contains several references to the liberty of choice one may enjoy in embracing a religion; it contains positive allusions to other monotheistic religions, and reference to the freedom to err. Some of these verses are well known and quoted often in literature pertaining to the religious tolerance of the early Islam.⁷

Two important quotations will be presented here. The fifth sura (v.50) asks exactly the question implied in the allegory of the lost pearl: 'Who is better than Allah for judgement to people who have certainty in their belief?' And does not verse 86 from the seventeenth sura: 'Say: Each one doth according to his rule of conduct, and thy Lord is best aware of him whose way is right' convey the very fundamental idea of the allegory?

It will also serve to refer here to a few sayings of Sufis in the eighth and ninth centuries, to show that the allegory of the pearl was not of an unprecedented nature in the cultural and religious atmosphere where it was articulated, neither did it occur in a vacuum. The mystic desire for unmediated passage and union with God, at times led Sufis to the disapproval of any established religious way. Out of the conviction that the love of God is the ultimate objective, they suggested that the constant aspiration for that

⁶Mignana, 226.

⁷B. Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton, 1984); W. M. Watt, *Free will and predestination in early Islam* ((London, 1948); A. Khoury, *Toleranz im Islam* (Munich, 1980).

single end annihilates the differences between various practices. According to this line of argument, all religions are equally valued, or rather, equally discredited. This was formulated in a phrase the Sufis ascribed to Muhammad: 'Many are the ways to God, as numerous as men's souls', but apparently the phrase was a Sufi invention, which circulated in intellectual circles.⁸ Other versions of this phrasing are also known: 'We worship you in diverse ways, but your light is one and everybody points their finger to it'.⁹ Gnostic commentary on the verse 'Unto Allah belong the East and the West, and whithersoever ye turn, there is Allah's countenance' (sura 2:115) says that God is omnipresent and is not bound by one belief or other; thus the mysticist Ibn al-Arabi suggests 'do not tie yourself uniquely to a single belief, rejecting all others. This way you will miss much of the goodness and will not succeed in recognising the genuine truth'.¹⁰

It is possible that the allegory told by Timothy was not created by him, but rather that he was previously familiar with it, and al-Mahdi as well. The pearl was a familiar allegorical element in popular literature of the East; this can be readily validated in any motif lexicon; the gem was long regarded as a symbol for faith, and indeed it is also found in the New Testament: 'The kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls. When he has found a single pearl of great value, he goes and sells all his possessions and buys it' (Matthew 13:45–6). The pearl is particularly common in stories focused on the quest of a religious truth. In Timothy's allegory, the pearl is apprehended as a form of a divine revelation; thus it implicates religions pertaining to one God and claiming to have had a revelation from him. Implicitly then, the allegory of the lost pearl refers to the three major monotheistic religions, each professing to be the sole possessor of the true faith.

Albeit of a much later date, an analogy made by the Mongol Mangu-Khan, in 1255, deserves presentation in the context of religious-tolerant perspectives expressed in the east. In a conversation recorded by the Catholic missionary William of Rubruc the Khan alluded to the different creeds as to fingers of a palm. Mangu-Khan said: 'We Mongols believe in only one God, by whom we live and die, and toward him we direct our hearts . . . but as God has provided the palm with fingers, he thus gave men different ways'.¹¹ This allegory contends that there is no single correct way to worship God, but several, and consequently there are no right or wrong ones. Or, the right religion was not specified by God, and therefore human beings cannot know it. Mangu-Khan's allegory is truly unique, but the idea it encapsulates is much the same as in the allegory of the lost pearl. Also, the circumstances within which both allegories were articulated share common properties. Mangu was a Khan amenable to religious discussions. He summoned, on this occasion and others, individuals of different beliefs to present before him their creeds in a tolerant and respectful manner. In Karracorum in 1254, Nestorian and Catholic Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists were invited for a religious discussion and were instructed to refrain from any expression of contempt. The religious interaction

⁸E. G. Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1951), 268 n.1.

⁹R. A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London, 1914), 87–8; A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, 1975), 263–6.

¹⁰Nicholson, 87–8.

¹¹Guillaume de Rubruc, 'Itinerarium', in: *Sinica Franciscana*, ed. A. van den Vingaert (Florence, 1929), 298.

stirred by the Khan and the interest in other beliefs he inspired were reflected in the markedly tolerant, even syncretist, religious nature of his kingdom. We know that Mangu-Khan's allegory travelled west in a written form, and presumably circulated orally as well, thanks to missionaries on their way back home, who fascinated audiences around Europe with the marvels of the East.¹²

III

To return to Timothy's allegory of the lost pearl, we know that it travelled west, too. The evidence is a manuscript found in 1957 by G. Levi della Vida, in the library of the mosque of Sidi O'kba in Kairouan.¹³ Included in a collection of Mozarabic manuscripts from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Levi della Vida found a sizable text of a universal history. Wrapped together with it were two smaller compositions: one is the dialogue between Timothy and the Caliph al-Mahdi, the other contains a dialogue between an 'Arab' and a 'Catholicos' not identified by name.

Numerous Arabic versions of the dialogue between Timothy and al-Mahdi exist; all are presumably based on the version introduced above.¹⁴ The Mozarabic version found in Kairouan is in Arabic with Latin margin-notes on five of its pages. Those responsible for the transmission of the text to Spain amended and modified the distinct Nestorian aspects of the *Apology*. The existence of the Arab versions indicates that the dialogue was read and circulated in the Middle East; its transmission to Mozarabic Spain and the revisions done within it are even more revealing. Firstly, it ties in with the evidence on the intellectual contacts of the Mozarabs with Baghdad and its many Nestorians, discussed by D. Urvoy and D. Millet-Gérard.¹⁵ It also reveals the Mozarabs' need for polemic texts of speculative nature. The dialogue of the *Apology*, distinguished for its courtesy and comparatively positive attitude toward Islam, testifies, as Urvoy points out, to the Mozarabs' cultural engagement with the Muslim world.¹⁶ Urvoy also suggests that the Nestorian 'rational' exposition of the Christian faith was in many points more palpable to Muslim ears, and therefore more effective for Christian polemic with Muslims.¹⁷ The *Apology*, then, not only survived in the Muslim world, but also travelled the route by which ideas and knowledge from the cultural realm of Eastern Islam made their entrance into the Catholic West. The political and cultural circumstances of Spain

¹²Guillaume de Rubruc, 164–332; R. A. Skelton *et al.*, *The Vinland Map and the Tartar Relation* (New Haven, 1965), 21; Giovanni di Pianocarpini, 'Ystoria Mongalorum', *Sinica Franciscana*, 29–130.

¹³G. Levi della Vida, 'Un texte mozarabe d'histoire universelle', *Note di storia letteraria arabo-ispánica* (Rome, 1971), 123–5; D. Urvoy, 'La pensée religieuse des Mozarabes à face de l'Islam', *Traditio*, 39 (1983), 419–32.

¹⁴R. Caspar, 'Les versions arabes du dialogue entre le catholicos Timothée I et le calife al-Mahdi: "Mohammed a suivi la voie des prophètes"', *Islamochristiana*, 3 (1977), 107–75.

¹⁵D. Millet-Gérard, *Chrétiens Mozarabes et culture Islamique* (Paris, 1984); Urvoy, 'La pensée religieuse,' and Urvoy, *Penseurs d'Al Andalus. La vie intellectuelle à Cordue et Seville du temps des empires berbères (fin XIe siècle-début de XIIIe siècle)* (Toulouse, 1990).

¹⁶Urvoy, 'Pensée religieuse', 421.

¹⁷Urvoy, *Penseurs d'Al Andalus*, 162.

during 700 years or so, made it an arena welcoming to Christian–Muslim polemic compositions. It is feasible, then, that the dialogue was used there for apologetic or polemical purposes, and might well have been utilised in inter-religious scholarly encounters involving Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

The Spanish cultural and religious arena also provides the background for a medieval Hebrew version of the parable. It was written by a Spanish Jew, the Kabbalist Rabbi Abraham Abulafia in c. 1285. In his *Sefer Or Ha'sechel* (Book of the Light of the Mind) he narrates an allegory about a father and a son. The father owns a beautiful pearl which he destines for his son. But the son angers his father, and he in his fury, takes the pearl and throws it into a pit, saying that if the son does not repent he does not want him to have it; yet, if the son repents, he does not want him to lose it. And, the story goes, the father's slaves would taunt the son every day, each claiming that he himself had received the pearl. The son, however, does not worry, for he is ignorant. Eventually the slaves enrage the son so much that he decides to go back. His father absolves him, takes the pearl out of the pit and gives it to him. Having seen that, the slaves prostrate themselves, ashamed of their lies, and beg forgiveness. There the story ends. Abulafia then offers the moral: the same lot has befallen us the Jews, he suggests, by those (other religions) who claim that God has replaced them for us. While not pleasing God at the present, the Jews cannot rebut the gentiles' arguments, but when they finally repent, all these claimants will be ever so abashed. Abulafia states that then it will also become apparent that 'they who broke and received likeness—likeness it was'—an intriguing statement. After all, the story refers to one pearl only, with no 'likenesses'. Moreover, there was no implication that something other than the pearl was ever given to anybody. Might those who received a 'likeness' of the pearl have their origin in the earlier allegory of the pearl? It seems an interesting possibility.

Abulafia's parable is not suggestive of religious openness. To begin with, there is an only son, the other claimants being mere slaves. The son represents the Jews who, for Abulafia, are the only conceivable heirs. Yet the explanation following the parable, inconsistently, concludes by saying that the dispute still prevails, until comes He who will draw the pearl out of the pit; he will give it to whoever He wishes, 'either to us or to them'. Whereas the parable leads to no speculation, the moral includes a somewhat different message. To accommodate this inconsistency, it may be hypothesised that Abulafia had heard a former version which might have been the allegory of the pearl, and modified it according to his belief, creating a new version. But still he retains a component of the older version and the spirit of its conclusion.

Abulafia's version is close in time, but a little later than Stephen of Bourbon's exemplum. The details of the story indicate no direct affinity between them. Abulafia might have read Stephen's exemplum or not, or perhaps they had a common source. Abulafia's version is unique because he himself was a Mediterranean wandering scholar. Born in Saragosa in 1241, he was in Acre in 1260, in 1270–4 in Spain, and in 1280 he was in Rome, intending, probably, to converse about spiritualistic Judaism with Pope Nicholas III, who rejected his appeals. He wrote *Sefer Or Ha'sechel* in Sicily probably in 1285; the book, a handbook on achieving the mystical experience, had a considerable diffusion and is extant in many copies. Abulafia himself remained to his death in 1291 a controversial figure, who stimulated both admiration and vigorous disdain among

contemporaries.¹⁸ Anywhere along his itinerary or in his short sojourns around the Mediterranean Abulafia could have encountered the allegory, not necessarily from Jewish sources.¹⁹ Yet, even as stern a believer as Abulafia, stern enough to attempt to discuss his convictions with the Pope, nevertheless inserted the parable in his book. I think that the impact of religious interaction manifests itself here again. Abulafia's allegory pronounces essentially the same idea as the allegory of the lost pearl, saying that believers may cling strongly to their creed, yet must realise that ultimately no way exists to verify it.

Abulafia's personality and activity raise interesting points of reference with his contemporary Ramon Lull, an enthusiastic wandering propagator of Christianity, himself, too, a controversial figure among his contemporary coreligionists. His *Libre del Gentil e los tres Savis*, written in 1270–1, provides reinforcement, as does Abulafia's parable, to my notion that the ideas encapsulated in the Three Rings parable were current in the Mediterranean basin in the thirteenth century. Lull, a native of Majorca where communities of the three religions cohabitated, wrote *Libre del Gentil* a few years after his 'conversio'. It is his earliest book, uncharacteristic of the dogmatism of his later works. In this book we see a juxtaposition of the three faiths, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, represented in the three sages whose meeting in a forest paves the way for an—inconclusive—dialogue. After convincing the gentile to believe in the existence of God, the three offer him three ways to worship God; the gentile never chooses, the sages return to their communities, the religious questioning for truth remains unsolved. It has been suggested that Lull proposes here an alternative kind of religious discourse, detached from the Catholic Church's traditional one.²⁰

Some scholars have argued that the parable of the three rings originated in Spain, whether because the earliest version they knew was linked, in one way or another, with Spain, or because it was in Spain where inter-religious relations were realised and where there was a flow of Eastern ideas relatively early compared to Northern Europe. Among them was Ernest Renan, who wrote: *Le mélange des religions dans l'Andalousie devait inspirer des pensées analogues. De la sortit ... selon toute vraisemblance le cont charmant des trois anneaux.*²¹ Renan, writing in the late 1800s, based this assumption on

¹⁸On Abulafia, see M. Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (New York, 1988); M. Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* (New York, 1989); M. Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany, N.Y., 1988), esp. ch. 3, 45–61.

¹⁹The first Italian version of the Rings parable appeared around 1300 in the *Novellino: cento novelle antiche*, as a short novella, a genre that itself developed from the exemplum. The allegory, of course, may have been known in folklore before appearing in writing.

²⁰R. Lulle, *Le Livre du gentile et des trois sages*, trans. D. de Courcelles (n.p., 1992), 16. Interestingly, Abulafia's main biographical points are intertwined here into Lull's biographic table, 21–4.

²¹E. Renan, *Averroës et l'Averroïsme* (Paris, 1925), 294. Renan was probably referring to the later Hebrew version of the parable which is found in Solomon ibn Verga's *Sefer Shebet Yehudah* (The Tribe of Judas), published in 1485. Ibn Verga was a Spanish Jew, writing in the Ottoman Empire. It is supposed, though, that many stories in his book were part of an older popular tradition from pre-expulsion Spain. See Y. Baer's introduction to *Sefer Shebet Yehudah* (Jerusalem, 1957), 12–5. See also F. Niewoehner, 'Die Ringparabel des Spaniers Salomon Ibn Verga', in: *Proceedings of the 17th International Congress of Historical Sciences* (Madrid, 1992), 648–50, on the interesting idea that Verga used the parable as a response to Maimonides, see also Niewoehner, 'Maimonides und die Tradition der Ringparabel', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 1 April 1985.

his acquaintance with a much later version of the parable, published in 1485 by a Spanish Jew, Solomon Ibn Verga. Verga's version appeared in his *Sefer Shevet Yehuda* that was printed in the Ottoman Empire.²² It appears to me that Renan's assumption duly emphasised the position of Spain in the context of the parable, if not as the parable's native land, then as a doorway to Europe for eastern ideas.

IV

We will not examine here all the allegory's European versions. The history of the parable in Catholic Europe, and its development into a universal theme is treated in the literary history of medieval and early and modern Europe. A catalogue of the extant Catholic versions is provided in the reference list.

In the later history of the parable, the religious relativist message was sometimes completely muted, as in some versions of the *Gesta Romanorum*. Boccaccio himself, obviously, was keenly aware of the 'explosive' message of the allegory (to use Carlo Ginzburg's adjective).

This discussion will conclude with the early modern version of the allegory, closest in time to Lessing. This interesting manifestation of familiarity with the parable comes from Domenico Scandella, or Menocchio, the sixteenth-century Italian miller whose views of the world and Christianity were documented by the Italian Inquisition.²³ Menocchio was consequently found guilty of heresy, and was put to death by the Holy Office. In the inquiry of 12 July 1599, Menocchio said: '... since I was born a Christian I want to remain a Christian, and if I had been born a Turk I would want to live like a Turk.' In order to explain and reinstate this, Menocchio told the inquisitor a story that he had read 'in the book of the *Cento novelle* by Boccaccio:

There was once a great lord who declared his heir would be the person found to have a certain precious ring of his; and drawing near to his death, he had two other rings similar to the first one made, since he had three sons, and gave a ring to each son; each one of them thought himself to be the heir and to have the true ring, but because of their similarity it could not be known with certainty. Likewise God, the Father, has various children whom he loves, such as Christians, Turks, and Jews, and to each of them he has given the will to live by his own law, and we do not know which is the right one.

The inquisitor then asked Menocchio if he believed that the right law is not known—to which Menocchio replied that he so believed, and added that whereas everyone considers his faith to be right, we still do not know which is the Right One. It

²²Renan, writing in 1852, could have known only Verga's version that was discussed as a source for Boccaccio's novella in 1857. Moritz Steinsneider published Abulafia's book for the first time only in 1877. See M. Nicholas, 'Le conte des trois anneaux', *La Correspondance Littéraire*, 1 (1857), 205–6. In 1885, Gaston Paris, in the conference of the Society of Jewish Studies, elaborated the theory that Abulafia's parable was the original version of the famous parable.

²³On Menocchio and his trials, see C. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms* (Baltimore, 1982).

is interesting to note that Menocchio's cited source, the *Decameron*, was then a censored book, for which 'corrected' editions appeared in 1573 and 1582. In these editions no hint remained of the parable's relativism, and it was renamed *The youthful Polifilo with a story of three rings escapes a great danger set for him by three women*.²⁴ (Here again, three women, as in the oldest Persian version!) Also note that Menocchio did not follow Boccaccio minutely. In the allegory there are three sons, but in Menocchio's version, there are potentially more: God has 'various children', 'such as', but not only, the three major religions. This can be understood by the fact that Menocchio was deeply impressed by another book he had read, and about which he also told the inquisitors—the famous fourteenth century book of travels ascribed to Mandeville, that was reprinted several times during the sixteenth century. This book expanded immeasurably the geographic and human horizon of Menocchio's world, and he was particularly swayed by the information on the diversity of Eastern religions, and by the fact that believers of various creeds cohabitated in tolerance. Menocchio's remarks on this matter ('out of many different kinds of nations, some believe in one way some in another'),²⁵ bring to mind once again the pertinence of a cognisant awareness of the existence of various creeds, to religious speculation.

Menocchio's trial is a fascinating instance in the allegory's history. He was denounced as a heretic while using the very same parable that was exploited earlier in the middle ages for the indoctrination of Christian folk; the allegory utilised by preachers to prove that there is only one correct faith is now re-introduced to them by the common man himself—only to argue the opposite. The Catholic church in Menocchio's time was seeking to deepen obedience, to coerce conformity as a weapon of self-defence. With religious conformity in Europe nonetheless waning, it seems meaningful that Menocchio did not blaspheme his religion. He did not deny its truth, nor did he eulogise another religion; he merely stated he was not sure. The inquisitors, though, considered it a deliberate provocation, for it hinted that there might be a choice better than Christianity. This is echoed in the challenge posed by Saladin to Nathan the Wise: 'Of these three religions only one can be the true one. A man like you does not remain where chance of birth has cast him: if he so remains, it is out of insight, reasons, better choice'.²⁶ The parable of the three rings implies, in fact, that there is no choice to be made. If seeking the truth, one is likely to remain adherent to one's own inherited creed, because the best way cannot be known.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the religious relativism in the allegory of the three religions may have originated in a Muslim milieu. It has come to be well known in the Christian West through the parable of the three rings, which itself, it is argued, stemmed from an oriental story. The transmission from Persia and Baghdad to Spain and to Western

²⁴Ginzburg, 152.

²⁵Ginzburg, 47.

²⁶Ginzburg, 73.

Europe was in the Middle Ages by no means an uncommon track for story material; finding a Hebrew version within this course does not render it less typical. The case presented here testifies to a transmission of literary subject-matter and form as well as the allegorical idea.

It seems that the frame story may allude to a common incidence in Islamic countries, Muslim rulers in need of ready cash often had to resort to the services of their *Dhimni* bankers.²⁷ However, the concrete—and intriguing—circumstances of Saladin's incorporation into the narrative, remain to be investigated.

The parable of the three rings, in fact, is not the only means by which relativist ideas and religious speculation were enunciated during the period discussed here. The legend of the Three Impostors was evidently another eastern nucleus absorbed into the Catholic West; it contains a far more overt manifestation of disbelief in any religious truth.²⁸ Also, expressions of scepticism—or in the Christian orthodox terminology—heresy, are extant throughout the period, in Christian and non-Christian surroundings. Ideas born out of the Christian encounter with other religions: of political dissent, anticlericalism, and of the decrease in the once all-powerful belief in the miraculous—provided the fertile ground from which religious scepticism burgeoned. Criticism of the crusades, which epitomised many of these feelings, contained quite a few phrases that correspond to the theme of scepticism. Research has indicated an increase, especially in the twelfth century, in acceptance of social diversity and religious pluralism within Christianity, a development that paved the way for acceptance of other religions as valuable.²⁹ These processes, and the comely mantle of the three rings fable, probably account for the allegory's longevity.

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²⁷Lewis, 90.

²⁸The history of the story of the Three Impostors is beyond the scope of this paper. However, its popularity in the eighteenth century coincides with that of Lessing's *Nathan der Weise*. It may be true, as Niewoehner suggested, that Lessing used the Three Rings parable as a response to the Three Impostors.

²⁹G. Constable, 'The Diversity of Religious Life and Acceptance of Social Pluralism in the Twelfth Century', in: *History, Society and the Churches*, eds D. Beales and G. Best (Cambridge, 1985), 29–47.

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