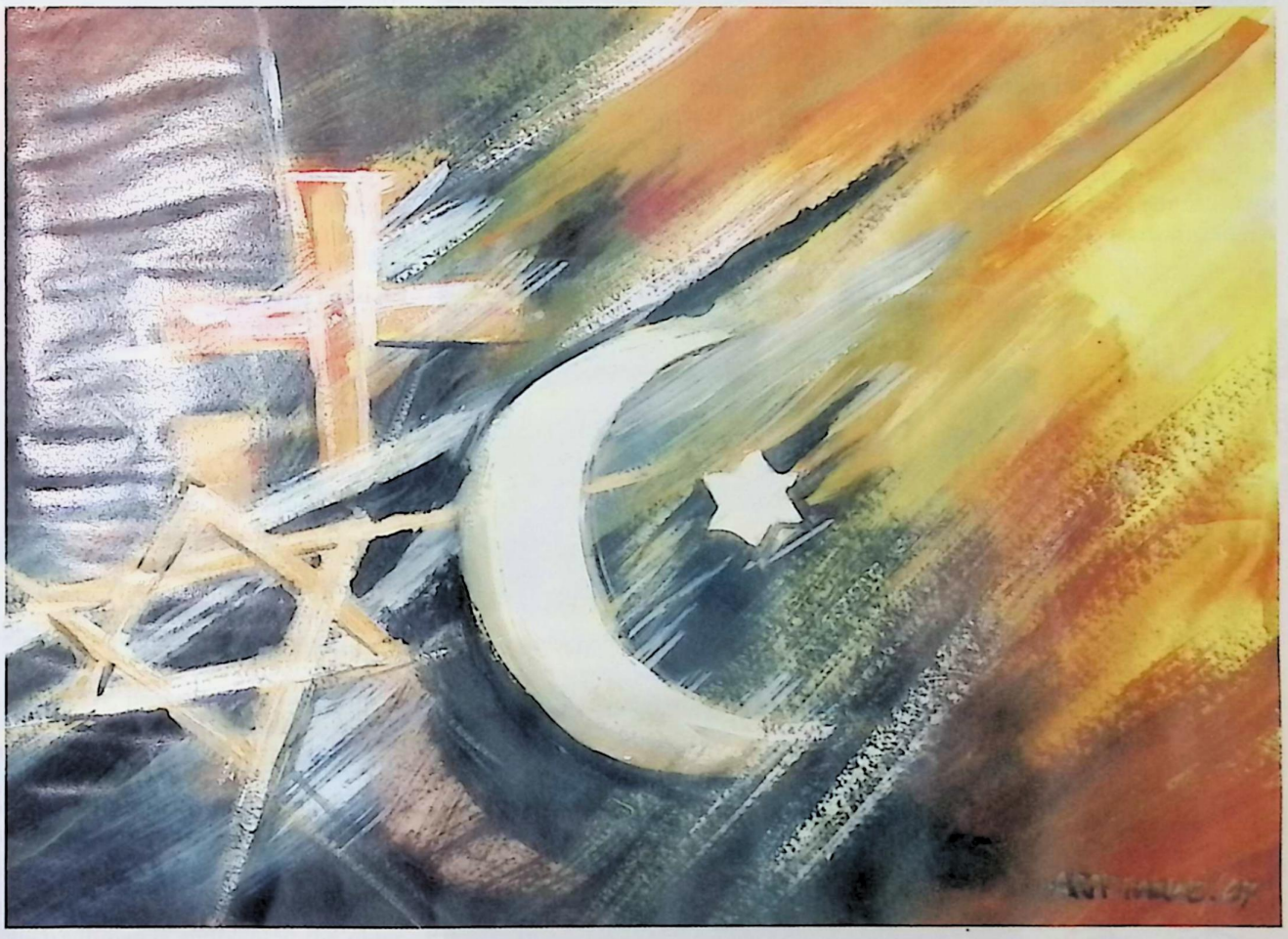
The evolution of monotheism

Zeeshan Hasan argues that the roots of the idea that conquered the world might be quite different from the conventional wisdom of its genesis



THE Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition seems to have the monotheistic faith as a common thread. However, modern literary criticism of the Hebrew Bible and archaeological research in ancient Israelite religion question the monotheism of early figures such as Abraham, and even Moses. Exploring the development of monotheism in the Abrahamic traditions allows us to put monotheism in a larger historical framework, which can be extended to include other religions such as Hinduism.

To begin with, we need to take a closer look at the traditional Biblical (as well as Islamic) picture of Abraham and other Israelite figures as monotheist worshippers of the Israelite deity. Essentially, this is the view that conservative Jews, Christians and Muslims have held to, based upon their reading of either the Biblical book of Genesis or the Qur'an. It posits the original monotheism of humanity all the way down from Adam, shared by Noah, and continued in Abraham and his Israelite descendants.

In a nutshell, Genesis presents a history of the Israelites, beginning with their ancestor Abraham (whose Hebrew name, ab-raham literally means "the father of the womb," which is an idiomatic way of saying "the ancestor of the many descendants" or "the ancestor of the tribe"). Abraham is portrayed as being an immigrant to the land of Canaan from the Babylonian city of Ur (in current-day Iraq), who has settled in Israel.

Abraham is followed by his sons Ishmael and Isaac, as well as his grandson Jacob to whom is given the divinely-appointed name of "Israel." Jacob's given name subsequently becomes the name of the tribe of his descendants. All the above figures are traditionally viewed as monotheist immigrants, as compared to the indigenous Canaanite polytheists who inhabit the land.

Finally, Abraham's great-grandson Joseph is sold by his brothers into