

6. COMPETITION AND RELIGION: ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS¹ AND ISLAM²

In the introduction to her book *The Competition Paradigm*, Pauline Vaillancourt Rosenau (2003) provides a veritable litany of the perceived benefits and advantages of competition:

Competition has been praised for increasing productivity, rewarding innovation, encouraging each individual to perform at his or her utmost, wringing out excess market capacity, lowering cost, increasing organizational efficiency, raising standards, distributing what society produces more adequately, protecting the public from government bureaucracy, promoting learning, and stimulating advancement in science and education. (p. 2)

The author herself is critical of these supposed benefits of competition, suggesting that competition also has the potential liability of incurring high costs. For our area of concern, namely the field of religion, it is not immediately clear whether competition would accrue any of the benefits listed in this litany.

Additionally, the question of competition in religion appears on the surface level to be a moot question, as competition seems to be in diametrical opposition to central tenets of religion: while traditional understandings of competition see self-interest as a primary drive for competition (Waterman, 2002), one of the most central aspects of the ethical dimension of Abrahamic religions, that is, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is altruism, i.e. the opposite of self-interest. These religions value altruism and selflessness, as they discourage their adherents from selfish desires (Tyndale, 2000). Thus, according to the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus is reported to have encouraged Christians to turn the other cheek when stricken on one cheek (The New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV, Mt 5:39); similarly, the Qur'an praises the Muslim original inhabitants of Medina who freely shared with Muslim immigrants and "g[a]ve them preference" over themselves (59:9). Additionally, the Abrahamic religions agree on the "Golden Rule," which states that one should not do unto others what one does not want done unto oneself (Küng, 1991).

Yet, at the same time, Abrahamic religions seem to encourage competition. Hebrew Scripture extols various biblical figures who successfully compete: for example, it narrates Jacob's wrestling match with an angel (Gen. 32: 22ff), David successfully competes against Goliath, (1. Sam 17.1ff) and Elijah competes against the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs. 18:17ff). Similarly, in the New Testament, Jesus

appears to encourage competition in the parable of the talents (Mt. 25: 14–30; Lk. 19: 12–27); likewise, Paul uses the image of a race to encourage competitive behavior (1. Cor 9:24–27). The Qur’an likewise exhorts its listeners to compete (f.i. 2:148, 5:48). Competition, in each case, is regarded as an effort that is divinely willed.

Both the messages of competition and altruism of the Abrahamic religions have found their various expressions at different points in history: Each of these religions has a long track record of altruistic and charitable individuals and groups whose efforts have alleviated suffering and have benefited the lives of many. At the same time, however, individuals and institutions of these same religions have often engaged in fierce, violent, and dehumanizing enterprises of competition, under the banner of a divinely mandated mission of conversion and conquest, be it in the textual (if not necessarily historical) conquest of the “promised land” of biblical scripture, be it in the military campaigns of the crusades and the conversions of the *conquistadores*, or be it in the military spread and conquest of the early Islamic³ empire. Similarly, the sometimes aggressive spirit by which universalizing religions such as Christianity and Islam pursue the spread of their message and the quest for new adherents very much exhibit a strong impulse of competition for converts. The tensions between a pronounced spirit of altruism and an equally pronounced spirit of competition are stark.

Yet, while these historical instances appear to embody a spirit of competition, can they be properly called religious competitions, instead of competition of economy, of military might, or of politics, etc.? Is there a separate category of religious competition? And, if there is a specific concept of religious competition, how does that concept relate to teachings of altruism and selflessness? In other words, we have two interrelated questions: One concerns the *object* of competition, that is, the resources over which competition is waged, the other concerns the *nature* of competition, that is: is there anything specifically religious in the activity of competition that can be properly understood as religious, or, is there a religious drive and impetus at work in religious competition?

THE COMPETITION PARADIGM IN RELIGION: WHAT IS RELIGIOUS COMPETITION?

Researchers on the phenomenon of competition have frequently observed that whereas usage of the term competition is widespread across a great number of disciplines, its meaning, while usually taken for granted, often depends on context, and few scholars attempt to define what they mean by the term (Rosenau, 2003, p. 8; Fülöp, 2004, p. 124). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2008) defines competition in its most basic meaning as “the activity or condition of striving to gain or win something by defeating or establishing superiority over others.” While this definition does not address the question of motivations, functions and/or benefits of competition, it shall serve as a first, preliminary heuristic device to raise questions regarding competition in the context of religion.