

A Progressive Christian Understanding of Islam

By Ward McAfee

“Man’s eternal questions about the meaning of life, suffering, and death, about the highest values and ultimate norms for the individual and society, about where humanity and the cosmos have come from and where they are going, are not simply still with us, but have grown far more urgent in the face of political catastrophes and disenchantment with blind faith in progress. ...If one wishes to prevent some false god (be it fuehrer, political party, nation, or even science) from being made into humanity’s ground for meaning, supreme value, and ultimate norm, then faith in the one true God must replace faith in the false gods of modernity. And so, these days especially, one must confirm together with the Qur’an and the Bible: “There is no god but God.” “You shall have no other gods before me.” Which means that faith, whether Qur’anic or biblical, in the one true God is capable of demystifying the powers of this world and, insofar as they are idols, of dethroning them.”

--Hans Kung, et al., Christianity and World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 55-56.

Introduction

Christianity and Islam have much in common and yet are worlds apart. Both proclaim one God. Both religions struggle with both script and tradition in the light of modern insights. Both have emphasized the importance of communal values over selfish individualism. Both have experienced the problems of “state” effectively controlling “church” or “mosque” when attempts are made for religion to inform the state.

Both teach about a common humanity and respect for it. Both still struggle in different ways to make these teachings transform culture. Both incorporate parts of the world that abound in wealth and other parts that know only grinding poverty. Both have emphasized the necessity to give to those who are most needy. Both teach about peace, and throughout history both have subjugated peoples they regarded as disturbing their own concepts of peace. Both emphasize prayer and daily meditative practices. Both have encouraged religious pilgrimages as an essential part of human life. Both are confessing faiths in eagerly proclaiming their perceptions of truth most publicly.

Within Islam, many of these similarities are codified in what is known as the Five Pillars of Islam: 1) faith or belief in the oneness of God, 2) the establishment of a regimen of daily prayers, 3) almsgiving to the needy, 4) an attempt to experience purification through fasting, and 5) religious pilgrimage for those who are able. Christianity has no similar personal five-point catalog of essential practices but the same teachings are nonetheless present. In the first Muslim pillar, Muhammad is regarded as having the final say concerning the oneness of God whereas in Christianity the witness of the Christ is regarded as including all that is necessary for human salvation.

Other differences abound. Most strikingly, in the current age many parts of Islamic civilization resist modernity despite its attractions, whereas much of Christendom has readily sought out its benefits despite its detriments. There was a time when both religions may have been said to represent a medieval mindset. For Christianity that day is no more. This difference concerns primarily culture but also religion, because culture has always informed religion and vice versa.

Throughout their long histories, both Christianity and Islam have often unintentionally affected the development of each other, a reality that makes Islam a participant in authentic Christian teaching and vice versa. In our shrunken world, traditions no longer have the luxury to refuse invitations to dialog. Each tradition must now accept the challenge posed by the other's existence, to work toward meaningful dialog and the development of a shared ethic of social justice that is intentionally co-determined. With much wisdom, Hans Kung has written: "Ecumenism should not be limited to the community of the Christian churches; it must include the community of the great religions, if ecumenism—in accordance with the original meaning of *oikumene*—is to refer to the whole 'inhabited world.'" Both Christianity and Islam must "accept a concrete responsibility for world peace."

For this to occur, it is necessary to see beyond the barriers imposed by imagined religious and cultural "iron curtains." We must develop the wisdom to see both what Christianity and Islam share in common and areas where we must agree to disagree. Rather than being separated by barriers made of impenetrable material, the cultural walls separating religious traditions are more like porous layers of skin that take in and give out liquids. This is a good metaphor with which to start. And yet, other

* Hans Kung, et al., Christianity and World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), xiii, xv.

metaphors are currently more successful in negatively shaping the thinking of both individuals and nations, thereby discouraging a Christian-Muslim dialog. In order to proceed, we must first examine these.

I. A Clash of Civilizations?

In 1989, a State Department functionary by the name of Francis Fukuyama boldly proclaimed that history was over. His logic was peculiarly Hegelian. In his opinion, as the ideological struggle between democratic capitalism and totalitarian communism had apparently ended, there could be no new conflicts great enough to drive Hegel's historical dialectic of "thesis, antithesis, synthesis." Fukuyama's quirky notion, founded on ethnocentric western philosophical assumptions, produced a temporary intellectual fad. Inherent in it was a celebration of the development of a "true global culture ...centering around technologically driven economic growth and the capitalist social relations necessary to produce and sustain it." Western economic values stemming from the Enlightenment of the 18th century had triumphed and apparently had no more rivals.

In 1993, an influential essay by Samuel P. Huntington, Harvard Professor and Chairman of the Harvard Academy of International and Area Studies, disagreed that this vision had materialized in the way claimed by Fukuyama. In his mind, history had not ended amidst a supposed new global unity of mind and common economic purpose. Appearing in the summer issue of Foreign Affairs, Huntington's essay entitled "The Clash of Civilizations," highlighted enduring differences among key civilizations as guaranteeing competing worldviews well into the foreseeable future. Of the several candidates for cultural conflicts that could shape the 21st century, Huntington predicted that differences between Western values and traditional Islam would prove to be uppermost.

Huntington's combative tone was apparent in comments such as this: "Between Muslims, on the one hand, and Orthodox Serbs in the Balkans, Jews in Israel, Hindus in India, Buddhists in Burma and Catholics in the Philippines,... Islam has bloody borders."* He portrayed Islamic civilization as unreasonably aggressive and hostile toward all of its neighbors and warned that Islam threatened the peace of the world. Even before the events

* Samuel P. Huntington, et al., The Clash of Civilizations? The Debate (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1996), 12.

of September 11, 2001, a majority of Americans quietly agreed with this outlook. Since “9-11,” this consensus has become noisy and chauvinistic, as American policy makers have favored pre-emptive action in “bringing on” this clash of civilizations.

The evening news is filled with stories of Muslim suicide bombings, Muslim oppression of women, Muslim hatred of Jews, Muslim beheading of foreign captives, and “Islam’s” general support of a terrorist infrastructure that is global in scope. The cumulative effect of these impressions is that Islam per se is indeed a dangerous religion. Other stories of Christian terrorists in the United States blowing up abortion clinics, or Serbian Christians waging genocide against Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo, or Christian rebels in Uganda routinely kidnapping children for use as sex slaves or as mindless and obedient Christian child soldiers are perceived differently. Rather than involving Christianity per se, such stories are seen as involving extremists who twist Christianity and warp its true meaning to commit unspeakable acts. Likewise, those Christians who endorsed and supported Hitler’s hatred of Jews are popularly seen as not true Christians but rather as Germans, Austrians, Ukrainians, or Estonians who strayed from Christian teachings, despite the fact that expressions of contempt and hatred of Jews appear in the Gospels and are prominent in later Christian teaching. When the acts of Christian extremists are involved, the standard American mentality quickly corrects any perception that these acts stem from Christian teachings themselves.

“Christian Identity” is the name of a religious movement uniting many of the white supremacist groups in the United States, but most Americans consider this movement’s followers as fundamentally anti-Christian in orientation. However, when Saudi Arabian, Pakistani, Iranian, Indonesian, or Filipino Muslims commit atrocities, their Islamic associations regularly are seen as determinative of these actions. Denunciations of terrorism by Islamic leaders do not satisfy Islam’s critics, who seek to expose any telltale verse in the Qur’an that may have been used to inspire such hatred. Such critics are apparently unaware that the Christian Bible is also vulnerable to hostile gleanings of this sort. Muslims are expected to apologize publicly for atrocities carried out by Muslims, whereas the great majority of Christians would find it ridiculous to apologize for the actions of “Christian Identity.”

Neither Western civilization nor Islamic civilization is monolithic as Huntington’s ideological position suggests. The true conflicts of our age are not between civilizations but rather within civilizations. In the last century,

Hitler and Stalin's horrific challenges to Western civilization arose from within Western civilization itself rather than from some outside source. Likewise, a violent, extremist interpretation of Islam today threatens Islamic civilization from within. The true goal of Al Qaida's leaders is not to defeat Western civilization but rather to undermine their own societies, impose their radical views by force, and ultimately change their civilization.*

Reza Aslan, author of No God But God (2005), argues that the events of "9-11," while immediately directed against the West, were in fact implemented for their potential effect in creating a new paradigm capable of transforming Islam. This horrific display was intended to weaken moderating influences within Islam itself. In producing a predictable reaction from the United States, Osama bin Laden became the effective face of Islam in the West, making instantly irrelevant the work of Islamic reformers over the past century. Against all odds, Aslan and other Muslim progressives intend to revive their movement to accommodate Islam to beneficial realities of modern life, a task made doubly difficult in the face of negative headlines screaming the latest "Islamic" atrocity.*

To persuade Americans and Europeans that Al Qaida holds an unwarranted reading of Islam is not an easy task. Historically, the Christian West has demonized Islam with only minor exceptions. This bad habit continues in our current culture. This tendency is based not only on highly selective evidence but also encourages bad policies that serve to transform Huntington's warning of a clash of civilization into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Huntington is correct that religious differences are bound to produce disagreements, but there is no imperative that continuous warfare should come to define our relationship. Wise policy in Washington, D.C., can only result from a better understanding of Islam among our citizenry. For this to occur, we need a theology capable of both encouraging peaceful dialog and resisting our own assumptions that we should dominate.

We are now engaged in a new global conflict. To some degree, its parameters can be defined as Huntington has suggested. In the process of our struggle, both civilizations involved may well change to incorporate new perceptions and better values. While demanding that Muslims apologize for "9-11," Christians hopefully may become sensitized that they too need to apologize to Muslims for the horrific terrorism against Jews that thrust a new Jewish nation uninvited into their midst. Christians also need to reflect

* Huntington, et al., Clash of Civilizations? Debate, 50-52.

* Los Angeles Times, July 2, 2005, E13.

upon how their civilization has encouraged global disorder and cultural upheaval. Muslim criticism of our civilization does not focus on Christianity directly but rather on dysfunctional manifestations of an economic culture that has effectively detached itself from Christianity's moderating influences. A healthy dialog with Islam will clearly reveal that our own religion has proven too weak to restrain evil tendencies that are now threatening a balanced ecology needed to sustain human life. Hopefully, our engagement with moderate voices within Islamic civilization will lead to new peaceful opportunities as we come to acknowledge the log in our own eye. Unfortunately, our civilization is now tightly focused on the splinter in the eye of Islam.

II. Early Islamic History

Common Roots of Judaism, Christianity and Islam

Judaism, Christianity and Islam arose during a millennium of great religious strife, spanning from the 6th century B.C.E. (when the ancient kingdom of Israel was destroyed), up to the 6th century C.E. (when Muhammad was born). During that time, Macedonia's Alexander the Great conquered the known world and bridged the intellectual and religious worlds of Greece, Egypt, Persia and India. Next came Roman armies and the expansion of a new empire. The disruption brought about by force of arms changed religions and theological imaginations.

Judaism was born out of the so-called Babylonian Exile, after the disappearance of the states of Israel and Judah. Christianity arose in the century of anti-imperialist conflict against Rome in Palestine in the First Century C.E. And Islam developed at a time of shifting caravan routes, emerging opportunities to acquire fortunes quickly, and the cultural disruption that this change wrought on the Arabian Peninsula during the Seventh Century C.E. Each of these three faith traditions was birthed in a time of great social upheaval.

Babylonian armies destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. The victors deported the Hebrew elite, perhaps as many as ten thousand people, to Babylon. The peasantry remained behind in a demoralized condition. It was among the exiled Hebrew priests and nobles that composing the scriptures that became both the Torah and the stories of the Prophets became a serious enterprise. When the Persian defeat of Babylon resulted in the release of the

first wave of Hebrew returnees to Jerusalem, Judaism as a religion of the book was born. As a result, Jewish expectations of redemption by a new Davidic ruler arose. This “Messiah” would presumably defeat the demonic powers of the empires, an end-times vision that owed some elements to the Zoroastrian beliefs of their Persian liberators.

When Pompey’s invasion of Palestine in 63 B.C.E. inaugurated the period of Roman domination, new expressions of unrest reactivated Jewish theological imaginations. Some Jewish thinkers, such as the Qumran community, read the Scriptures as promises of a cataclysmic divine intervention to restore true religion in Jerusalem. Some, such as the Pharisaic teachers, believed that God would bless the people if they faithfully obeyed the laws of Moses. Other groups, collectively known as Zealots, took to the hills with armed resistance. It was in this context that Jesus of Nazareth was born. His message became that God’s reign should be seen as an immediate reality to be lived out fulfilling the deepest intentions of the laws attributed to Moses. The fact that he also organized a movement of resisting cultural norms encouraged both the Jewish elite in Jerusalem and the Roman authorities in Caesarea to regard him as a dangerous rebel, a perception that eventually resulted in his arrest and execution.

Meanwhile, turmoil over Roman domination boiled over. A generation after the Crucifixion, Jewish rebels temporarily took possession of Jerusalem. The Romans destroyed the Temple when they regained control in 70 C.E. Two generations later, Jewish rebels again arose in a vain effort to topple Roman authority. As a response intended to be final, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem itself in 135 C.E., expelling all Jews from the city. In the chaos that followed, both Jews and Christians were dispersed, resulting in the formation of both Torah-based Rabbinic Judaism and “gentile” Christianity, whose quintessential missionary was Paul and whose historian was Luke.

Born in 570 C.E., the Prophet Muhammad entered a world wherein Christianity and Judaism had created a religious hothouse with a rich soil capable of breeding strong hybrids. Islam emerged from this fertile environment. Other religions were involved as well. Zoroastrianism, originally of Persia, influenced Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as did other faiths in the region. And ancient Greek philosophy became part of the mix. This development came after centuries of upheaval. And yet, traditional Christian believers see God as having been at work in all of the turmoil. And Muslims regard that which transpired as part of providential destiny.

In the pages that follow, it will be seen that Muhammad's social context matched the upheaval and collective violence that had earlier given rise to both Judaism and Christianity. The historical origins of these three related faith traditions reveal that resistance to domination systems in each instance provided the catalyst needed for a hearing of God's word. And yet, these various pursuers of divine truth each heard a somewhat different message. The similarity of their intent did not necessarily produce a uniform result. In the end, each would vie with the others in an on-going environment of cultural strife and religious enmity. Accordingly, Jews came to regard Christianity as a Jewish heresy, and Islam came to be regarded as both a Jewish and a Christian heresy.

Muhammad

Muhammad grew to manhood in Mecca. At that time, the traditional culture of the Arabian Peninsula was tribal, while the "get rich quick" ethos of a burgeoning caravan trade threatened traditional communitarian values in Mecca. Widows and orphans who should have been taken in and nurtured in each tribal community were often abandoned and left to fend for themselves. Muhammad himself had been orphaned at an early age but a wealthy and powerful uncle adopted him and raised him to manhood. Others were not so lucky. Muhammad's personal brush with the worst kind of destitution made him keenly sensitive to the social inequities in Meccan society.

As a youth, Muhammad traveled to Syria while earning his way on a caravan. Both on the Arabian Peninsula and in Syria, he came into contact with Jews and Christians whose stories and teachings were logged in his memory. Years later, typical of natural mystics, he sought solitude in the many caves in the hills around Mecca. One day, in 610, he felt a strange presence and heard an audible command, "Recite!" Two more times, he heard the command, and then he answered, "What shall I recite?" And this is how it began. The answer promised to reveal to him that which humanity desperately needed. On his way back from this experience, Muhammad saw a figure astride the horizon and feared that he had gone mad. Then his wife Khadija took him to her Christian cousin, Waraqa ibn Nawfal, who declared that Muhammad's encounter was with the angel from God that Christian and Jewish scriptures recorded had once encountered Moses. Islamic tradition considers this angel to be Gabriel, the angel of revelation. Muhammad's mystical experience was repeated many times, and many times Muhammad

would fall into a trance from which he eventually emerged with power and began reciting. This was the birth of the Qur'an, which translated literally from Arabic means "Recitation." Khadija became the first convert to Islam. Muhammad also shared his revelations with friends and began making many converts to a new religion. By 615, the established order in Mecca began to worry.

Muhammad's recitations boldly stated that there is only one God. Meccan society at that time housed many stone idols in a building known as the Ka'ba. Each idol was a god of a particular tribe, and each tribe came to Mecca on an annual pilgrimage to pay homage to its particular god. The powerful men of Mecca who made money off of these tribal pilgrimages were threatened by Muhammad's monotheism.

The completed Qur'an was the result of roughly two decades of recitations. Following each recitation, Muhammad's followers memorized the new verses and added them to the growing body of the text. Muhammad was their prophet, equivalent to the Jewish and Christian prophets who had come before. These prior prophets were all mentioned in the Qur'an, from Adam to Abraham to Moses to David and to Jesus. The Qur'an revealed that each of these prophets had received the same message that was given to Muhammad—the unity and power of God, and the oneness of humanity--but that their followers had garbled it to varying degrees. Christ's followers, Muslims believe, garbled this message by worshiping Christ himself as divine, thus necessitating God's communication with another prophet via the revelations of the Qur'an. Muhammad received the message and recorded it unblemished for all time, making him the ultimate "Messenger" of God and the "Seal of the Prophets." After Muhammad, Muslims believe, there is no further need for prophecy as he recorded the holy message undefiled. Jews and Christians are regarded by Muslims as Peoples of the Book—people whose traditions were originally on the right track but got waylaid because of corrupted transmissions and translations. Therefore, Muslims believe, the Qur'an is unlike either the Hebrew or Christian Bibles in that it is completely accurate and final.

This view of the inerrancy of the Qur'an has had both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, it encouraged a certainty that helped Muhammad gain converts in a culture that respected nothing but money and material power. He eventually conquered those worldly powers to submit to his message of social justice, human kindness and the community of all Muslims. The Muslim community in the broadest sense is

known as the Ummah. It is a foundational community, knowing no single bloodline, greater than tribe and nationality and potentially capable of uniting all of humankind under God. Literally, the Arabic word “Islam” means both “peace” and “submission,” and the word “Muslim” means “one who is at peace” or “one who submits” to God. In the act of praying, a Muslim’s forehead touches the ground, outwardly symbolizing an inward submission to something higher than self.

In 622 C.E., Muhammad became a civic leader. With his nascent religious community threatened with destruction at the hands of Mecca’s hierarchy, he fled under cloak of night and became the political and spiritual leader of Medina, a city several hundred miles to the north. He had been invited to this task as Medina’s quarreling tribes discovered in Muhammad’s religious teaching a workable common purpose.

As king of Medina, Muhammad ceased to be solely a spiritual leader. In this new role, he became not only high priest, but also chief diplomat and warlord. From Medina, Muhammad and his followers raided Meccan caravans acquiring great booty, in the process attracting independent tribes to join a movement that steadily grew stronger. Muhammad blended the worlds of God and “Caesar” for positive purposes. Wealth taken from the raids went to support the struggling Ummah, especially meeting the needs of widows and orphans. Hard decisions defined his bold attempt to build a new Islamic theocracy. The designs of his relentless Meccan enemies threatened any weak links in Muhammad’s chain of alliances. Facing a rebellion from two Jewish tribes within Medina, he had one expelled from Medina and executed all the adult males of the other, essentially exterminating the tribe. Eventually, Mecca itself was conquered, and Muhammad cleansed the Ka’ba of its idols. Within two centuries, Islam went on to absorb much of the known world, acquiring an empire spanning from Spain to the Indian subcontinent and western China.

Whether one emphasizes religious or secular standards—Muhammad’s life is one of the most striking success stories of all time. By worldly standards, Jesus of Nazareth was a failure. Roman authorities regarded Jesus as a threat and eliminated him after a brief ministry. Using the standards of the world, academic historians agree that Jesus’ resumé cannot match Muhammad’s. In several polls taken in recent decades they have judged Muhammad to be the greatest change agent the world has ever seen.

The Islamic Schism

A greater unity exists within Islam than is the case in Christianity, which is divided between East and West, and in the West, between Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. Protestantism, subsequently has splintered into numerous denominations and sects. Islam's schism, which is less complex but no less important, refers to the split between Sunnis and Shi'ites.* This split is obvious in current news stories coming out of occupied Iraq. It was also apparent in the late 1970s, when Sunnis castigated the Shi'ite theocracy of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini in overriding Islamic tradition concerning proper treatment of diplomats. Distrust between the two groups can run high, as evidenced in Saudi Arabia's Shi'ite minority practicing dissimulation (pretending to be Sunnis) so as not to be persecuted by the regime.

The cause of the schism began immediately upon Muhammad's death in 632, with the founding of the first caliphate, or continuation of the religious government established by Muhammad. His closest companions determined that Abu Bakr should become the first Caliph (literally the "successor" to the Prophet). This decision disappointed Ali, the male who was closest to Muhammad in bloodline. Ali claimed that Muhammad had designated him as his future successor while returning from the Prophet's last pilgrimage to Mecca. Muhammad had no surviving sons, but Ali was both his cousin and his son-in-law and had been an early convert and a leader in battles. In the Arabian Peninsula, blood and tribal ties had always been highly important. However, central to Muhammad's message had been the far different conclusion that all Muslims are equal so far as blood and tribe are concerned. Ali was only a young man at the time of Muhammad's death, so he bided his time, waiting for the proper moment to be elected to the office of Caliph.

The second Caliph was Umar, who served from 634 to 644. The Muslim community's selection of Uthman upon the death of Umar particularly galled Ali, for Uthman showered favors upon his clan, the Umayyads, who had once been part of the Meccan establishment that had persecuted the earliest Muslims. Uthman's behavior angered many and led to his assassination in 656. At that point, Ali stepped forward and claimed the caliphate as his own. But he was not without a challenger. Mu'awiya, a

* In addition to this primary Islamic schism, there are also other-groups that are covered elsewhere in the paper, such as Sufis and Wahhabis. Directly pertinent to the Sunni-Shi'ite schism is the fact that Shi'ites are likewise divided into several principle groupings known as Seveners and Twelvers. The differences between these Shi'ite subgroups are not explored in this paper as they are not essential for a Progressive Christian understanding of Islam.

cousin of Uthman and commander of the Arab forces in Syria, mounted an army against him. However, Ali's forces proved stronger. When military victory was all but within Ali's grasp, Mu'awiya caused Ali's forces to withdraw at the sight of pages of the Qur'an hosted on Mu'awiya's soldiers' spears. Muawiyah then called for arbitration, which Ali accepted as the solution most suitable for intra-Muslim disputes. This outraged some of Ali's more militant followers who thereupon assassinated him as a weak and unfit leader. Ali's eldest son Hasan was then popularly acclaimed Caliph, but he was persuaded by Mu'awiya to abdicate in favor of Mu'awiya, who in turn subsequently poisoned the hapless Hasan to be rid of a potential rival.

Some Christians may regard the fact that several of Islam's early Caliphs were assassinated is strong evidence that this religion is inherently violent. However, these Christians should examine the history of the Popes over the centuries, as well as the behavior of Protestants who sought to supplant their historic authority. Religious warfare sparked by the Reformation constitutes a story of terrible bloodshed.* So far as this aspect of Islam is concerned, similarities with the Christian past appear more striking than the differences. Ancient Hebrew Bible stories beloved by Christians also abound with betrayal, murder and assassination.

Continuing the story of the Islamic schism, when Mu'awiya's drunken son Yazid succeeded his father in 680. This new Caliph's tyrannical behavior outraged Muslims residing in Kufa (located in modern-day Iraq). They called upon Hasan's younger brother Hussain to step forward as a more legitimate candidate for the caliphate. Hussain was not only the sole surviving grandson of the Prophet but was also widely regarded as a decent and fair man. Hussain accepted Kufa's call and traveled northward with his entire family from their home in Medina, much as his grandfather had once traveled from Mecca to Medina to rescue Islam.

Approaching Karbala (also located in modern-day Iraq), Hussain's caravan was ambushed by Yazid's forces. Shi'ite legend nurtures what happened next. With his caravan trapped, Hussein anxiously waited for aid to come from nearby Kufa that had received word of the attack but sent no assistance. Death for Hussain and his family could have been swift and merciful, but it was not. The agony was extended over days. Finally, with all but one of his sons dying before his eyes, Hussain was killed in a most

* In an effort to curb Reformation violence, the right of princes to determine the religion of their territories was firmly acknowledged in the Peace of Augsburg. (1555). In Great Britain, questions regarding the religious identity of the monarch (and head of the established church) produced wars (both external and within the kingdom) well into the 18th century.

gruesome way. His head was cut off as a trophy for Yazid, and then the rest of his body was trampled by Yazid's horsemen. One of Hussain's sons escaped to carry on the bloodline of Muhammad. As the boy's mother was a Persian and as Ali had argued for full equality between Arab and Persian converts, Persia (Iran) became the Shi'ites' official homeland.

Shi'a literally means "a partisan" of Ali. Sunna literally translates as "the beaten path." The meaning here is that the way of tradition is uppermost and that the community rather than bloodline should determine Islamic leadership. Sunnis see their religion as founded on the traditions established by the Seal of the Prophets. Shi'ites, while also revering tradition, pay additional emphasis to a secret knowledge (gnosis) and a deeper meaning of Islam passed on by Ali and his descendents.

Shi'ites have generally practiced a different version of Islam than their Sunni rivals. For example, Shi'ites annually celebrate Hussain's cruel death in an annual festival during the month of Muharran. At that time, Shi'ites recall their own trials in the world, identifying them with Hussain's suffering, yet confident that at the end of time ultimate justice awaits. On the tenth day, known as 'Ashura, Shi'ite men march through the streets, stripped to the waist, beating their bloodied backs with chains, thereby demonstrating that this world holds nothing but unending sorrow and oppression for the pious believer. By the standards of the world, Yazid the tyrant and drunkard and defiler of true Islam succeeded, while Hussain the beloved grandson of the Prophet was ground into the dust. There are some parallels to Christianity here. Whereas Christians like to see their religion as rejecting attitudes of anger and vengeance, Jews, who have long suffered for their supposed historic roles as "Christ killers," can see little difference between Christian attitudes and those of the Shi'ites who thirst for "justice" (vengeance).

Historically, Shi'ites have preferred to wait until the end of time for the arrival of justice, however the rise of Iran's Shi'ite theocracy during the last three decades suggests a different approach. Christians too once relied almost solely upon eschatological expectations, but over time came to seek justice in more immediate ways. Certainly progressive Christianity, with its strong emphasis on social justice in the here and now, reflects this religious tendency. For their part, Sunnis have never postponed the search for good government until the last trumpet.

Christian outsiders may regard the differences between Sunnis and Shi'ites as arcane and of little importance. But then, non-Christians often

marvel over how Christians have slaughtered each other over which Pope/Patriarch (Roman or Byzantine) should control Christendom or whether there should be any such hierarchical authority over Christian churches. Indeed, the Islamic schism is easier for Christians to understand than is the Christian schism over filioque for Muslims. In Medieval times, the filioque controversy effectively divided Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Christianity. The West taught that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son, whereas the East taught that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father through the son. For both Muslims and Christians, matters of little importance to outsiders are often highly sensitive because they deal with questions of religious legitimacy.

Islamic Expansion

Despite internal divisions, from the outset, Islam rushed to convert the known world. Before Islam, the warring tribes of the Arabian Peninsula had been turned inward, with each tribe the enemy of the others. However, as soon as Muhammad unified them within the Muslim Ummah, their attentions turned outward in all directions. Muslim conquerors presented pagans only with the choice of conversion or death. People of the Book (Jews and Christians) were treated differently. They were required only to swear allegiance to Muslim suzerainty. As dependent religious communities, they were not allowed to serve in the armed forces, and because they were so exempted, they had to pay an annual tax or tribute. Islam's goal was to conquer the entire earth but force the conversion of only pagans and polytheists. Whereas Christianity sought to bring the salvation of Jesus Christ to the entire world, Islam has sought only to bring all of humankind under a common divine sovereignty.

In 642, Egypt easily fell to expanding Islam. At that time, the Coptic (Egyptian) Christian Church in Alexandria and the Greek Orthodox Church in the Byzantine capital at Constantinople were locked in the monophysite controversy, a theological dispute over the nature of Christ. Byzantium's church at Constantinople held that Christ had two natures and was simultaneously fully man and fully God. The church at Alexandria could not accept this. For Copts, Jesus' divine attributes dominated his nature. Byzantine Christianity pressed the Egyptians to conform. Hating the Greeks, Egyptian Christians initially welcomed the Muslim conquerors who promised to tolerate them as "People of the Book."

Jerusalem was captured, and in 691 Abd al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock on the ruins of the Jewish temple destroyed in 70 C.E. In Muslim belief, this is the spot from which Muhammad ascended through the various levels of heaven during his “night journey”—a mystical experience that the Prophet experienced while residing in Medina.

Spain fell in 711, and had it not been for a Christian victory at the Battle of Tours in 732, all of Europe might have experienced Muslim rule. The Islamic army retreated back across the Pyrenees, which for many centuries became the frontier line between the two faiths. In the east, Constantinople withstood a Muslim siege in 717-718. Further east, Muslim armies conquered the Persian Empire, and by 711, Muslim warriors reached the valley of the Indus. In less than a century after Muhammad’s death, Islamic civilization stretched from Spain to India.

The Rise of Sufism

Worldly success breeds hedonistic values and practices. The last two centuries of Western civilization have amply demonstrated this, as did the first several centuries of Islam’s existence. Both were periods of extraordinary material success. With an empire stretching from Spain to India, the caliphal court forsook the simple ways of the Prophet and indulged in elaborate displays of luxury. Protesting this drifting away from authentic Islam, a few early Muslims overtly rejected silks and donned clothing of a coarse woolen material, termed *suf* in Arabic. Thereby becoming distinct within the Muslim community, they became known as Sufis.

They did more than simply protest the comforts and luxury of silk garments. They also attacked the emerging pedantry of the *ulema*, the canon lawyers of Islam. They rebelled against Islam being reduced to a set of legal codes and rules demanding outward conformity. Early Sufis tended toward personal asceticism, learned from Christian monks in Syria. Drawing upon Gnostic teachings, which then were being suppressed within Christianity, the Sufis fashioned a religious mysticism surpassing anything in the Western world. Sufism eventually absorbed the additional mystical traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism from the Indian subcontinent. Religious adaptation and inventiveness later made Sufism the most skillful proselytizing branch of Islam.

Sufis preached that religion must be lived rather than studied. They regarded themselves as lions, rather than vultures that eat what they

themselves have not searched out. They pronounced aphorisms such as, “He who tastes not, knows not.” They sought to live completely in the present moment. Each day, they advised, should be appreciated without the burden of any past agenda or future expectations. The Sufi mystic was completely adjustable to whatever each passing moment might bring. In fact, Sufis viewed every moment as a unique creation of God, perfect in and of itself. *Ibn al-waqt*, or “son of the present moment,” was a title adopted by Sufis. “Wisdom descends from heaven,” one Sufi wrote, “but does not settle into the heart of any man who pays attention to the next day.”

Sufis regularly meditated (and still do) on the Qur’anic notion of *shirk*, or “association” of God with anything that is not God. *Shirk*, often occurring only in one’s mental habits, is the worst form of idolatry, the most terrible sin in Islam. *Shirk* is in every selfish thought, for each one effectively makes an idol of “self.” Sufi disciples reflect seriously upon this. When they see a flaw in another, they meditate upon the existence of that same fault in themselves much in the spirit of Jesus’ metaphor of the splinter in the eye of one’s enemy. Sufis tend to seek poverty to break all ego attachment to comfortable existence. In this sense, most Sufis are not highly motivated toward conventional acts of social justice, because instead of trying to improve the material lot of the poor, they seek out living with the poor as a “mercy in disguise” that can drive out materialist cravings.* Their version of Islam calls for great self-discipline as well as mental and physical toughness, qualities that they have used through the centuries to preserve their faith against all obstacles—including those erected within the U.S.S.R. by Josef Stalin during his exceptionally cruel anti-religious regime.

Sufis provided Islam with a new kind of hero—not the warrior but rather the practitioner of the “Greater Jihad”—the struggle to overcome individual selfishness. Early Sufis looked to the prophet Jesus, a holy man who had no place to lay his head. They termed their movement “the conscience of Islam,” and they regarded Jesus as the model for those aspiring to be saints. Sufism might have gone unheralded if it had not been for Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, a renowned Islamic scholar who lived in 12th century Baghdad. He was widely regarded as the premier Muslim theologian of his day. But he did not find this fame satisfying. He came to realize that his scholastic accomplishments were in fact empty and abruptly left his

* This statement must be qualified by the realization that not all Sufi orders are quietist in orientation. Sufism is a highly inventive religious phenomenon that has resulted in many variants that do not fit the norm described here.

prestigious position at Baghdad’s Nizamiya University. Abandoning respectable society, he went to live with the Sufis. Returning years later, he brought Sufism into the fold of Islamic orthodoxy. Because of his great influence, a community consensus (*ijma*) formed on the authenticity of Sufism. This theological development served further to exalt the model of Jesus within Islam. Unlike the Christian Jesus, who is characteristically regarded as uniquely different from all other mortals, the Sufi Jesus serves as a human model for an authentic “way” and “truth” and “life”—an inspiration for liberation from the misery and prison of self-centeredness.

III. Theological Similarities and Differences

Religious Pluralism

Christianity has nothing parallel to Islam’s notion of “People of the Book”—i.e., Jews and Christians who are perceived as within Islam’s prophetic religious tradition.** Throughout most of its long history, the official church has allowed very little latitude towards anyone not accepting its specific creeds and tenets. By contrast, “People of the Book” living in Muslim countries historically have often known a high degree of toleration, albeit in an inferior status. This relative flexibility produced a golden age of interfaith cooperation and intellectual development between 900 and 1200 in Spain and North Africa. In medieval Egypt, Christians controlled the Muslim government’s bureaucracy. Jews and Christians also dominated not only medical fields but also served in banking, foreign trade and espionage. Specific strictures on their status included a prohibition against marrying Muslim women and a requirement that they wear distinctive clothing and show Muslims deference. At times, this prescribed tolerance has been reduced significantly against the very specific commands of the Qur’an. However, the fact remains that Muslims historically have been far more accepting of people of other Abrahamic traditions than Christians, who have often insisted on faith in Jesus Christ as the only acceptable religious position. On the other hand, in relation to heretical versions of Islam, such as Baha’i, rigorous persecution has been the norm.

** Christians may argue that in their understanding, Jews are “people of the Bible,” but Jews hold no similar understanding of Christians. And the treatment of Jews by Christians throughout most of their shared history belies any notion that Christian acceptance of Jews as “people of the Bible” has had much practical value.

Fundamentalist Islam is also an exclusive religion. Only Muslims are regarded as truly submitting to the will of God. Unfortunately, religious exclusivity—starting with the Hebrew notion of the “chosen people,” then continuing with those who believe people are saved solely because they accept Jesus Christ as their only Lord and Savior, and concluding with those who claim both that their Qur’an is without error and their Prophet has the last word in prophecy—has throughout history been the source of untold violence and cruelty. Perhaps this is why an anonymous author scrawled the following prayer on a wall in Washington, D.C. shortly after the events of September 11, 2001: “Dear God, please save us from the people who believe in you.” In the 18th century, Jonathan Swift left a related but more helpful thought: “We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.” Hopefully, both progressive Christians and progressive Muslims can move to a deeper level, which evokes love.

Jesus and the Qur’an

Islam’s treatment of Jesus of Nazareth reveals another set of similarities and differences. Unlike Judaism, which has no role for this Christian messenger, Islam regards Jesus as one of a long line of Allah’s prophets beginning with Adam. This fact is commonly not appreciated by Christians who regard their own faith as far closer to Judaism than to Islam. On the other hand, Islam’s acceptance of Jesus is limited. The Qur’an relates Jesus giving the following reply to Allah regarding Christian claims that Jesus is equivalent to God: “Glory be to you! It cannot be that I would say that which is not mine by right.” (5: 116) The Qur’an describes Jesus as a human, who, accordingly, cannot be God. Still Jesus is not viewed as an ordinary human being. He is said to be one born of a virgin and one who will return at the end of time to usher in the reign of God. Further, Islam accepts all of Jesus’ miracles as occurring “with God’s permission.”

Islam makes no divine claims for Muhammad either. However, he too is no ordinary human being. He is said to be the Seal of the Prophets and is regarded as having been incapable of committing error. The entire practice of revering authentic Hadith, or acts performed by Muhammad, is based upon the assumption that his recorded practices reveal the will of Allah as much as do the verses of the Qur’an. In this latter regard, it is interesting to note that one Hadith concerning the Prophet is that he prayed in a fashion very similar to Jesus’ “Lord’s Prayer:”

When any one is in suffering, or his brother suffers, then let him pray this prayer: Our Lord God, who is in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom is in heaven and on earth, and even as Thy mercy is in heaven, so may Thy mercy also be upon earth. Forgive us our debts and our sins, for Thou art the Lord of the good.*

Some Gnostic Christian teachings held that Jesus was not crucified but rather was rescued through divine intervention, and Islam accepts this. The Qur'an is sparse and cryptic concerning exactly how Jesus was rescued, but Muslim exegesis later proposed that the one executed in his place was probably Judas. Progressive Christians, some of whom have difficulty with the divinity of the Jesus, may like aspects of the Muslim rendition but nonetheless find strained the Muslim claim that Jesus somehow escaped crucifixion. In any case, both Christian and Muslim narratives of Jesus demand different levels of extraordinary belief.

Christianity regards Jesus as the Christ, God's Pre-existent Word made flesh. The opening verses of the Gospel of John state:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.

This is not the Muslim conception of Jesus. But it is very close to the Muslim conception of the Qur'an, which Muslims regard in much the same way that Christianity defines the Christ. For their respective believers, both Christ and Qur'an constitute the "pre-existent word," existing with God before the beginning of time. The Qur'an is viewed as with Allah, just as

* Brian Brennan, "The Jesus of Islam: Christians have more in common with Muslims than they realize," National Catholic Reporter, 41 (June 3, 2005): 15.

Christian theology holds that the Christ is with God in Heaven. Christians do not exalt the Bible to this extent. The Bible is a compilation of many writings put together by the church. Many different divinely inspired people composed the books of the Bible over many centuries. The church rejected some candidates for scripture as inauthentic, whereas others were included in the official canon. There are several versions of the Bible within Christianity. The Catholic Bible contains some books not to be found in Protestant Bibles. By contrast, the Qur'an was revealed to one man in one language within a short time period, and it was transcribed into writing shortly after the Prophet Muhammad's death. Major problems of translation do not burden the Qur'an, which Muslims are urged to read in the original Arabic, the language that the Angel Gabriel used in transmitting the message to Muhammad. Muslims are encouraged to memorize Qur'anic verses in order to invite the will of Allah into their souls.

Muslim tradition holds that Muhammad was not a man of letters, a point meant to emphasize the divine origins of his "recitations," for how could such a person invent a work that is regarded as the finest piece of literature in the Arabic language? Modern scholars have come to roughly the same conclusion. Hans Kung writes: "Muhammad, although hardly illiterate, neither read the Bible himself nor had it read to him. In his time,... there was no Arabic translation of the Bible in existence; if there had been the passages in the Qur'an relating to the Bible would have been clearer, more precise, and less fragmentary." So the divine mystery of the Qur'an's soaring mastery remains intact.

Free Will and Divine Omnipotence

One last issue deserves emphasis in any review of Christian and Muslim theological similarities and differences. Encouragement for theologies of both free will and predestination occur in both the Bible and the Qur'an, but within Islam predestination has been a far stronger theological tendency than within Christianity. However, at the outset, predestination and free will existed in tension within Islam. The Qur'an states that God alone can change the human heart, which suggests predestination. Yet it also asserts that if one recognizes Allah as the only God, does not steal, does not commit adultery, does not slander neighbors and kill girl babies (an all too common practice in

* Kung, *Christianity and World Religions*, 33.

Muhammad's day), one will go to Paradise. These stipulations suggest a theology of free will.

Early in Islamic history, a group of rationalist Muslim theologians inspired by Greek philosophy encouraged a belief in free will. These thinkers, known as Mu'tazilites, taught that God allows evil free play in this life but punishes evil doers in the afterlife. In the 10th century, Abul-Hasan al-Ash'ari disagreed strongly, and his emphasis on predestination has remained uppermost in Muslim theology ever since. In his mind, any agency that allowed God to be restricted (such as human free will) weakened the Almighty, an impossible condition that he saw as false teaching encouraged by human arrogance. Al-Ash'ari regarded God as the immediate and direct author of every occurrence, large and small. As a philosophical atomist, he dismissed all ideas regarding causation in the natural world, including God as First Cause. Instead, he held that God allows repeating natural phenomena out of habit but in fact creates every natural event as a miraculous act. God, he taught, creates every action and every thought. In this way, he dismissed any notion of fixed Natural Law. Al-Ash'ari handled those Qur'anic verses suggesting free will in this way: Allah allows human beings to do what is predestined for them to do, thereby leaving them with the moral consequences of their own actions.

Al-Ash'ari's theology of divine omnipotence taught that Allah creates belief in the believer as well as unbelief in the unbeliever. Under the sway of this theology, the observant Muslim is made to feel dependent upon God for everything. "What reaches you could not possibly have missed you," one well-known Muslim proverb relates, "and what misses you could not possibly have reached you." On a more mundane level, when asked if it is going to rain, an Arab Muslim will typically respond, "*insh'allah*," or "as God wills." Ironically, this tendency of mind does not necessarily breed passivity but often its opposite, for if one believes that God is determining a particular course of action, then backing the cause is sure to result in victory. A similar phenomenon is often observed among Calvinist predestinarians.

From this brief review, it can be seen that similarities and differences between Christians and Muslims are woven into their exclusivist claims, their interpretations of Jesus, their views of the pre-existent Word of God, and their understanding of the relation of God's will and human will. Differences abound. But both groups use similar philosophical and theological constructs and the emphases of each are reflected in the other tradition as well. Rather than being radically apart in theological approaches,

Christianity and Islam appear to be cousins, with some differing customs, practices and habits of mind.

IV. Social Ethical Similarities and Differences

Egalitarian Teaching

The message of Muhammad's revelations was one of both divine authority and social justice. Given that today, most American Christians believe that Islam is inherently hostile to women, It is significant that Muhammad's ministry was in part committed to uplifting the status of women. He commanded that the community as a whole assist the downtrodden and that women be respected in marriage and while single, that no man should have more than four wives, and that husbands should not play favorites among their wives. Certainly, he stopped well short of asking for equality of women and men. However, he did challenge Meccan culture regarding its treatment of women.

Modern Christians may take pride that their more abstract religion has proven to be more advantageous toward achieving full equality for women. But the historical record shows that before reforms of the 19th century C.E., women in Islam enjoyed a higher legal status than did those in Christendom. Before that time, women in Islam may have had to live with a religious tradition that placed their lives under the rule of men, but in Christianity it was no different. And women in Islam may have received only half the inheritance rights of men, but in Christian lands, no such rights existed at all, even to this partial degree.

Muhammad's message not only attacked the selfish individualism of Mecca's elite regarding the status of women, it also called for ameliorating the condition of slaves. Not all of Mecca's slaves were black, but many were. Throughout all of recorded history, evidence of white racism abounds. The Arabian Peninsula in Muhammad's time was no exception. Muhammad attacked this ugly tradition. He placed blacks in responsible positions in his new religion. A black man named Bilal became the first muezzin or caller for Muslim prayers. In Islamic legend, it is recorded that Hagar, the mother of the Arabic peoples, was black. Later in Muhammad's life, he also reportedly married a black woman.

Neither early Christianity nor early Islam forbade slavery, yet both practice degrees of racial toleration. Long after Muhammad, Muslims and

Christians participated in a vicious African slave trade that led to the death of many millions, but these malefactors behaved in contradiction to both Christianity and Islam's best understandings. Those Muslims who sinned in this horrific manner, warped the Muslim concept of jihad, or holy resistance, to serve their economic ends. Human greed motivated them, not the egalitarian teachings of Islam. Similarly, Christian participants in the slave trade thoroughly warped their religion to justify their greed-driven practices. In any case, so far as Islam is tainted by this history, it was Christian Europe that created the context for the extremely lucrative African slave trade spanning oceans and continents.

Islamic egalitarianism is underwritten by the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage of Muslims to Mecca. The Qur'an teaches that at least once in a person's life, he or she should go to the Ka'ba in Mecca during the time of annual pilgrimage. There, the Muslim circumambulates the Ka'ba that Muhammad eventually cleansed of false idols and worships the one true God in egalitarian harmony. On this pilgrimage, each Muslim is to be clothed in a simple white garment so as to eradicate any and all distinctions during this holy congregating of the Muslim community. Many new pilgrims have commented with depth of feeling about the egalitarian teaching that is the very texture of the Hajj.

An angry and articulate black American named Malcolm Little, better known as Malcolm X, underwent a second conversion near the end of his life while on his first and only Hajj. He had become a leader of the Black Muslims within the United States. His message of hate had been that all white men are devils. On the Hajj, for the first time, Malcolm X experienced human relations that were truly colorblind. He returned to his homeland with a new understanding of the peace of Islam just before he was assassinated.

Muslim belief that the Qur'an is word-for-word the word of God has a negative consequence for Muhammad's egalitarian message, especially regarding women. During his lifetime, Muhammad definitely improved the status and role of women. Women gained more standing vis-à-vis men than they had ever before known in Arab societies. They gained some inheritance rights as well, and although they did not become fully equal with men, the direction of change was positive. However, because the Qur'an is viewed as inerrant and eternal, its favorable teaching, instead of starting a trajectory toward full equality, discouraged further reform as against God's will.

Today, Muslim progressives regularly argue that the teachings of the Qur'an should be understood within the historical context that existed in

Muhammad's day. In Judaism or Christianity, similar approaches to scripture are often helpful in gaining progressive perspectives. But the situation within mainstream Islam is more like that of Christian Fundamentalism. Since its leading scholars hold that the message that Muhammad delivered was eternal and without error, an argument based on historical contexts and cultural relativism is at a tremendous disadvantage.

Progressive Muslims occasionally turn literalism to their advantage. One Qur'anic verse that they commonly use is: "Allah will never change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves." (13:11). Progressive Muslims interpret this verse as encouraging a reinvention of social consciousness within Islam. They also point out that nothing in the Qur'an mandates that women dress so as to leave only their eyes showing and that the seclusion of women has strong cultural causes independent of Islam. In fact, what the Qur'an does state is that both men and women equally should dress modestly. Most of the treatment of women within Islam results from attributing to traditional practices something of the finality Islam in general attributes to the Qur'an.

Against this tradition, Muslim progressives emphasize that several of Muhammad's wives led active lives that belie any conservative emphasis on secluding women. His first wife Khadija was a leading merchant in Mecca and a subsequent wife, Aisha, led a Muslim army into battle. Muslim progressives argue that it is neither the Qur'an nor the early tradition that oppresses women but a reactionary Islam that scapegoats female independence because of its popular association with westernizing influences closely identified with colonialism.

The Question of Democracy

Christianity has had a long and diverse history of teaching and practice regarding its proper relation to the state. From the Constantinian establishment until quite recently, the two have been closely related. Today, however, separation of church and state (which is most thoroughly codified in the United States) has come to be viewed as normative throughout most of western civilization, in order to allow for religious pluralism within each nation.*

* Progressive Christians currently sense that this norm is under attack in American culture. Nonetheless, the tradition of no establishment of religion within the United States is strong and will most likely successfully resist any and all attempts to undermine it.

Those seeking greater pluralism within Islamic civilization are now reinventing Muslim traditions in a similar way—relying upon scriptural reinterpretation to rework ancient concepts in the interests of reform. One example concerns *ijtihad*, “independent thinking” or “independent interpretive judgment.” Early in Islam, *ijtihad* came to mean that different religious schools of thought should be tolerated regarding how best to determine Islamic law. In no way was *ijtihad* originally intended to promote the kind of independent individual judgment that is needed in an effective mass democracy. But that goal is approximated if a deeper meaning of *ijtihad* is reimagined to include all Muslims. Muhammad Iqbal (1875-1938), a philosopher and thinker of Kashmiri origin and a leading founder of progressive Islamic thought, crafted the interpretations needed to support this innovative understanding.

The Qur’an teaches that *shura*, or “consultation,” should occur regularly in both religious and worldly affairs. Historically in Islam, this has been interpreted as a hierarchical ruler seeking advice from selected subordinates. However, the Qur’anic text does not require this interpretation. Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988), of Pakistani origin and an advocate for democracy within Islamic civilization, emphasized that the literal language used in the Qur’an calls for “mutual advice through mutual discussions on an equal footing.” Here Rahman used the strong contemporary Islamic tendency toward literalism to promote a Qur’anic interpretation that virtually requires democracy. Rahman argued that Muslims who negatively claim that democracy leads away from the will of Allah “are willingly or unwittingly guilty of rendering Islam null and void.”**

Examples from the Christian past encourage hope that an evolution toward democracy can occur within Islam. In the 17th century, the English Puritan philosopher John Locke applied Christian egalitarian understandings to develop his idea that all human beings have an inherent right to participate in government, thereby overcoming an earlier Puritan understanding that only God’s Elect should have a say in government. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England and later the American Revolution were based on his innovative concepts. Similar intellectual transformations are now occurring within Islamic civilization.

** Paul A. Winters, ed., *Islam: Opposing Viewpoints* (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1995), 116, 118. For a very readable and brief explanation of *ijtihad* and its history, see Irshad Manji, “From Books to Virgins,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 2005, M3.

Sunni Muslims, constituting roughly 85 percent of all Muslims worldwide, adhere to the doctrine of *ijma*, or “collective judgment of the community” in resolving important disputes. Historically, this has meant that differences among spiritual leaders are ultimately resolved by a consensus developed in the *ulema*, or community of learned scholars. Throughout Sunni history, the *ulema* has emphasized that the legitimacy of state institutions to carry out the will of Allah can only be validated by *ijma*.

The question is then how the collective judgment of the community is expressed. In the West, this gradually moved toward democracy. The potentiality for this development exists in Islam as well.

Indeed, Western Christians should recognize that Western interference has been a major obstacle to the development of democracy in Muslim countries. Over the last half-century, movements toward democracy in Islamic civilizations have been generally quashed by Western powers. U.S. policy in the Middle East has encouraged rulers there to put down any form of dissent that would interfere with those governments’ cooperation with American “strategic interests.” It is not that Muslims around the world shun democracy. Rather, it is often the case that rulers have been kept in power precisely because they are willing to suppress democratic movements. The CIA’s intervention in Iran when Mosadeq was democratically elected is a case in point.

Consumerism

Progressive Christians are coming to realize that hyper individualism and selfish capitalist acquisition dominate our culture and drown out the capacity to appreciate and transmit our own religious tradition effectively to the next generation. Today the greatest challenge of Christian teaching and living is consumerism. This functions as the dominant religion of the West, and especially of the United States, and current policies are spreading it abroad.*

To date, Islamic civilization, where tradition remains strong, has withstood this modern attack on community values better than many other cultures. We progressives, who have done so much to break the shackles of tradition, must recognize that this force can at times work for good. Tradition clothed in the cause of social justice can be an ally to progressive Christians seeking to recreate a sense of community in a disintegrating age

* See Gordon Douglass and Ward McAfee, “Christianity versus Consumerism,” Progressive Christians Uniting position paper.

such as ours. If we believe that God is at work in human struggles, we must consider the possibility that that which is best in both Islam and Christianity can be used for transformations that are beyond our current powers of imagination.

Pope John Paul II apparently realized that Islam was outperforming Christianity as an effective bulwark against Western consumerism when in 1985 he arranged for Roman Catholics and Muslims to dialog concerning living lives of “holiness” in the modern age. The cause of this Muslim superior performance is not difficult to discern, for in Islamic societies human rights are normally not dissociated from religious duties, as they are in the West. As a secular, economic religion currently shapes Western civilization more than any other force, the Pope reached across ancient religious barriers for muscular spiritual allies. With the hope that Christianity itself might be revived into a living force, John Paul II commented upon how devout Christians and Muslims have far more in common than either normally realize:

In today’s world, it is more important than ever that men and women of faith, assisted by God’s grace, should strive for true holiness. Self-centered tendencies--such as greed, the lust for power and prestige, competition, revenge, the lack of forgiveness, and the quest for earthly pleasures--all these threaten to turn mankind from the path to goodness and holiness which God has intended for all of us. The countless numbers of good people around the world--Christians, Muslims, and others who quietly lead lives of authentic obedience, praise, and thanksgiving to God and selfless service of their neighbor--offer humanity a genuine alternative, “God’s way,” to a world which otherwise would be destroyed in self-seeking, hatred, and struggle.*

* Pope John Paul II, “Address of Pope John Paul II to the Participants in the Colloquium on ‘Holiness in Christianity and Islam,’” May 9, 1985. This development built upon a statement in Vatican II (1962-1965): “Upon the Moslems, too, the church looks with esteem. They adore one God, living and enduring, merciful and all-powerful, maker of heaven and earth, and speaker to humans. They strive to submit wholeheartedly even to his inscrutable decrees.”

V. Our Actual Relationship

Cross Pollination and Conflict

It is obvious from the account of Mohammed and the Sufis above that Christianity, like Judaism, profoundly influenced Islam, especially in its early development. However, for the following thousand years the influence flowed much more in the other direction. Sadly, much of this influence was bound up with warfare, some initiated by Muslims, some by Christians.

Indeed, Christianity and Islam have a long history of military conflict throughout the fourteen centuries the two religions have co-existed. A root cause of this violent history lies in their theological similarity. Unlike Judaism, both have always been proselytizing religions. From roughly 500 B.C.E. to 500 C.E., Judaism also sought converts, but it gave up this practice when Christianity lured away many of those who initially made a commitment to become Jews. During its proselytizing period, Judaism required that convert families remain in a training status for three generations, after which they were finally accepted as full-fledged members. Christianity's process toward full membership was much quicker, making it a more attractive alternative. Accordingly, Judaism settled for enduring as a minority faith in lands governed by adherents to other religious traditions. When Islam came into existence in the 7th century C.E., Christianity finally had a powerful proselytizing rival.

Linking scientists from Egyptian, Persian, Byzantine, Chinese, and Indian civilizations, Islam established possibilities for tremendous progress. At that juncture, Islamic civilization became the preserver of the knowledge of the ancient Greeks, much of which Europeans of that day had long forgotten. Most importantly, Muslims created a synergistic cultural environment that encouraged intellectual growth and the development of new advances in mathematics and astronomy. Beginning in 1096, when medieval Christendom counterattacked during the Crusades, backward European invaders were introduced to both new and old scientific and philosophical constructs that would change Christendom forever. Indeed, the beginnings of modern European material progress commenced at that time providing the seeds for a European intellectual rebirth that eventually came to be known as the Renaissance.

Today many Americans wonder why Muslim fanatics hate everything Western. The answer can be found in the attitude of the late medieval

Florentine poet, Dante Alighieri. On the one hand, he was deeply affected by Muslim insights. For example, his *Inferno* drew heavily upon the Islamic conception of the various layers of Hell. Yet, on the other hand, he refused to acknowledge this debt and professed hatred of all things Islamic. He portrayed the Prophet Muhammad deep in Hell and suffering the cruelest punishment of all, being cleft from head to crotch. According to Dante, Muhammad's crime was sowing discord within a Christian civilization that still thought it desirable to maintain unity of thought.

It seems that nobody appreciates those who bring about unsought and unwanted change. In receiving this impetus to change through their engagement with a superior civilization in Palestine, Europe was not grateful. Eventually failing in the Crusades after a temporary conquest of the Holy Land, Europe retreated back across the Mediterranean.

Between the Crusades and modern times, the rise of the Ottoman Turks provided Islam with a further opportunity to affect Europe. As the Ottomans conquered the Balkan Peninsula and reached Vienna, they absorbed much of Christendom's attention and created a context in which the Protestant reformers were able to succeed. The failure of the Crusades and the success of the subsequent Islamic aggression left Europeans deeply resentful.

The history of Christian influence on Islam and of Islam pollinating Christianity is too rich to claim that these two great religious traditions are separated by history. To the contrary, they have long been in a most creative (if often violent) interfaith relationship. Much bloodshed and many cruel atrocities have stained the histories of both, allowing deep hatreds to fester, especially along the frontier territories of the two traditions in regions such as the Balkans. Nevertheless, a Western civilization that now appreciates modern pluralism owes a great debt to Islam, as Western medieval religious and cultural uniformity was the principal casualty resulting from repeated encounters with Islamic civilization.

As Islam once impacted the West, so the West today impacts Islam. The Ottoman Empire declined gradually after being stopped at Vienna and came to be called "the sick man of Europe." It collapsed completely in World War I. Progressive Christians must appreciate the depth of shame that Muslims have felt over the last two centuries in witnessing their once dominant civilization kneeling before a Christian West that carved up their territory into colonies and client states and then facilitated the creation of a Jewish state in their midst.

This Western colonialism and the more recent American desire to attain global hegemony have worked to identify modernity itself with unwanted outside influences. In our own time, the West has unleashed great changes. There have been two types of response. One was the rise of diverse Islamic movements calling upon Muslims to maintain their traditions in order to resist Western imperialism. The other response was the adoption of modernity. Desperately wanting to match Western technological power, Arabs sought to copy Western tendencies toward secularization and modernity, thinking that these were prerequisites for creating powerful Arab nations. In many Arab countries, the seeds of fundamentalist Islam were suppressed after the dismantling of the last caliphate at the close of World War I. Kemal Ataturk, the leader of Turkey after World War I, provided a new model for the Muslim world. Intent upon modernizing Islamic civilization away from its own medieval past, he suppressed what he regarded as a backward religion. New Arab nations followed his lead. Later Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt emerged as a hero and model of Arab secular nationalist leadership. Within Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood that urged a fundamentally religious response to the European threat of colonialism was persecuted and driven underground.

The Six Day War of 1967 was a profound turning point in this regard. Israel blitzed its neighbors after many threatening indications of an imminent Arab attack intent on annihilating the Jewish state. The quick war resulted in a complete Israeli victory that claimed the West Bank and the Sinai Peninsula. The total defeat of the Arab armies showed many Muslims that the nationalist, modernist response was futile. Jews gained access to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, and their heartfelt religious devotion was apparent via televised broadcasts to the entire world, including Arab populations.

Thereafter, momentum has been with religious fundamentalism throughout Islamic civilization. Following Israel's smashing victory over Egypt, Syria and Jordan, Muslim fundamentalists emphasized Allah's obvious displeasure as a divine wake-up call to follow a different path. They reflected on why an Almighty Allah had allowed such an outcome. Their preferred answer was deeply disturbing. Allah temporarily favored the Jews because of their greater religious devotion. Seemingly overnight, the mood within Islamic civilization shifted toward fundamentalist Islam intent on producing an even greater religious devotion.

As the Muslim world has shifted away from secularism, Saudi oil wealth has helped fund the spread of fundamentalism, including some of its most violent expressions. If the Six Day War was popularly viewed throughout the Arab world as indicating the direction of Divine Will, so was the fact that the world's largest oil reserves were located in that part of the Islamic world inhabited by the most reactionary expression of Islam in modern times. In the late 18th century, 'Abd al-Wahhab revived the theological doctrines of Ibn Taymiyya, creating a movement known as Wahhabism which found support among the House of Sa'ud, whose men he trained in the use of firearms, thereby enabling them eventually to gain control over much of the Arabian peninsula. Wahhabi doctrine professed a strict monotheism and viewed tomb visitations, including visits to the tombs of the Prophet or of Muslim saints, as heresy. Wahhabi theology emphasized God's predestination. Wahhabis further viewed all Muslims who did not subscribe to their doctrines as heretical, especially the Shi'ites and the Sufis. A Wahhabi warrior community marched northward into Iraq and westward to Mecca destroying all Sufi tombs in its path. The Wahhabi objective was to return Islam to the original "purity" that it had known in the days of the Prophet. Ironically, this effort to go back to the fundamentals of Islam was itself heretical, for ijma (community consensus) had long before accepted Sufism into the very body of Islam. Mainstream Muslims crushed Wahhabi military capabilities early in the 19th century, but the Wahhabi fundamentalist ideal lives on today as the state religion of Saudi Arabia. It is understandable that the overwhelming majority of Muslims participating in the 9-11 suicide flights hailed from Saudi Arabia.

In 1979, Iran's Westernizing Shah was overthrown. In 2003, the United States ironically furthered the fundamentalist cause by dismantling the cruel but also secular nationalist regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, an event that attracts radical Islamic warriors to meet the western infidel in guerrilla combat on Arab soil. Inexorably, the region appears drawn into religious warfare. In our time, religion and politics are no longer separate and distinct realms. Unfortunately, the religion reflected in this gathering storm is characterized by hate. This phenomenon is not restricted to Islam but may be seen within Christianity and Judaism also. This is a most bitter legacy involving the three religious traditions of Abraham.

Progressive Muslims

For progressive Christians a major concern is whether there are progressive Muslims who share our hopes. We do not celebrate all past forms of Christianity, nor are we enthusiastic about much that is done today in the name of Christianity. But we do not reject our tradition because of its past affirmation of religious exclusivism or acceptance of patriarchy, slavery, racism, authoritarian governments, nor for the support that today it gives to imperialism and war. Accordingly, we certainly do not condemn other traditions because they contain much that we deplore. Our question is whether Islam provides support for progressive self-reform. Much has already been said that indicates that it does.

Neither Christianity nor Islam is a static religion. Both are in time, and both may yet be transformed to improve upon that which has been. The purpose here is not to idealize either Christianity or Islam but rather to suggest that both may benefit from entering into a positive interfaith relationship with the other.

Opportunities for reform exist within Islam. Recently, an event occurred in Los Angeles demonstrating how Islam might be changed. In June 2005, the Progressive Muslim Union of North America conducted a town-hall meeting at the USC Religious Center. Both progressive and traditional Muslims were in attendance to observe a debate over whether women should be allowed to lead prayer observances. Examples from the past were used in an attempt to remake the present. The event featured Khaled Abou El Fadl, a UCLA Islamic law professor who argued that Islam requires the most knowledgeable person to lead prayer, regardless of gender. In making his case, Abou El Fadl cited examples of female prayer leaders in Islamic history along with three schools of thought during medieval times that embraced the practice. He emphasized that most Muslims are ignorant of their own vast and diverse heritage and urged those in attendance to become educated to new possibilities that have in fact existed before. In short, the way to reform Islam is through historical interpretation.*

The Qur'an, as with Jewish and Christian scriptures, contains many ambiguities and a few seeming contradictions, and is subject to many different interpretations. Within these ambiguities and contradictions are opportunities for new understandings. Hadith, or the compilation of the sayings and deeds of Muhammad himself, is a primary basis for the formation of Muslim understandings of right and wrong, good and evil and the parameters of legitimate reform. Different Muslim groupings (especially

* Los Angeles Times, June 27, 2005, A12.

Shi'ites and Sunnis) disagree on what constitutes authentic Hadith, opening possibilities for diverse Islamic practices, laws and teachings. In any case, Muslims typically agree that tradition is a strong primary value within Islam. The Shar'iah, a broad term for the basis of the many different schools of law created through the interpretations of the Qur'an and the Hadith, uses analogy and consensus to form rulings applying tradition to changing circumstances.

The message of Jesus was one of radical equality and so was the tendency of Muhammad's reforms in his time and place. Christianity and Islam are two branches of a single tree that obviously includes Judaism as a third branch. Progressives from these three great traditions have enough in common to be in solidarity for the common cause of restoring a revitalized sense of community so desperately needed in our broken world. Global society today is like that of Mecca in Muhammad's time. The ancient witness of Islam's Messenger triumphing over obstructions and obstacles raised by a powerful economic establishment encourages hope. This story, so long excluded within Western religious discourse, should now be added to examples of historic Jewish and Christian religious leaders doing the same thing.

V. The Judeo-Islamic-Christian Tradition

While we are exploring the relationship between Christianity and Islam, Judaism must not be kept out of the discussion. All three Abrahamic faith traditions stem from common origins. That is not to say that throughout their shared history, there have not been Christian tendencies to equate Judaism and Christianity as closer in form, practice and mentality than is Islam, which is thereby assigned an inferior status. Typically, Christians have never regarded Islam as a covenantal partner potentially sharing a claim deserving of God's blessing. It is helpful here to consider the Jewish perspective, which sees Christianity as no more closely related to Judaism than is Islam. Effectively, the Christian mentality envisioning a special theological bond with Judaism is a one-way street as Jews have no theology underwriting Christianity as a covenantal partner.

For his part, Muhammad urged that both Judaism and Christianity be regarded as faiths intimately related to Islam. This teaching was both encouraged and discouraged by actual events. Before he moved his residence to Medina, some of Muhammad's followers bloodied by cruel

persecution in Mecca fled to Christian Abyssinia where they found refuge. When Muslims want to remember their Christian co-religionists fondly, memories of this rescue are recalled. After Muhammad removed Islam to Medina, he received a revelation that Muslims should pray toward Jerusalem as Allah's holy city. He experienced a miraculous night journey wherein he instantaneously traveled to Jerusalem ascending through heaven's multiple layers. With two Jewish tribes as part of his Medina constituency, this revelation served to bind Judaism to Islam. However, when these two tribes chafed at this intimate relationship, they were suspected of treason and ultimately exiled or destroyed in order to keep Medina secure in a dangerous time. Later, Muhammad received a new revelation that Muslims should pray toward Mecca, and the Ka'ba came to be regarded as the house of Allah (the geographic focus of Muslim worship).

Upon Muhammad's death, rumors held that a Jewish woman had poisoned the Prophet, adding to some negative memories of Jewish perfidy within Islam. But then, there are also negative Muslim memories of Christians, primarily stemming from the Crusades of late medieval times as well as Western colonialism during the last two centuries. Christians also have their own bad memories, of Ottoman Muslims kidnapping Christian boys in the Balkans and elsewhere to be raised as janissaries, the most disciplined and feared military arm of Ottoman power. Kidnapped Christian girls became harem girls. To this day, the center of anti-Muslim Christian feeling is Christian Serbia that at one time bore the brunt of these kidnappings.

Modern American Christians can also point to the events of "9-11" as justifying negative feelings toward Islam. Despite this, Christian bad feelings for Abrahamic relatives have rarely been primarily directed at Muslims. The genre of Christian passion plays has long fostered hostility toward Jews as Christ-killers. Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" is a recent and monetarily successful recollection of this particular bad feeling that has long been nurtured and exploited for horrific ends. Jews hold bad memories of both Christian and Muslim atrocities. The systematic extermination of the Jewish people at the hands of Christian-Nazi executioners is linked in the Jewish mind with the violent resolve of Muslim Palestinians to drive Jews from Greater Israel. Hostile theology, forced conversions, expulsions, countless pogroms, colonialism and negative propaganda have made good feelings and healthy relationships exceptionally difficult among these quarrelling family relatives.

Realities in our world now demand that each faith tradition reduce festering memories that contribute to provincial theologies concerning the greater evil of “the other.” The Christian West’s nuclear arsenal has the potential to destroy all life on the planet. Israel’s reported nuclear weapons have at least the potential to destroy the entire Middle East. Muslim Pakistan is currently the only Islamic nation with nuclear bombs but Iran is not far behind. And just a few bombs would suffice to destroy Israel. The human urge to hate and follow through with acts of cruelty and barbarism must be reduced or our shared future is one of radioactive doom. In light of this, new theologies are called for that encourage respect rather than contempt, cooperation rather than exclusivity, and love rather than hatred. All three Abrahamic faiths need to be engaged in this process of thinking anew.

In recent years it has been commonplace for progressive Christians to think within the confines of a Judeo-Christian tradition—a paradigm that suggests a special-if-difficult relationship between two quarreling senior partners of unequal strength. A negative unspoken corollary of this linguistic and mental habit is that the third Abrahamic faith is more distant and even alien.

Essential in the developing relationship between Christians and Jews since 1945 is an emerging Christian understanding that both Judaism and Christianity share related covenants, the exact relationship of which will be revealed at the end of time. After the horrors of the Shoah, Jews fully appreciate the necessity of improved relations with Christians and so do little to comment negatively upon what they regard as part of Christianity’s well-established tendency toward theological inventiveness and invasiveness, so far as Judaism is concerned. This developing Christian-Jewish relationship might be regarded as wholly positive (or at the very least harmless) were it not for the fact that it has no role for Islam other than that of a heretical outsider. Progressive Christians need to raise this theological problem to the level of conscious thinking. With a long history of negativity toward both Judaism and Islam, Christians cannot afford to exaggerate any new supposed “good feelings” toward one of its Abrahamic relatives at the expense of the other. A radical and exclusive theological dividing line between Judaism and Christianity on one side and Islam on the other has potential for great evil in a nuclear world. The witness of the Shoah should instruct us that our theological and mental habits have serious consequences. No matter how difficult, we must invite Muslims to our family interfaith gatherings. The

alternative is unthinkable. Persistent attitudes of exclusiveness and contempt undermine hope for human survival.

As words help shape mentality, the name that we give to our family relationship is theologically important. That is why this section is entitled “The Judeo-Islamic-Christian Tradition.” To tack on Islamic at the end of “Judeo-Christian-Islamic Tradition” would appear as an obvious afterthought designed more as a cosmetic than encouraging any real change of heart and mind. Meaningfully to include Islam in the family fold, its placement must be more central. In many ways, Islam fits in the middle. Indeed, this is how many Muslims regard their religion in relation to Judaism and Christianity. They clearly see that Islam has greater similarities with either Judaism or Christianity than the other two have with each other. Islam exalts Jesus more than does Judaism. It is oriented to religious law, as is Judaism, which suggests that these two faith traditions should be side by side. Islam and Christianity both have strong proselytizing traditions, which suggest that they should be side-by-side. Most importantly, as Islam is currently the “stranger,” it should be given the favored place at the table—or the central place in the grouping. A generous interfaith theology is one that is most likely to bring about a better future.*

VI. Theological Conclusions

This survey shows that Christian self-righteousness and contempt for Islam is profoundly inappropriate. However, it indicates that there are real, and quite fundamental, differences between the two traditions. In concluding, we need to explore several theological questions. Beyond fairer and friendlier interpretations, and efforts to work together for peace and justice, what do progressive Christians propose as a theological response to Islam?

* “A Common Word Between Us and You” initiative began in 2007 when 138 Muslim scholars from around the Islamic world called upon Christians to start a process of historic reconciliation between the two communities. The initiative emphasized that Christians and Muslims make up almost half of the world’s population and that reconciliation between the two communities is essential for world peace. Jews have responded to this initiative in positive ways. In August 2008, Yale Divinity School hosted a conference bringing together over 150 Muslim and Christian scholars, intellectuals, academics and religious leaders to discuss how Muslim-Christian relations may improve. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair has also entered this arena, establishing the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, the purpose of which is to make common faith traditions a positive force in bringing about world peace.

God

Christians often ask whether Islam's Allah is the same as their Christian God. This is similar to asking whether the God of progressive Christians is the same as the deity of fundamentalist Christians, just as progressive Muslims may wonder whether the Allah of Fundamentalist Muslims is identical to their own. The answer to such questions rests in the human inability to define with precision something as unfathomable as "God." Yet, many serious people seek answers to this and similar questions. This can be said with certainty: The word "Allah" in Arabic means "God." It is what Arab Christians call their God. So from a linguistic standpoint, Allah and Christian God are one and the same.

We may stand with Jews who proclaim with certainty, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one." (Deuteronomy 6: 4) Despite their shared tendency to place aspects of their faith traditions within an ahistorical realm termed the "Preexistent Word," which easily suggests something equivalent to a second divinity, all of the faiths within the Judeo-Islamic-Christian tradition are truly monotheistic. Jesus Christ is no more a second God for Christians than is the Qur'an for Muslims or the 613 laws of the Torah for Jews. Each of the three related faiths is devoted to the same God, whom they admittedly understand imperfectly. Each faith tradition, and indeed sects within each faith tradition, often describe radically different parts of "the elephant," but they are all attempting to portray the same phenomenon. Theologians, such as the ancient Christian Marcion, who claimed that the God of the Jews was different than the God of the Christians, have rightly ultimately been rejected even within their own traditions, for such commentators undermine the very monotheism that is the bedrock of this shared interfaith tradition.

Is the Muslim understanding of a God who requires submission substantially different than the Christian God of Love and Grace? Perhaps so, but within the Christian Bible is definitely a similar message. Whether or not Christians want to label it "submission" per se is another matter. In answering the Rich Young Ruler who wanted to follow the way of the Master, Jesus required that he first detach himself from the false god to whom the young man had sworn his effective allegiance—the god of his own possessions and wealth. This act was too much for the Rich Young Ruler, who abandoned Jesus as a consequence. (Matthew 19: 16-26; Mark

10: 17-27; Luke 18: 18-27). The teaching of this story is equivalent to the Muslim conception of Shirk, or the condemnation of associating anything that is not God with God. The God of both Christianity and Islam agree that this kind of idolatry is unacceptable and that believers in both faiths should yearn to adopt a more holy understanding that is “the way, the truth, and the life.” (Luke 16: 13). And within the theologies of both faith traditions is also the emphasis that God alone can fulfill that yearning as a free gift.

The word “submission” (or “surrender”) in Islam is tied to the role of religious law within that tradition.* In contrast to Christianity, Islam does indeed emphasize religious law. In this sense, Islam is closer to Judaism than to Christianity. However, there are Jews that do not emphasize religious law, such as Reform Jews, and there are certainly Progressive Muslims who do not look to the *ulema* for guidance in their daily lives. Progressive Christians accent freedom rather than submission. Perhaps because Progressive Muslims realize the difficulty that Christians have with the word “submission,” they commonly emphasize that the deepest meaning of Islam is “peace,” as in the peace that one can only know in God. The Gospel of Matthew reports Jesus communicating the same thought: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden light.” (Matthew 11:28-30). While there are definitely differences in emphasis, there is also enough common ground between Progressive Christians and likeminded Muslims to not let the word “submission” become an insurmountable stumbling block.

Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit

Does the Christian understanding of Jesus Christ as a person within whom God and humankind meet irrevocably separate the Muslim understanding of Allah from the Christian understanding of God? On the surface, it may seem so. However, the historic inability to define the Christian understanding of Jesus Christ with rational precision opens other possibilities. The traditional Christian definition of Jesus Christ as both “fully God” and “fully man” constitutes something akin to a Christian koan. In Zen Buddhism, a koan is a construct intended to frustrate the rational

* Progressive Muslims usually prefer to use the word “surrender,” instead of “submission.”

mind beyond artificial categories of human language and philosophical learning. “God” is beyond the powers of our human abilities to corral, limit and dominate. The Christian claim to Jesus’s special status has some parallel in the Muslim claim that Muhammad is the Seal of the Prophets. Christians believe that the fullness of God was revealed in the person of Jesus in a way that makes any subsequent prophecy commentary on that revelation rather than a revision of its truth. In dialoguing with Muslims, Christians need to explain that they do not effectively worship three gods (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). They need to explain that the mystery of the Christian Trinity was codified in response to a third-century Christian heresy that held that Jesus was an intermediate deity between God and Man. The intent of the Trinitarian concept is to convey the fullness of God as revealed in Jesus’s earthly life and ministry and the continuation of that Holy Spirit into the current age.

Muslims have difficulty with the Christian concept of the Risen Christ as well. Muhammad, they say, was just a man. Why do Christians insist that the Prophet Jesus rose from the dead? For the Christian hearing again the Easter story in a crowded church, the message is clear. Death does not have the final word. Jesus’s humiliation and crucifixion did not defeat the meeting of God and Man in Jesus of Nazareth. The gospel stories present no one rendition of the resurrection story. Indeed the variety of resurrection narratives allows the hearer or reader to hold close the one that best communicates the reality behind the words. A favorite one with Progressive Christians is the encounter of several of Jesus’s followers with the risen Christ on the Road to Emmaus. They knew him not by his physical presence. Apparently, he looked nothing like the Jesus that they knew. They knew him by the truth that he spoke in intimate communication while breaking bread.

Progressive Christians in dialogue with Muslims may find that the latter also have difficulty with the Christian concept of the Holy Spirit, perhaps the most mysterious aspect of the Christian Trinity. Yet, it is likely that they have much experience with this concept within their own tradition. Islam teaches that Allah is closer to the Muslim than his or her own jugular vein. That could help to communicate the Christian idea of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was a man who was crucified and after his resurrection became sanctified as “The Christ,” which is described in concepts and categories that seem removed from the average person. And God the Father likewise seems distant and unfathomable. The Holy Spirit represents God who is most accessible--closer than one’s own jugular vein.

Muhammad

There is another matter that needs to be addressed in communications between Christians and Muslims. Muhammad was a great spiritual as well as temporal leader. In some ways, he is admirable as King David was, adept at leading his people on political and military stages as well as generally setting a religious model for his community. The total witness of Muhammad's life, not just the fact that he was in and of the world, must be weighed.

The Muslim claim that Muhammad is to be understood in the category of "prophet" is somewhat strange to Christian ears. Christians are accustomed to distinguishing the role of prophet from that of priest and king and also lawgiver. All may be appointed by God to perform their proper functions, but prophets do not rule and lead troops into battle as Muhammad did. Islam uses "prophet" inclusively for those who are specially called by god to bring divine truth and guide God's people. For them, for example, Moses and David are great prophets, as are Isaiah and Jesus. For Islam, Muhammad as "prophet" performs all these roles and completes the process the great figures of the Christian Bible have begun. Hence his political and military leadership in no way counts against his role as prophet. By some realistic historical judgments it does seem that Muhammad carried the prophetic role furthest and most successfully and that there has been no comparable prophet since his time. In order to facilitate public recognition of a Judeo-Islamic-Christian heritage, if for no other reason, it is time that Christians acknowledge this record.

The Qur'an

Our greatest problem with Muslims is, then, not their monotheism, nor their conception of God, nor their Prophet. Rather, their doctrines about the Qur'an present the greatest potential theological stumbling block. They tend to deify the Qur'an in ways not unlike the way in which some Christians exalt Jesus as more God than human. We may share the Muslim view that the Qur'an is a truly remarkable document, that its origins are unique, even that in many ways it surpasses the Christian scriptures, for example, in literary style, in internal coherence, and in relative freedom from offensive invective. But Christians in general, and progressive Christians in particular,

must deny that it is eternal and inerrant. Progressives must insist that it is historically informed and relative.

The question is, then, whether an ahistorical status for the Qur'an is essential to Islam. That is, of course, for Muslims to say, and many of them will undoubtedly say that it is. Are there progressive Muslims who, with the greatest appreciation of the Qur'an and respect for its remarkable origin and nature, nevertheless are open to consideration of its historical character? There are. And they do not thereby cease to be Muslims any more than progressive Christians cease to be Christians when they emphasize the historical Jesus over the otherworldly images of Christ in the Book of Revelation.

Prospects for Progress

If this is so, then we have all the more reason to deplore the recent radical Islamist success in marginalizing progressive Muslims. The U.S. "war on terror" effectively socializes Americans to view all Muslims as radical extremists. Our task as progressive Christians is to help create a friendly and honest context in which Muslims, instead of being put on the defensive, are appreciated for their many contributions in the past and the present and are encouraged to formulate their beliefs in the most convincing way. Today that requires bringing historical consciousness to bear upon religious issues. Progressive Muslim scholars have made a fine beginning. Already it is often the case that progressive Christians and progressive Muslims feel more comfortable with one another than either do with the more rigid and militant members of their own communities.

In the long run there need not always be flat contradictions on basic questions between progressive Muslim teaching and progressive Christian theology. This would not mean that they would cease to differ. Jesus Christ will remain central for Christians, as the Qur'an will for Muslims. We will continue to think out of our Christian history; Muslims, out of theirs. The goal is not unity. Diversity, rather than leading to opposition and antagonism, can be experienced as an enrichment of both parties. Each can challenge the other to grow into God's fullness. The proper goal in any Christian-Muslim dialog should be that Christians come away from it becoming better Christians, and that Muslims also become better Muslims in the process of free and open interfaith discussion.

One important potential of the interaction between these two communities comes from their different relations to the Western Enlightenment. Progressive Christians have been deeply shaped by this, but today we are trying to overcome its destructive consequences deriving from the Enlightenment's overemphasis upon individual liberty at the expense of community well being. In addition to making the individual the measure of all things, the Enlightenment served to exalt scientific methodologies that overtime encouraged a compartmentalization of human experience, an approach well suited to rational discourse but falling short of effectively incorporating the whole of personal and social and ecological life, rather than a few of the fragments left to it by an exaggerated scientific rationalism. Despite these negatives, Progressive Christians do not seek to undo positive advances made because of the Enlightenment. That which is sought is a better balance between expanding perceived needs of individuals and the over-all health of the greater community.

Islam, on the other hand, has not been inwardly informed by this history. However, it has been "outwardly informed." Western-dominated processes such as colonization, colonial education, and most recently globalization have tended to associate these ideas with both western imperial dominance and Muslim subservience. Nonetheless, individual Muslims have come to appreciate the full range of rights and responsibilities that were encouraged by Enlightenment principles; but Middle Eastern strong-arm rulers receiving financial, political and military support from the West have thwarted indigenous Muslim democratic expressions. The growth of Islamic fundamentalist ideologies has arisen in part as a meaningful resistance to this unwanted foreign influence over the political life of the Middle East. Accordingly, Muslims are now faced with both internal and external factors that they have to overcome in order to realize their democratic desires as well as their need to acknowledge pluralism within their own societies. It is a difficult bind. Finding a solution to this problem while retaining religious practices and a faith that encompasses and unifies the whole of human life is the growing edge of Islam. In a similar way, overcoming negative results of the Enlightenment provides the growing edge of Christianity.

Each tradition has much to offer the other in a dialogue that recognizes and appreciates differences in an attitude of mutual respect. Christianity has lost much of its past ability to shape western culture that is now effectively conforming to values having little to do with any meaningful aspect of traditional faith. Muslim practices of self-sacrifice, such as witnessed during

the holy month of Ramadan when Muslims go without water, food, and sex during the daylight hours, serves as a reminder of their human frailties and their devotion to a power beyond those frailties. Similar practices need to be recovered by Western Christians where self-denial beyond short waiting periods is commonly regarded as unacceptable. Christians need not convert to Islam to restore these lost practices and virtues, any more than Muslims need to convert to Christianity to grow in the area of individual human rights. All that is necessary is to be inspired by a related religious tradition that perhaps has seen a different side of “the elephant” to grow anew in ways that are pleasing to God/Allah and helpful for the peace, justice and sustainability of the world.

Questions for Consideration:

1. Is it possible to know Christianity by only knowing Christianity? How can coming to know another religious tradition, such as Islam, possibly make a Christian into a better Christian?
2. How does the authority of scripture differ in Christianity and Islam?
3. Is any religion, including Christianity, unchanging? What evidence is provided in the paper that demonstrates that both Christianity and Islam have interpreted their scriptures differently at different times. Is there any one theology that has dominated throughout all ages in Christianity? Have divergent theologies likewise existed within Islam?
4. What are the most striking theological similarities and differences in these two faith traditions?
5. Ideally, what should be the roles of religious custom and individual spiritual discernment in the practice of religion? What aspects of Christianity and Islam are today needed in providing a holy balance?
6. As a Christian, do you engage each day with specific religious practices that effectively transform your “life style.” Do you recognize that Muslims do focus on such practices that play positive roles in their daily living?
7. Compose a list in which you itemize your own complaints of flaws that currently exist within Islamic civilization. Then compose of list of flaws that exist within your own society. Which one of these two lists is longer? Is your judgment “objective” or conditioned by highly

- subjective cultural preferences? Which list do you imagine Jesus would regard as being of the greatest concern?
8. Are theocracies that blend church (mosque) and state beneficial for either religion or government? Should religion inform politics in other ways? Over the centuries, what role has religion played in the politics of both western civilization and Islamic civilization? What role should religion play in contemporary American politics?
 9. Is God on “our side?” Or is God more subtly at work in the struggles of many different sides? Have you seen the bumper sticker, “God Bless the World—No Exceptions?” If you had this bumper sticker, would you put it on your car or would fear of a neighbor’s reactions restrain you?
 10. Can there be world peace without religious peace? What are you and your church doing to help bring about religious peace?
 11. What opportunities exist in your geographic area for a constructive Christian-Muslim dialog? If such a relationship exists, would you be willing to participate in it? If one does not exist, would you be willing to participate in creating one?

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Glossary of Arabic Words

Allah: God.

Caliph: Successor (to the Prophet Muhammad). The last caliphate ended with the Ottoman Empire's demise at the end of World War I.

Hadith: Tradition. The body of tradition from the time of Muhammad and his associates constitutes the basis of sunna, or "beaten path," the standard of Muslim orthodoxy.

Hajj: Annual pilgrimage to the Ka'ba in Mecca. In each Muslim's lifetime, the ideal is to go on this pilgrimage at least once.

Ijma: Agreement among the learned scholars of Islam is the principle whereby religious beliefs become articles of faith. "My people shall never be unanimous in error," said Muhammad.

Itjihad: Independent interpretive judgment that is tolerated among the various schools of thought within Islam.

Jihad: Resistance to forces hostile to God is seen as fully appropriate and necessary, whether those forces manifest themselves in general society or in the interior of one's own soul. The latter is commonly called the Greater Jihad.

Ka'ba: The cubical stone building in the court of the Great Mosque at Mecca. It contains the sacred black rock given by the Angel Gabriel to Abraham (Ibrahim). It is the object of annual pilgrimage, and the worship center to which Muslims turn in prayer five times daily.

Qur'an: Koran: Literally, it means "recitation. The holy book of Islam was given word by word to Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel.

Shar'iah: Islamic law.

Shi'ite: Shi'a, or literally "a partisan" of Ali, the fourth Caliph.

Shirk: Association of anything that is not God with God. Idolatry.

Shura: Consultation. In pre-Islamic Arabia, the various tribes selected their leaders and made major decisions after appropriate consultation. The Qur'an requires this in Islam.

Sufis: Islamic mystics. The word derives from "suf" (rough wool), as that was the material which the early Sufi ascetics selected for their garments. Jesus is their guide.

Sunni: A follower of the Sunna, the "beaten path."



Ummah: The Muslim community.

Ulema: Learned scholars in Muslim tradition and canon law.