

The Quran

An Exploration of the Judeo-Christian roots of Islam

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Chapter 1- Introduction

The Beginnings of Islam

In the 6th century A.D., the Arabian Peninsula was the home of many Semitic tribes who not unlike much of the world at the time were still immersed in polytheistic religion worshipping a pantheon of deities. Into this world was born a man who would have a tremendous impact not only on these Arab tribesmen but on nations far away from his home.

This man of course was Muhammad, the founder of Islam, one of the three main monotheistic religions in the tradition of Abraham that cover the earth today. The renowned prophet of the Muslim people was born in the city of Mecca into the Quraysh tribe. He lost both mother and father at a young age and ultimately came under the care of his uncle, a wealthy merchant and head of his clan. As a young man, he so impressed a rich woman much older than he, so that she offered him marriage. His wife, though over 40 bore him several children including at least two sons who died young and four daughters, the descendants of which would carry on the legacy of Islam.

As a man of means, Muhammad had a fair amount of leisure time which afforded him the opportunity to think about spiritual things. Having lived in a coastal city, he was frequently in contact with the populations of Jewish and Christian peoples who also inhabited the region. This was an important part of the prophet's spiritual formation as he began to compare the beliefs of these other monotheistic religions with his own tribal faith. While married to his very supportive wife Khadijah, he would often withdraw to a cave on Mount Hira outside of the city for reflection and meditation. It was there that he began to receive a long series of revelations apparently from the angel Gabriel who said to him, "You are the messenger of God." Though he could neither read nor write, he memorized these messages and others later transcribed them into the collection of spiritual writings that came to be known as the Quran. Not unlike other prophets who were traditionally carried along by the Spirit, Muhammad experienced the divine message as a heavy weight coming over him. He would hear the ringing of bells and enter a trancelike state when the angelic words were impressed on him.

Though Muhammad had begun his spiritual quest as a polytheist, this was to change as the revelations continued. In Abraham's day, polytheism was the norm, yet many in the Middle East regarded a head of the pantheon known as the "God of the Fathers" with a special reverence. Also known as "God Most High," this deity was the common god of the region and became the One that Abraham was intimately connected with. Likewise despite the polytheism in Arabia in Muhammad's day, many also regarded a chief of the deities known as Allah, and this god became the special divinity to Muhammad and ultimately the only one true god.

With his commission to be a prophet and spread the messages he had received in the cave, Muhammad began to share them with the people of Mecca and initially gained about 70 devoted followers by the year 615. Though his message was received warmly

by some, there was not surprisingly fierce opposition to it by others. His fellow tribesmen were generally very worldly at heart and interested in making money not unlike most of the human race. Muhammad's preaching of monotheism was certainly radical for his contemporaries, but its message was perhaps most offensive because of the threatened economic impact to Mecca. Polytheism with its many idols and shrines was an industry that brought in a fair amount of money to the city, and the call to believe in one God threatened the livelihood of many. Additionally, the moral message that the prophet brought to his fellow tribesmen was also offensive as it threatened the lascivious lifestyle of the people, and finally Muhammad's challenge to the unjust social order and class distinctions that existed in Mecca also raised ire with its inhabitants.

In 622, he and his supporters fled to another town called Medina that was situated to the north of Mecca. The city was inhabited by Jewish and Pagan Arab clans that had been quarrelling for years, and Muhammad was apparently recruited to resolve the rivalries in the city on the condition that they submit to his direction. He enacted a constitution for the city creating a federation of the feuding tribes and seems to have been able to resolve their disputes and gain a position of respect among them. The pagan Arabs converted to Islam while the Jews generally retained their ancestral religion. With tremendous success in Medina, word spread throughout Arabia about him. With the tide in his favor, he ultimately swept back into his home city of Mecca where the city submitted to him in a mass conversion. Within a century of his death in 632, the new religion of the prophet had spread far and wide from the coast of France in the west to India in the east.

Continuity with Judaism and Christianity

Having now sketched a brief history of the man who started a new major monotheistic faith, we turn to focus on his teachings which are presented to us in the Quran. It is perhaps most important to note that Muhammad's exposure to Jews and Christians in his formative years had a profound effect on the development of the new religion. In most respects, the prophet adopted the heritage of Judaism and Christianity as his own and used them as the foundation of Islam.

Over and over again in the Quran we see an acknowledgement of the authenticity of the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Among other passages, the fifth chapter (surah) communicates faith in the revelations that came before: "Indeed, We sent down the Torah, in which was guidance and light. The prophets who submitted [to Allah] judged by it for the Jews, as did the rabbis and scholars by that with which they were entrusted of the Scripture of Allah, and they were witnesses thereto." "And We sent, following in their footsteps, Jesus, the son of Mary, confirming that which came before him in the Torah; and We gave him the Gospel, in which was guidance and light and confirming that which preceded it of the Torah as guidance and instruction for the righteous." (5:44,46) While there is not a complete embrace of the entire Old and New Testaments, Islam nonetheless reveres any book that is associated with a prophet of old, and so the Quran also recognizes the Psalms as the inspired writings of David: "And We have made some of the prophets exceed others [in various ways], and to David We gave the book [of Psalms]." (17:55)

In fact, Islam embraces all of the prophets of those they refer to as the “People of the Scriptures,” that is the Jews and the Christians. From Adam to Jesus, all the important biblical characters are also claimed as prophets in the Muslim faith: “And [mention, O Muhammad], when We took from the prophets their covenant and from you and from Noah and Abraham and Moses and Jesus, the son of Mary; and We took from them a solemn covenant.” (33:7)

In the study of this religion it is important to recognize that Islam views itself as the legitimate successor of both Judaism and Christianity. That is, Islam sees itself as just the most recent development of the one true religion that has been in existence from the beginning. As Christianity emerged from Judaism and understands itself to be its legitimate successor, so does Islam see itself as the heir of both religions, affirming the continuous stream of prophets since the dawn of creation.

The Quran places importance on this continuity of religion asserting that there has only been just one religion evolving in stages since the days of the progenitors of the human race: “And indeed this, your religion, is one religion, and I am your Lord, so fear Me.” (23:52) The backbone of Islam is its ties to the more ancient revelations which it seeks to ratify repeatedly in the Quran: “There was certainly in their stories a lesson for those of understanding. Never was the Qur'an a narration invented, but a confirmation of what was before it and a detailed explanation of all things and guidance and mercy for a people who believe.” (12:111)

Muhammad, as simply the latest in a long series of prophets has the job of reiterating the same message as those who have gone on before him: “Rather, the Prophet has come with the truth and confirmed the [previous] messengers.” (37:37) “Nothing is said to you, [O Muhammad], except what was already said to the messengers before you.” (41:43)

In Muslim theology, each prophet had a certain message to bring, and it sees first Abraham delivering the truth of monotheism. Then Moses came with the morality of the Ten Commandments. Jesus brought the Golden Rule, and Muhammad the final prophet teaches the believers how they should love their neighbor. So for the Muslim, he alone possesses the complete divine revelation. What is possessed by Jews and Christians is simply incomplete by comparison.

While there is common ground for Jews, Christians, and Muslims in what has been inherited from the ancient revelations, it must be said that Islam offers its own rendition and interpretation of many of the stories and traditions from the earlier prophets. While the basic gist of many of the Old Testament stories is preserved in the Quran, there are deviations from the biblical text to varying extents. There are perhaps a number of reasons why this should be so. Of course, some anecdotes needed to be reformatted to fit with Muslim theology as we shall see. But in other cases the stories that the Meccan Jews and Christians orally recounted for Muhammad from the Bible were a little lost in the details when the prophet relayed them to his scribes in the formation of the Quran.

Naturally we wouldn't expect Muhammad's recall to be perfect, and it seems that oral transmission was a source of discrepancy from the original documents.

Chapter 2- Old Testament Parallels

Narratives

Let us begin our analysis of the Quran by comparing those common narratives that are also found in the Bible. Looking first at a good place to start, we focus on the account of the creation story. Not surprisingly, Islam confirms the creation of the heavens and earth in six days just like the account of Genesis. It goes on further to say that the earth was created in the first two days while all forms of life on the planet were brought into being over the next four. And again this is consonant with the Jewish scriptures. However, additional information is provided regarding the creation of the heavens, and we learn that they were fashioned in the span of two days. Interestingly, the Quran teaches that God created "seven layered heavens" (23:17,) and it would seem that this revelation was not a recapitulation of something found in Genesis. Rather, it would appear to be based on the direct experience of the prophet who relates to us his famous Night Journey. In the spirit, he was transported from Mecca to Jerusalem and then through the seven heavens until came to the throne of God himself. Such a fantastic journey is not unusual among the advanced mystics who were brought into the presence of God. It is important to note that the testimony of Christian saints along with the New Testament infer nine ranks of angels who each inhabit a sphere of the heavens. So Muhammad's recollection of seven heavenly planes is perhaps fairly close to reality.

We should also not be surprised that the Muslim scriptures suggest a geocentric solar system as opposed to a heliocentric one. For the ancients, the sun, moon, and stars seemed to move along the course of the sky while the earth stood still. And so the Quran states, "It is not allowable for the sun to reach the moon, nor does the night overtake the day, but each, in an orbit, is swimming."

In terms of the origin of life, the holy book of Islam is fairly profound in suggesting that life on this planet began in the water: "Allah has created every [living] creature from water. And of them are those that move on their bellies, and of them are those that walk on two legs, and of them are those that walk on four." (24:45) Evolutionary science has understood that life began in the seas in its most primitive form before it moved to the land many millions of years later. The Quran indicates that even man, the pinnacle of creation was made from water. Whether or not the prophet was conscious of the symbolism behind his claim, water has long been a representation of life particularly in the arid Middle East. In a spiritual sense, water typifies the divine life force that saturates the creation and upon which everything depends for its existence. But though the Quran makes this important connection to water, it does not fail to keep in line with the Genesis narrative regarding the creation of man. The book states, "Indeed, we created men from sticky clay." (37:11)

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, there are only two forms of sentient beings including men and angels, but Islam adds an additional class to include beings known as the Jinn. The Muslim scriptures say, "He created man from clay like [that of] pottery. And He created the jinn from a smokeless flame of fire." (55:14-15) While angels are said to be spirits without free-will, the jinn are spirit beings that can choose good or evil very much like man. That they exist as a unique feature of Islamic theology is a mark of the indigenous polytheistic religion that pervaded the Arabian Peninsula before the time of Muhammad.

Originally worshipped as a host of nature spirits, they were ultimately absorbed into the framework of Islam as beings with supernatural powers that have a sway over men. In pre-historic Arabia, such spirits were often revered as "good and rewarding gods" (e.g, the Genie of the Lamp,) but others were considered as evil. Triggering on patriarchal bias, the latter were typically viewed as female spirits who spread disease among humanity and were responsible for infertility among other maladies. In modern Islam, the jinn are a spiritual breed made up of good and bad and are largely behind the actions of men, and it is particularly in Islam's rendition of the Fall of Adam that this is so.

Whereas in the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is an angel that goes astray, in the Muslim tradition it is an evil jinn that first becomes corrupted. The Quran tells us that at the creation of man, the angels were told to prostrate themselves before the newly created Adam, and in obedience they carried out this command. Undoubtedly such subservience to man on the part of angels is a foreign idea to those who embrace the Bible, for angels are seen as beings of higher power and importance. But Jews and Christians do understand angels to be in the role of ministering to humanity, and perhaps it is in this respect that Muhammad envisioned the angels assuming the posture of a servant to the human race. In any case, it is implied in the text that the jinn were also required to prostrate themselves, but one character named Iblees refused to do so. When God questioned him as to his refusal, he argued that he was better than mankind, for he was fashioned from fire while men were made from mere mud.

God was not amused by Iblees' protest and condemned him to hell. However Iblees (Satan) asked for a reprieve and it was granted to him until the Day of Resurrection. Iblees also promised that he would be a thorn in man's side until the Last Day comes: "[Satan] said, "Because You have put me in error, I will surely sit in wait for them on Your straight path. Then I will come to them from before them and from behind them and on their right and on their left, and You will not find most of them grateful [to You]. [Allah] said, 'Get out of Paradise, reproached and expelled. Whoever follows you among them - I will surely fill Hell with you, all together.'" (7:16-18) With the background of disobedience established, the passage goes on to recount man's first temptation into sin.

In the account of the Quran, there seems to be only one tree rather than two in the Garden of Eden. And this single tree is equated with the Tree of Life. God forbids the couple from partaking of its fruit, but the deceptive Iblees suggests that it would be to their benefit. He said, "Your Lord did not forbid you this tree except that you become angels

or become of the immortal." (7:20) Though the story is a little altered from the original form, nonetheless the temptation of something appealing is made to the unwary pair, and they succumb to it.

God is of course disappointed with what has happened, but the severity of the event is not nearly as great as understood in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The gist of the Quran's rendition is to say that Adam's offense was much closer to a simple mistake than to a cataclysmic moral failure that would contaminate the whole world. Though the first couple is kicked out of Paradise for the misdeed with the promise that there should be hostility among their descendants, rather than a litany of curses as found in the Genesis narrative, there is instead an immediate act of reconciliation initiated by God. We are told, "Then his Lord chose him (Adam) and turned to him in forgiveness and guided [him]." (20:122)

We get the impression from the Islamic scriptures that human nature really wasn't tarnished by a devastating fall from grace but that the disobedience in the garden was more an error in judgment that could be forgiven like any other sin. Absent from Muslim theology is the idea that the nature of man was suddenly corrupted by humanity's first parents; rather man is still good at his core though he often forgets his true identity in God and is prone to go wayward. Not that there isn't a penalty for sins, especially the punishment of hell for those who habitually turn away from God, but the teachings of Muhammad do not demand the same perfection as the faith of Jews and Christians would require. James the brother of the Lord wrote, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." Yet for the followers of Islam this would be interpreted as an unreasonable condition. Adam's sin was his own without far reaching repercussions. So unlike in the Judeo-Christian system, Islam doesn't seem to need a redeemer to reverse the impact of some primordial failure that was inherited by the human race.

So much for the Muslim theology of the Garden of Eden! After presenting its rendition of the story of Adam and Eve, the Quran doesn't fail to recount the other patriarchs of the Old Testament, and so we turn now to the next sequential figure, Noah. This familiar character is presented as the "preacher of righteousness" that the New Testament labels him. With a mission to turn the people back toward the way of God, Noah initially worked to convert sinners, but he was met with ridicule and resistance. Unimpressed that he was a mere man telling them to believe, they protested that they wouldn't take the message seriously unless a more supernatural being like an angel preached to them.

But God revealed to Noah that his efforts would ultimately be in vain: "No one will believe from your people except those who have already believed, so do not be distressed by what they have been doing." (11:36) So Noah proceeded to build his ship and loaded it with two of every creature as well as his own family and just the few who had believed in God. Once the waters came and the ark was borne upon the waves, Noah saw his son who was not in the boat with him but on a mountain taking refuge from the waters. The patriarch called to him to join him in the ark, but he insisted that he would be safe on the mountain and ultimately drowned.

When Noah questioned God about this matter, he was informed that this son of his was in fact not part of his family, that is the family of faith and so was slated for destruction like the other masses of humanity. In this detail we have a departure from the biblical account, but we are also advised that Noah's son was not the only member of his family who was a disbeliever. Unfortunately his wife was also among the rebellious according to the Quran: "Allah presents an example of those who disbelieved: the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot. They were under two of Our righteous servants but betrayed them, so those prophets did not avail them from Allah at all, and it was said, "Enter the Fire with those who enter." (66:10)

Though the Quran only offers a few brief synopses of the story of Noah there are more anecdotes about the central figure of all three monotheistic religions, the patriarch Abraham. The main biblical accounts of the one that was called "the friend of God" are recapitulated in familiar form. The story of Abraham and the Three Visitors is recounted for us more or less without exception to the biblical account. There is the offering of a fattened calf to the guests along with a divine prediction that Sarah will have a son followed by the haggling over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Mention is made of Abraham's nephew Lot who is identified as one of the righteous and a prophet to his city, and of course his message fell on deaf ears. Apparently Lot spoke out about sexual immorality which is intimated in the Genesis story: "Do you indeed approach men with desire instead of women? Rather, you are a people behaving ignorantly." (27:55) Consequently the messengers of God had left Abraham and made their way to the city to rescue him and his family. When they arrived, Lot found it necessary to protect his guests from the sexual advances of his townsmen, and like the biblical account we are told that he offered his daughters to them instead.

Regarding the family of Lot, the Quran is less than sympathetic to his wife compared the Genesis' account: "The angels said, 'O Lot, indeed we are messengers of your Lord; [therefore], they will never reach you. So set out with your family during a portion of the night and let not any among you look back - except your wife; indeed, she will be struck by that which strikes them.'" (11:81) The angels had told Abraham a little earlier, "We will surely save him and his family, except his wife. She is to be of those who remain behind." (29:33) In a less than charitable description, Lot's wife is referred to as "an old woman among those who remained behind." (26:171) And apparently she and the rest of the city perished when it began to rain down stones upon them.

In addition to these two popular narratives, the Quran also recounts the famous account of the testing of Abraham. We are told that the patriarch had prayed for a righteous son and it was granted to him. Without too many intervening details the Muslim scripture gets the point. Without trying to hide it, Abraham tells his son Isaac that he has a dream in which he is instructed to sacrifice him, and we find a more than cooperative Isaac encouraging his father to obey God's will. In the biblical story, the reason for the journey to Mount Moriah is hidden from the boy as it is assumed he wouldn't comply knowing of his own fate. However we are not told whether or not there was a struggle when

Abraham ultimately bound his son and laid him upon the altar of sacrifice. The Islamic rendition of the story is perhaps a nice tribute not only to Abraham's but also to Isaac's faith in being a willing participant in this sacrifice.

While the biblical parallels to Abraham and Isaac end with these familiar stories, the Quran offers other accounts of Abraham and his sons which importantly tie in with the polytheistic heritage of the Muslim religion. Three times in the Muslim scriptures it is mentioned that Abraham and Ishmael (the presumed progenitor of the Arabians) travelled to Mecca and built the sacred house of Islam. The shrine known as the Kaaba is the main focal point for the Muslim religion as St. Peter's Basilica is for Catholics and the city of Jerusalem is for Jews. Muhammad writes of this work of the patriarch saying, "And [mention] when Abraham was raising the foundations of the House and [with him] Ishmael, [saying], "Our Lord, accept [this] from us. Indeed You are the Hearing, the Knowing." (2:127)

While the building in its present form has undoubtedly been rebuilt and remodeled a number of times over the millennia, it is clear that historically it was a center of polytheistic worship. And Muslims do not deny that this was so before the time of Muhammad. However, followers of Islam assert that originally it was a worship center for the true faith as established by Abraham which unfortunately got taken over by pagans sometime in the distant past.

In pre-Muslim Mecca, the Kaaba was a temple that housed apparently 360 idols, one for each day of the lunar year and drew in a lot of revenue for the city. Pagan deities would often be worshipped in the form of rectangular or cubic rocks, and it seems that this was the case in the Kaaba. When Muhammad introduced the new monotheistic religion to the city, he necessarily purged it of its idols, but curiously he left just one stone in the Kaaba which has become a major relic to the Muslim faithful to this day.

The famous Black Stone was a large meteoric rock that was originally worshipped as "the Goddess who came down from Heaven." Its dark color was identified with the black rich earth and therefore with a fertility goddess, an important figure in early religious thought throughout ancient civilizations. When Islam appropriated the Kaaba for itself, it left the Black Stone in place because it saw in it a far more ancient significance than its polytheistic heritage. According to Muslim tradition, the stone fell from the sky to show Adam and Eve where they were to offer sacrifices to God, and so it was on that spot Abraham and his son build the sacred temple.

It is believed that the stone was originally a brilliant white, but has subsequently absorbed many sins which have turned it black. Muslims are often charged with worshipping this stone, but they vehemently contend that their reverence for the rock is simply out of respect for Muhammad who established the practice of kissing it, perhaps not unlike how Christian priests kiss the altar upon which they offer Sacrifice.

Interestingly, some Muslim scholars link the Black Stone with David's words in the Psalms: "the stone that the builders rejected." In this regard, they see Ishmael and his

descendants (the Islamic Arabs) as the un-favored son of Abraham. But though the descendants of Isaac were designated as the original keepers of the true faith, the followers of Islam see a reversal in their secondary status in Jesus' Parable of the Vineyard. They understand that the prophet Jesus predicted that the kingdom would be ripped away from the unfaithful descendants of Isaac and given instead to their long-term rivals, the descendants of Ishmael. As guardians of the most recent divine revelation through the prophet Muhammad, Muslims believe they have assumed this status.

The Quran has ample to say about Abraham, but doesn't do more than mention the names of the prophets Isaac and Jacob. Skipping over those two patriarchs, it devotes an entire chapter to the story of Joseph which is more or less a condensation of ten of the later chapters of Genesis.

Islam's rendition of the story parallels the biblical account fairly well, though there are nuances with certainly theological overtones that we will address later. The account starts off almost identically to the Genesis narrative but begins to diverge once Joseph appears as a slave in Egypt. There we see Joseph as the servant of one al-'Azeez, the Arabic equivalent of the biblical Potiphar. Though in the Genesis tale Joseph is unjustly imprisoned for allegedly making sexual advances to Potiphar's wife, the Quran spins it a little differently.

In the Islamic scriptures, Joseph had his shirt torn from him as both he and the master's wife ran to the door. Then to their surprise, her husband appeared in the doorway to assess the situation. The wife accused Joseph, and Joseph accused the wife of wrongdoing, so the master took the advice of a family member in making a judgment of the situation. It was suggested that if the shirt was torn from the front, then the master's wife was telling the truth, but if the shirt was torn from the back, then Joseph was the one with integrity.

As it turned out, it was evident that the shirt was torn from the back, so the master believed Joseph, and he was exonerated of the allegations made by his adulterous wife. So the Quran makes sure to paint al-'Azeez's wife as a clear villain. Nonetheless, to remain faithful with the Genesis story, somehow Joseph must end up in prison before his ascendancy to power in the Egypt. The Quran suggests that in his piousness, Joseph requested that God arrange for his imprisonment to avoid any more temptations to sin at the hands of his master's wife. And so without providing details, the Muslim scriptures tell us that al-'Azeez planned to "imprison him for a time." (12:35)

The Joseph narrative then continues much like the biblical story with a little variation and embellishments relative to the Genesis account. Joseph is depicted interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh, rising to power in the land, and then encountering his brothers who came from Canaan to buy grain during the famine. Probably the most interesting addition to the story is found toward the end when Joseph's brothers are told to go back to Canaan and bring Jacob back with them. The account says that Joseph instructed his brothers, "Take this, my shirt, and cast it over the face of my father; he will become seeing. And bring me your family, all together." (12:93) This extra note seems to be a

confusion with the story of Isaac whom we are told was nearly blind at the time that Jacob deceived him for the coveted birthright. Of course in that story, Jacob had donned the shirt of his brother Esau to smell like his brother. So it seems that this older story was somehow superimposed on the Joseph account, though it would appear that Islam illustrates an appreciation for the power of relics in working miracles through this addendum to the narrative.

Moving on from the patriarchs, it is probably Moses of all the biblical characters which receives the most attention in the Quran. Many of the important stories are recapitulated including the early life of the prophet, the exodus, and the events in the wilderness, and of course Islam's holy book offers its own perspective on these stories. Like in the Book of Exodus, the Quran initially recounts the difficulties that the children of Israel were experiencing in Egypt. It is noted that there was a campaign to slaughter all of the male Israelite children while sparing the females to later become assimilated among the Egyptians. It is said that Moses' mother was inspired by God to place him in a chest and cast it in the river with the understanding that it would wash up on shore. Apparently it was the plan of God that Moses be taken into the royal family to ultimately punish the evil monarch: "there will take him an enemy to Me and an enemy to him." (20:39) According to the Quran it was the wife of Pharaoh that suggested that Moses be adopted, and her evil husband notwithstanding, the Islamic scriptures say that she was a righteous woman: "And Allah presents an example of those who believed: the wife of Pharaoh, when she said, 'My Lord, build for me near You a house in Paradise and save me from Pharaoh and his deeds and save me from the wrongdoing people.'" (66:11)

At the time when the children of Israel were under oppression in Egypt, the Muslim holy book mentions that Pharaoh had a minister that we presume was helping him to carry out his misdeeds. Interestingly, Muhammad names that accomplice as Haman, and of course we recall that it was a man by this name that planned the destruction of the Jewish people under the Persians in the Book of Esther. Whether the choice of this name was simply due to a confusing of stories or a deliberate allusion to the campaign of Jewish persecution is not clear. But further on in the Quran, Haman is cited again with what appears to be a reference to the Tower of Babel: "And Pharaoh said, 'O Haman, construct for me a tower that I might reach the ways - The ways into the heavens - so that I may look at the deity of Moses; but indeed, I think he is a liar.'" (40:36-37) What is clear from this and other passages is that Muhammad understood that all of the events of Moses' life were linked with one Pharaoh, whereas historically it seems there were probably a few spanning the life of the prophet.

Besides the narrative concerning his birth, the Quran also recapitulates the biblical incident in which Moses killed an Egyptian. While the Exodus account indicates that it was the deliberate taking of a life, Islam's holy book plays it down suggesting that Moses only unintentionally killed the oppressor. Perhaps out of its great respect for this prophet, Islam does not wish to link one of the premier prophets with murder, while the Judeo-Christian tradition seems to have less of a problem with its main Old Testament character committing a serious sin. Nonetheless, the Quran tells us that Moses asked God for forgiveness, and God granted it to him: "He said, 'My Lord, indeed I have wronged

myself, so forgive me,' and He forgave him." (28:16) What this illustrates again is that within the Muslim religion, divine forgiveness is not predicated on atonement, sacrifice, or some other form of reparation but is solely based on the divine will. Those who are trying to live a good life usually receive God's mercy and those who are following evil do not. While the Islamic scriptures play down Moses' culpability in this affair, in another passage the prophet does assume some guilt for the deed. Later on when he returns from Midian to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt, Pharaoh questions how he could have killed another Egyptian when he was well treated in the royal house. Moses replied to him, "I did it, then, while I was of those astray. So I fled from you when I feared you. Then my Lord granted me wisdom and prophethood and appointed me [as one] of the messengers." (26:20-21)

The Quran does indeed relate Moses' flight to Midian where according to the Bible he lived for 40 years. We are told the familiar story of how he rescued the daughters of Jethro from unfriendly shepherds and then proceeded to water their flocks for them. The account deviates from the Exodus narrative when after being invited back to Jethro's home, the priest of Midian offers his daughter in marriage to Moses on the condition that he serve him for eight years. The biblical narrative omits this detail which seems to be more of a throwback to the deal between Laban and Jacob.

After Moses' marriage, we are told that his family was travelling when he came upon the Burning Bush which for all the monotheistic religions is the great commission for the prophet. In the Quranic account, Moses is given two signs to bring back to Egypt to prove his credentials including the turning of his staff into a serpent and the turning of his hand leprous upon concealing it in his cloak. He is also given his brother Aaron as his spokesman and partner in the important mission that is to be carried out.

The Muslim scriptures recount how Moses and Aaron appeared in Pharaoh's court and challenged them to believe their message. Then took place the contest between God's prophet and the court magicians who each threw down their staffs. As we read in the biblical account, Moses' staff consumed those of the magicians and so won the challenge. It is at this point that the Quran informs us that the magicians were convinced of Moses' message and believed in God. Pharaoh proceeded to threaten them: "I will surely cut off your hands and your feet on opposite sides, and I will surely crucify you all." But the magicians filled with great faith replied, "No harm. Indeed, to our Lord we will return." (26:49-50)

Of course, Pharaoh hardened his heart all the more after this showdown, and so inevitably the plagues came upon Egypt to break down their resistance. The Quran reports five plagues that were sent upon the Egyptians: "So We sent upon them the flood and locusts and lice and frogs and blood as distinct signs, but they were arrogant and were a criminal people." (7:133) Interestingly, the Islamic scriptures do not identify the Ten Plagues that are related in the book of Exodus but do claim that there were Nine Signs given to Moses. Five of these were the indicated plagues in addition to the signs he was given at the Burning Bush of turning the staff into a serpent and his hand into a leprous white. The other two signs are not quite as obvious but Muslim scholars identify two other

scriptures: “And We certainly seized the people of Pharaoh with years of famine and a deficiency in fruits that perhaps they would be reminded.” (7:130) “[Allah] said, ‘We will strengthen your arm through your brother and grant you both supremacy so they will not reach you. [It will be] through Our signs; you and those who follow you will be the predominant.’” (28:35) Apparently one reference is to a famine in Egypt and the other is to the divine protection afforded to Moses and Aaron from their enemies.

After the plagues were sent, the Quran tells of Israel’s exodus from Egypt and crossing of the Red Sea in which their Egyptian pursuers were drowned. It relates how the people were fed with both manna and quail in their desert wanderings and then spends some time on the events of Mt. Sinai. When Moses had gone up the mountain for 40 days to receive instruction from God, the people became impatient and fell into idolatry in molding a Golden Calf as the Bible also makes plain. However in protecting the good name of Aaron, the Quran does not put the blame on Moses’ brother but on a figure named Samiri who is said to have fashioned the image for the people.

The Quran suggests that Aaron had warned the people about this folly ahead of time: “And Aaron had already told them before [the return of Moses], ‘O my people, you are only being tested by it, and indeed, your Lord is the Most Merciful, so follow me and obey my order.’” So Aaron’s responsibility is greatly diminished compared to the Exodus’ account. As we know from the biblical story, God tipped Moses off to the trouble the people were getting into, and when he came down the mountain he threw the Two Stone Tablets on the ground. However in the Quran, the tablets are not shattered but picked up again whole by the prophet. There is no mention of Moses needing to climb up the mountain to get another set to replace the originals.

While the Islamic scriptures recapitulate many biblical stories, it should be noted that they have a number of their own unique narratives including one about Moses. In the story, Moses is out on a journey and meets up with a servant of God who tries to teach him patience. He instructs Moses that whatever he sees this servant of God do, he is not to question it or object to it. Three episodes are presented which each challenge Moses to complain to the servant. In the first, he and his spiritual companion board a ship, and the servant of God tears it up making it unseaworthy. In the second, Moses and his new friend come across a boy on the road, and the servant kills him. And in the third, the pair enter a town where they are shunned and shown no hospitality, and despite this, the servant of God repairs a broken down wall for them.

In each of these instances, Moses is outraged by the apparent injustice or absurdity of the deeds of his friend and protests vehemently. What he doesn’t know is that there was a very good reason behind each of the seemingly unjust or undeserved acts. In the first episode, the servant of God explained that the ship belonged to poor people working at sea, and by damaging the boat he prevented it from being confiscated by a king who seized every good ship by force. In the second vignette, the servant of God pointed out that the boy had believing parents, and he ultimately would have been a burden to them because of his grave sins. And in the third scenario, the servant of God revealed that

under the wall was buried treasure which was the property of a righteous man and was hidden for his two orphan sons to discover upon reaching maturity.

Of course these three scenes teach the same message, a message that is not unique to Islam but common to people of faith. Human reason can never explain the mysterious and apparently unfair ways of God which have a purpose behind them that is often beyond our comprehension. Rather than object to something that seems tragic and impatiently complain, people are called to have the faith that God knows what is best. After Moses and the patriarchs, the Quran also treats other Old Testament characters to a lesser degree. A brief mention is made of Job who is commended as a patient and excellent servant. It is acknowledged that he was tried sorely by Satan, but in its brief passage on the man of God, the Muslim scripture emphasizes God's consolations to him. An extra-biblical claim is made that God provided him with refreshing water from the ground: "Strike [the ground] with your foot; this is a [spring for] a cool bath and drink." (38:42) And the Quran seems to recall Job's restoration when it says, "And We granted him his family and a like [number] with them as mercy from Us and a reminder for those of understanding." (38:43)

A short passage is also dedicated to Elijah who defended the name of God against the servants of Baal, and honorable mention is also made for Elijah's servant Elisha. The popular story of Jonah is also recapitulated in brevity from the time he was swallowed by the whale until he preached to the people of Nineveh and they converted to God.

The Quran gives more attention to the first few kings of Israel in retelling biblical narratives as well as introducing its own anecdotes about the famous men. One story is told of Saul who took his soldiers down to a river to be tested before entering a battle with Goliath and his soldiers. We are told that those who abstained from drinking would go into battle while those who indulged their thirst would be disqualified except for those who cupped the water in their hands and brought it up to their mouths. The passage concludes by remarking how such a small group of chosen soldiers could defeat a much larger enemy.

It seems very likely that Muhammad confused the story of Gideon and his battle against the Midianites with the adventures of Saul and the Philistines. In the biblical account of Gideon, the men were separated by the criterion of whether they lapped the water with their tongues like a dog versus cupping it with their hands and bringing it up to their mouths. It is also possible that Muhammad knowingly re-appropriated the story of Gideon for another purpose, but it is more probable that the stories that were transmitted to him by the Jews of Mecca were not always properly recalled.

After Saul, there are several passages in the Quran which deal with David. Probably because of his vast military exploits, the Islamic scriptures suggest that David learned how to work iron. We are told that he was commanded, "Make full coats of mail and calculate [precisely] the links, and work [all of you] righteousness." (34:11) The Islamic scriptures also remember David's major fall into sin and recount the biblical story of Nathan's rebuke in a different form. Rather than the prophet approaching David with his

parable, the Quran depicts two men climbing over his wall into his prayer chamber who explain that they are adversaries. One says that he had one sheep and it was confiscated by the other who had ninety-nine, and the story provokes David's remorseful response that is also told in the bible. While the bible doesn't specify how many sheep the rich man had, it seems likely that Muhammad adapted Jesus' Parable of the Lost Sheep which mentions the ninety-nine and the one.

Regarding Solomon, the Quran seems to have yet more to say than his father. Probably because of the bible's reference to this great king's wisdom, the Muslim holy book developed its own particular anecdotes about him. The bible mentions that Solomon "taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish," and it seems that the Quran extrapolated from this that the king had learned to decipher the language of the animals, particularly the birds. In fact, knowing how to communicate with them, Solomon employed birds as well as men and jinn in his army. With his great wisdom, the Islamic scriptures also assert that Solomon had power over nature and could control the wind at his command. Probably remembering Solomon's great construction efforts, the Quran relates that God had made to flow for him a spring of liquid copper with which the jinn made bowls and kettles and other articles (presumably for the temple.)

There are yet other biblical narratives found in the Quran, and we will present some of them in the context of our discussion of Muslim theology. But suffice it to say, the Quran also has its own unique stories, and we conclude this treatment of narrative by sketching one popular story of the famous She-Camel. The Islamic scriptures speak of the tribe of Thamud which met with an unsavory fate following their dealings with a prophet from God. The people of Thamud had fallen into wicked ways and were entrenched in material pursuits, so God as he often does sent them a prophet calling for their conversion.

The people weren't responsive to his preaching and demanded that he prove himself by performing a miracle. They demanded that he produce an undeniable sign. Pointing at a rock they insisted, "Ask your Lord to make a she camel, which must be 10 months pregnant, tall and attractive, issue from the rock for us." And in an act of mercy, God granted this stupendous miracle for the people. Yet though some people of Thamud then believed, many persisted in their unbelief, perhaps not unlike those who witnessed the miracles of Christ.

It is said that the miraculous camel would drink all of the water in the wells in one day leaving none for man or beast. Yet the creature produced milk sufficient for all of the people to drink. While the animal was certainly a marvel to behold, not everyone was happy with it.

Despite the wonder of this animal, we are informed that the people conspired against it to kill it. As it was a living testimony to the words of the prophet whom the people now hated, they thought to do away with it. The prophet warned them against harming the creature: "O my people! This she camel of Allah is a sign to you, leave her to feed on Allah's earth, and touch her not with evil lest a near torment will seize you." (11:64)

Nonetheless a conspiracy succeeded. The plotters watched the camel when it was drinking at the well, and one of them shot it in the leg with an arrow so that it was hamstrung. Then the assailant cut the other leg immobilizing it before running it through with a sword.

Tragically, this deed spelled annihilation for the tribe, and three days after the She-Camel was exterminated, severe earthquakes rattled the land that shook so violently that all living creatures perished. So concludes a message about the dangers of unbelief!

Monotheism

We turn now to the theology of Islam, particularly how it relates to the Old Testament and the beliefs of Judaism. Central to the Abrahamic religions is the belief in one God, and this is no less important for Muslims than it is for Christians or Jews. One could probably say that it is the central tenet of Islam and the foundation of the entire faith. Like the Jewish Shema, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One” is the Islamic Profession of Faith, “There is no god, but God ...” And there is probably no greater theme in the entire Quran than defending the monotheistic principle against the worship of many gods.

Despite being a monotheistic religion, Islam like Judaism before it refers to God in the plural. The Book of Genesis uses plural pronouns frequently such as in the creation of man: “Let us create man in our own image.” Ironically, this terminology is a vestige of earlier polytheistic traditions but remained in place as a deference to the heritage of the past. The Hebrew term for God, Elohim means literally “gods” and yet in practice it refers only to the one true God. Islam seems to have followed the Old Testament in using the plural pronouns “we/us” prolifically in the Quran.

However, though it follows this tradition, it no more means to imply polytheism than Judaism. In actuality, the Muslim religion is just as dogmatic about its monotheism as its predecessor and both are certainly intolerant of the Christian monotheism which understands a plurality within the Godhead itself. For both religions the anti-Trinitarian argument is primarily based on a rejection of the transcendent God of the universe becoming a finite man. For Judaism, the Book of Numbers is often cited as a proof text for such foolishness: “God is not a man that he should lie.” And Islam carries the torch in this vain. At least a dozen times in the Quran there is a condemnation of the idea of God having a son supported with various arguments.

The Muslim faith argues that God is too lofty to have begotten a son, and it cites this conviction in a rebuke of Christians: “O People of the Scripture, do not commit excess in your religion or say about Allah except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, was but a messenger of Allah and His word which He directed to Mary and a soul [created at a command] from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers. And do not say, ‘Three’; desist - it is better for you. Indeed, Allah is but one God. Exalted is He above having a son.” (4:171)

The Quran also poses an argument which would certainly be hard to counter when thinking of the capricious gods of the Roman and Greek pantheons: "Allah has not taken any son, nor has there ever been with Him any deity. [If there had been], then each deity would have taken what it created, and some of them would have sought to overcome others." (23:91) Naturally, if the gods were as fickle as humans, they would inevitably be fighting with each other as Islam maintains, and so a power struggle would always exist within a so-called Trinity.

But Islam also argues against God having a son on the basis of him having no partner: "Praise to Allah, who has not taken a son and has had no partner in [His] dominion and has no [need of a] protector out of weakness; and glorify Him with [great] glorification." (17:111) [He is] Originator of the heavens and the earth. How could He have a son when He does not have a companion and He created all things? (6:101)

Its fierce anti-Trinitarian stance aside, the Quran devotes many narratives to the evils of polytheism and worshipping idols. Joshua had told the children of Israel that their forefathers including Terah the father of Abraham lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshipped other gods. Perhaps keying off of this information, Muhammad developed a story in which Abraham the first monotheist confronts his father and his people about their wrongdoing.

When Abraham questions his people about their worship of idols, they respond that they do so because their fathers before them also worshipped graven images. The patriarch informs them of their error, and the people imagine he is joking. But Abraham is very serious and when his countrymen go away, he proceeds to crush all of their idols except for one. When they question Abraham about whether it was he who broke their statues, he cleverly recommends that the people ask the remaining image who did it. Knowing full well that with eyes they cannot see, nor with mouths can they speak he catches them in their folly. For this they tried to burn him in the fire, but God said, "O fire, be coolness and safety upon Abraham." So Abraham was spared from their intention to harm him. While Terah is usually spoken of with matter-of-factness in the bible, the Quran has harsh words to say about him. We are told that Abraham used to pray that his father be forgiven because of his iniquity, "but when it became apparent to Abraham that his father was an enemy to Allah, he disassociated himself from him." (9:114)

Though Abraham's attempt to convert the people of his native land was a failure, there are other success stories narrated in the Quran. In particular, Muhammad's rendition of the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba ends happily when the pagan queen accepts the one true God. The story begins with one of Solomon's hoopoe birds reporting back to him about its travels to and fro. The king is informed that the bird has discovered a woman with a great throne ruling over the people of Sheba. And it reveals that the queen and her people are entrenched in the worship of false gods: "I found her and her people prostrating to the sun instead of Allah."

So Solomon writes the queen a letter inviting her to come to him and submit to the worship of the one God. After an exchange of letters, the queen finally decides to visit

the king, but while in transit, Solomon arranges for a sign that would surely convince the queen to abandon her old way of worship. He instructs one of the jinn in his service to go fetch her throne. In the twinkle of an eye, the spirit returns to Jerusalem with the queen's throne, and Solomon disguises it. When the queen arrives he asks her if she recognizes her throne, and the bewildered monarch is full of surprise to see her property. Then the queen is invited to enter the palace hall which appears like a pool of water. Pulling up her dress she prepares to wade through it, when she realizes it is a hard surface, for Solomon had made it of glass clear and smooth. Convinced of God's greatness she says, "My Lord, indeed I have wronged myself, and I submit with Solomon to Allah, Lord of the worlds." (27:44)

As mentioned earlier, Islam's form of monotheism is very much akin to Judaism's. It is not only one indivisible God that they embrace but also very importantly one that is forbidden to be represented by any image or statue. For the Jews this tradition was based on the Ten Commandments themselves where they were instructed, "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below." Muslims also clung to this principle and actually exerted quite an influence even upon Christendom through their conviction.

After the rise of Islam in the 7th century and its subsequent invasion of the Near East, the Muslim World became neighbors to the Christian stronghold of Byzantium to the west. That Christians made use of pictures and statues of Christ and the saints as aids to prayer and worship was a detestable thing to the devout Muslim. Ultimately the exchange of ideas that came through contact with the Muslim world brought back to Byzantium a distaste for the use of images and spurred the iconoclastic controversy that raged within the church in the 8th century.

There had been a number of events that caused some friction between the leaders of both worlds like when Justinian II put a full faced image of Jesus on Byzantine gold coins which greatly offended the nearby ruler of a Muslim community. But it seems that the iconoclastic issue fully entered the political arena when Leo III began to have dialogue with the Caliph of Damascus. The caliph tried to convert him, and though he didn't succeed, he did convince him that images were wrong which in turn got the attention of iconoclastic sympathizing bishops. Leo saw the issue as a stumbling block to the conversion of both Jews and Muslims to the Christian faith and along with other factors decided that Christianity needed to be free of this superstitious practice. After a conflict that raged within the church for over a century, in the end the use of images was permitted. However, it was no longer an unrestricted practice, for the Iconoclasts had succeeded in forbidding the use of three dimensional images while permitting the veneration of only two dimensional pictures.

At this time, Western Europe was more or less insulated from these debates and from the influences of Islam on the church. And this persisted up until the time of the collapse of the Byzantine Empire in the 15th century when eastern Christendom fell under the power of the Ottoman Turks. At that point, both cultures came into closer contact, and we can probably say that at least one contributor to the Reformation was the iconoclastic posture

of Europe's Muslim neighbors. Protestantism by and large adopted radical iconoclasm, and many medieval churches suffered the brutal destruction of statues, pictures, and all sorts of religious artifacts at the hands of the Reformers. Churches were all but stripped bare in this period, even to the extent of ripping out the ornate organs which were considered an abomination.

There were a number of fundamental similarities between Islam and Protestantism including a fierce opposition to the use of images in worship, the denial of marriage as a sacrament, and the rejection of the monastic tradition. As a result there arose a certain kinship between the two religions which regarded themselves a lot closer theologically than either was to Catholicism.

Consequently Protestant monarchs sought to capitalize on these similarities by seeking alliances with the Turkish Sultan as they looked for help in their wars against the Catholics. In a correspondence with Elizabeth I of England the Sultan Murad III indicated that he felt that Islam and Protestantism had "much more in common than either did with Roman Catholicism as both rejected the worship of idols," and he argued for an alliance between England and the Ottoman Empire. Suleiman the Magnificent sent a letter to "Lutherans" in Flanders, claiming that he felt close to them, "since they did not worship idols, believed in one God and fought against the Pope and Emperor" and he offered them troops. There still exist many of the letters exchanged between Protestant leaders and the Ottoman Sultans, emphasizing these similarities and seeking their alliance against the Catholic powers, and politically such alliances made a lot of sense.

Justice and Retribution

Monotheism is certainly a fundamental precept of the Muslim faith, but of course there are many other facets to this religion which mirror the face of the Old Testament. The concept of justice and retribution which permeates the Mosaic faith is also reflected in Islam. Yahweh repeatedly breathed threats to the children of Israel which inspired a healthy fear of the immense and omnipotent God of heaven that they worshipped. Muslims preserve this element of fear in their concept of God who will certainly repay those who fail to obey his commands. We see this sentiment early in the Quran where the prophet states, "The believers are only those who, when Allah is mentioned, their hearts become fearful, and when His verses are recited to them, it increases them in faith; and upon their Lord they rely." (8:2)

Islam very much understands God as an accountant who keeps track of what good and bad they have done. "So whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it, and whoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it." (99:7-8) Muhammad commands, "When you are greeted with a greeting, greet [in return] with one better than it or [at least] return it [in like manner.] Indeed Allah is ever, over all things, an Accountant."

The Old Testament God of Wrath is ubiquitous in the Quran, and we frequently have reminders of what happened to the likes of Pharaoh: "[Theirs is] like the custom of the people of Pharaoh and those before them. They denied Our signs, so Allah seized them

for their sins. And Allah is severe in penalty.” (3:11) The Quran is fond of remembering what happened to the people of Noah’s day, the destruction of Sodom, and what happened to the tribe of Thamud which killed the miraculous she-camel. In this way it seeks to foster obedience through the consciousness of punishment which all too often is the only language that some people understand. It exhorts its people to “fear the Fire, which has been prepared for disbelievers.” (3:131-132)

Animal Sacrifice

Among many ancient peoples including those of the Old Testament we find the need to appease and mollify the god who has it within his power to punish those who are disloyal to him. Animal sacrifice played a major role in the worship of our ancestors and that tradition also entered into Islam. Though Judaism had long before abandoned blood sacrifices to God when their temple was destroyed, Islam preserved the tradition as a form of worship.

The Quran speaks of the pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj) which is enjoined on all believers once in their lives, but it seems that if the pilgrimage is not practical, a believer can offer sacrifice instead: “And complete the Hajj and 'umrah for Allah . But if you are prevented, then [offer] what can be obtained with ease of sacrificial animals. And do not shave your heads until the sacrificial animal has reached its place of slaughter.” (2:196) Worthy of note in this passage is the command not to cut one’s hair which seems to be a parallel to the Jewish Nazirite vow in which one would let his hair grow until the vow was completed.

The Quran mentions the popular animals for use in sacrifice: “And the camels and cattle We have appointed for you as among the symbols of Allah; for you therein is good. So mention the name of Allah upon them when lined up [for sacrifice]; and when they are [lifeless] on their sides, then eat from them and feed the needy and the beggar.” (22:36) Unlike the ancients who believed that their sacrifices were in some way feeding the gods, Islam is not under this allusion: “Their meat will not reach Allah, nor will their blood, but what reaches Him is piety from you.” (22:37) So the ritual has only the gesture of gratitude to God in mind.

Dietary Laws

The slaughter of animals for general consumption and not just for sacrifice has a ritual protocol in Islam as intimated by the previous quotations. It is a requirement to say the name of God over the beast while its throat is slit. Like Judaism, Islam observes strict religious laws regarding the processing of animals and about which foods are licit to consume. In Judaism this code is known as “halakha” which seems to be of the same Semitic root from which Islam’s “halal” derives.

For both religions, it is forbidden to consume blood and therefore slaughter requires the cutting of the jugular vein so that all of the blood spills out of the dying animal. Like in the Mosaic Law, it is also prohibited in Islam to eat the flesh of animals that have died

naturally or in any way that prevents the blood from being drained: “Prohibited to you are dead animals, blood, the flesh of swine, and that which has been dedicated to other than Allah, and [those animals] killed by strangling or by a violent blow or by a head-long fall or by the goring of horns, and those from which a wild animal has eaten, except what you [are able to] slaughter [before its death], and those which are sacrificed on stone altars, and [prohibited is] that you seek decision through divining arrows.” (5:3)

Muhammad summarizes general food restrictions saying, “He has only forbidden to you dead animals, blood, the flesh of swine, and that which has been dedicated to other than Allah.” (2:173) It is very interesting that this 4 prong commandment has a strong resemblance to the decision of the Jerusalem Council in 50 A.D. This strongly Jewish-Christian council was trying to determine which regulations to impose upon Gentile believers, and they decided to tell them “to abstain from food polluted to idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals, and from blood.”

It seems that Muhammad adapted this early Judeo-Christian decision for Islam as well. While the Quran’s version of the council’s statement does not mention the flesh of swine, it does in a number of other places. Following the Jewish tradition, it is imperative for the Muslim faithful to avoid eating pork. Islam seems to recognize that Levitical principle in the following passage from the Quran: “And to those who are Jews We prohibited every animal of uncloven hoof; and of the cattle and the sheep We prohibited to them their fat, except what adheres to their backs or the entrails or what is joined with bone.” (6:146) While Islam acknowledges this principle, it seems to be only strict on the pig and not on other animals that might fall into the category of uncloven hoof/non-cud chewer.

Civil and Religious Laws

Besides dietary laws, Islam parallels many of the civil and religious ordinances of the Old Testament. It certainly embraces the concept of justice and retribution as we touched on earlier. The Mosaic precept of “eye for an eye, tooth for tooth” is evident in the legal system of the Muslim faith. The Quran teaches, “So whoever has assaulted you, then assault him in the same way that he has assaulted you.” Revenge killing is sanctioned in Islam much the way that it was recognized in Old Testament times: “And whoever is killed unjustly - We have given his heir authority, but let him not exceed limits in [the matter of] taking life.” (2:194) Because of the possibility of accidental homicide, the Bible provided for cities of refuge to protect the innocent from their irate pursuers. While the Quran does not make a similar provision, it does seek to make amends for wrongful death: “And whoever kills a believer by mistake - then the freeing of a believing slave and a compensation payment presented to the deceased's family [is required] unless they give [up their right as] charity.” (4:92)

The principle of an “eye for an eye” is also very evident in the punishment of common criminals like a thief. While in the Old Testament, the one who has stolen is required to repay up to 4x what has been taken to the victim, Islam seeks to inflict bodily harm as a harsher deterrent. The hand that has pilfered is the hand that shall be lost according to the

Quran: “[As for] the thief, the male and the female, amputate their hands in recompense for what they committed as a deterrent [punishment] from Allah.” (5:38)

In terms of financial law, Islam very much reflects the ancient Jewish tradition of loaning to a fellow believer at no charge. While in the Old Testament a Jew was forbidden to charge interest to a fellow Jew he could do so to a foreigner, and of course this is partly the reason while the Jews living in Christian Europe were often bankers. The Quran on the other hand does not seem to make a distinction between believer and unbeliever but says generally, “Allah has permitted trade and has forbidden interest.” (2:275)

Like many religions, the Muslim faith also seeks to regulate sex, and there are quite a few passages on this subject. Almost mirroring the list of unlawful sexual relations in Leviticus, the Quran prohibits marriage to all close relatives. While the Old Testament is harsher on those who commit adultery than those who have pre-marital sex, Islam is tough on both. The Quran prescribes a brutal corporal punishment for those who are sexual violators: “The [unmarried] woman or [unmarried] man found guilty of sexual intercourse - lash each one of them with a hundred lashes, and do not be taken by pity for them in the religion of Allah.” (24:2)

Like Judaism before it, there is a strong ordinance for believers only to marry other believers. Naturally, such a command seeks to preserve unity among the faithful and prevent the harmful effects of other faiths influencing the religion. The Quran instructs to “marry free, believing women,” and even goes so far to suggest that marriage between a believer and an unbeliever is invalid: “And if you know them to be believers, then do not return them to the disbelievers; they are not lawful [wives] for them, nor are they lawful [husbands] for them.” (60:10)

Muhammad recognizing the difficulties of marriage and providing for human weakness also made ordinances for divorce as did Moses many centuries before him. According to the Quran, a divorce should not be an easy thing; before a woman leaves the home there is to be a waiting period (typically three menstrual cycles) in which the couple are to reconcile: “When you [Muslims] divorce women, divorce them for [the commencement of] their waiting period and keep count of the waiting period, and fear Allah, your Lord. Do not turn them out of their [husbands'] houses, nor should they [themselves] leave [during that period.]” (65:1) While this is theoretically the prescribed protocol, in practice most Muslim communities have recognized a divorce as final when a man says to his wife three times in succession, “I divorce you.”

Like any patriarchal religion, Islam has established policies that foster the control and subjugation of the female gender. Of course, the most well known of these institutions is that of polygamy. Whereas the Jews of old permitted an unlimited number of wives to any man (e.g. Solomon,) the Quran fixes a limit on how many wives a man may take: “Then marry those that please you of [other] women, two or three or four.” (4:3) The Quran advocates that sometimes very strong measures be taken to ensure the submission of a woman to her husband: “But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance - [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them.” (4:34)

Because of constant suspicion on the part of men in a male dominated society, Moses instituted a test to validate whether or not a woman suspected of adultery was in fact guilty. In an elaborate ritual, the prophet more or less designed that a curse be put upon her in the event that she was unfaithful. While Islam does not mirror the ritual, it does provide for a self-imprecation if one accused has been untruthful: “But it will prevent punishment from her if she gives four testimonies [swearing] by Allah that indeed, he (her husband) is of the liars. And the fifth [oath will be] that the wrath of Allah be upon her if he was of the truthful.” (24:8,9)

Indeed, suspicion and superstition are in large part the basis of a patriarchal culture, and Islam following the precepts of the Mosaic Law reiterates the command not to sleep with a woman during her period: “It is harm, so keep away from wives during menstruation.” The fear of menstrual blood and its powers is ancient and actually finds its root in the beliefs of primitive man who understood that life in the womb was formed from this substance.

The need to control women who can be dangerous if not restrained can be seen in the traditional garb that is prescribed for females of menstrual age. The hijab which almost entirely conceals the skin of a woman is detailed in the Quran: “And tell the believing women to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts and not expose their adornment except that which [necessarily] appears thereof and to wrap [a portion of] their headcovers over their chests and not expose their adornment except to their husbands.” (24:31) After child bearing age has past and along with it the temptation for wanton behavior, a woman is then released from the restriction of her younger years: “And women of post-menstrual age who have no desire for marriage - there is no blame upon them for putting aside their outer garments [but] not displaying adornment” (24:60)

While all of these regulations regarding the female sex sound very oppressive, they were quite the norm for the time and for that matter much of recorded history. It is important to know that Islam actually improved the condition of women in the Arabian Peninsula significantly when it came to replace the indigenous polytheistic religions. At that time there was little permanence to marriage and a woman was hardly secure for having borne a man a child. Additionally, infanticide (particularly of undesirable female children) was common. And in the pre-Islamic era, a woman didn't stand a chance of inheriting anything from her family.

Under Muhammad all of this changed for the better. Perhaps following the Mosaic principle regarding the case of Zelophehad's daughters (Numbers 27:1-11,) the prophet of Islam allowed women to inherit property. While we couldn't expect an equitable treatment at this time, he did entitle them to receive half the share of a man: “For the male, what is equal to the share of two females.” (4:11) That notwithstanding, the Muslim faith did much to attack the institution of primogeniture which dominated the Middle East for millennia. In a time when it was normal for the eldest son to get everything, Muhammad provided for all the offspring to have their share.

Fighting for God

At this point, we have examined many parallels between the Quran and the Old Testament upon which it is based in part, but our study would not be complete without addressing one very important topic. Controversial, misunderstood, and abused is the subject of jihad which strikes fear in the modern world. The idea of Islamic holy war goes back to the inception of the faith and elicits thoughts of conversion at the point of the sword.

The Quran can be very blunt on this subject. Muhammad was told, “O Prophet, fight against the disbelievers and the hypocrites and be harsh upon them. And their refuge is Hell, and wretched is the destination.” (9:73) The chapter continues, “O you who have believed, fight those adjacent to you of the disbelievers and let them find in you harshness.” (9:123) With zero tolerance for the faithful of the indigenous religions we are told, “And when the sacred months have passed, then kill the polytheists wherever you find them and capture them and besiege them and sit in wait for them at every place of ambush.” (9:5)

What are we to do with these hostile verses which riddle the Muslim holy book? There are certainly more positive explanations that can be given to them than what appears at face value, but it is probably important to first remember the day and age in which they were written. It was a relatively barbaric world in the early 7th century, and we can maintain that the level of human consciousness had not risen to a point to make such violence in the name of God unequivocally wrong.

We can remember the deeds of the children of Israel some centuries earlier who after finally regaining their independence from the Greeks in the 2nd century B.C. began a campaign of forced conversion. When the period of the Hasmonean kings began, the new state started a war of expansion and conquered Galilee of the Gentiles as well as Edom and compelled them all to convert upon pain of death, forcibly circumcising the males.

While this event rubs our modern sensibilities the wrong way, we should remember how centuries earlier a far more barbaric campaign took place in the Holy Land. Of course it was Moses who was commissioned to eradicate all of the unbelieving tribes in the land of Canaan. Without even an option for conversion, the people were slaughtered en masse. Yet some of the time it was only the males who were killed while virgin girls were kept for sex slaves (Numbers 31:17,18,&35) by the permission of Moses.

That Muhammad issued the decree of holy war in the name of God is certainly not unprecedented. However, Muslims do not all interpret his words in any absolute sense. Many choose to look at them in the context of the time in which they were written. “Some Muslims argue that God’s commands to fight applied only to the holy land of the Arabian Peninsula at a time when it was necessary to solidify the foundation of the new Islamic state, and that these commands cannot be used to justify fighting today. Other Muslims argue that these commands to fight apply everywhere for all time..”

[\(http://www.patheos.com/blogs/muslimsforasafeamerica/2012/12/according-to-the-quran-when-are-muslims-required-to-fight-and-against-whom/\)](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/muslimsforasafeamerica/2012/12/according-to-the-quran-when-are-muslims-required-to-fight-and-against-whom/)

Whether the call to fight was limited in scope to ancient Arabia or is still a universal mandate applying to the whole world, there is strong evidence from the Quran that such conflict should only take place after provocation by an enemy and not be initiated by a good Muslim. Muhammad seems to have fought back in many cases after aggression by an opponent. There is some historical basis to suggest that the long standing feud between Mecca and Medina was at least partly the fault of the Meccans who confiscated the property of Muhammad's followers when they fled the city.

The prophet instructs his followers to reciprocate hostility but not to initiate it: "Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress ... And do not fight them at al-Masjid al- Haram until they fight you there. But if they fight you, then kill them." (2:190,191) He goes on to say in a later chapter, "Permission [to fight] has been given to those who are being fought, because they were wronged." And in another place the principle of self-defense is reiterated when the Quran says, "Fight against the disbelievers collectively as they fight against you collectively."

As a result of a number of more passive passages regarding fighting in the Islamic scriptures, Muslims around the world have varying opinions on when it is appropriate to take up arms. "Some Muslims have argued that Islam requires fighting when Muslims are physically attacked, or when Muslims are prevented from practicing Islam, or when Muslims are prevented from teaching others about Islam. Other Muslims have argued that Islam requires Muslims to fight until the world has come under Islamic rule." [\(http://www.patheos.com/blogs/muslimsforasafeamerica/2012/12/according-to-the-quran-when-are-muslims-required-to-fight-and-against-whom/\)](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/muslimsforasafeamerica/2012/12/according-to-the-quran-when-are-muslims-required-to-fight-and-against-whom/)

It can be debated when there is just cause for a Muslim to fight, but irrespective of that question, the prime reason for taking up arms is clearly in service to God. In one passage, the prophet tells us that one bears the sword in order to rescue the weak and downtrodden: "And what is [the matter] with you that you fight not in the cause of Allah and [for] the oppressed among men, women, and children who say, 'Our Lord, take us out of this city of oppressive people and appoint for us from Yourself a protector and appoint for us from Yourself a helper?'" (4:75) But perhaps even more fundamentally, the call to jihad is for the purpose of expanding the kingdom of God in the war against evil: "Those who believe fight in the cause of Allah , and those who disbelieve fight in the cause of Taghut. So fight against the allies of Satan. Indeed, the plot of Satan has ever been weak." (4:76)

The Quran seems to have little patience for those who will not take up arms in the cause of God. Failure to brandish the sword is tantamount to not fulfilling one's duty to God. There are many reasons why one would shirk this obligation, but among others cowardice and laziness are repeatedly condemned: "Already Allah knows the hinderers among you and those [hypocrites] who say to their brothers, 'Come to us,' and do not go to battle, except for a few, Indisposed toward you. And when fear comes, you see them looking at

you, their eyes revolving like one being overcome by death.” (33:18,19) Those who have the means to fight but refrain are no better than unbelievers: “The cause [for blame] is only upon those who ask permission of you while they are rich. They are satisfied to be with those who stay behind, and Allah has sealed over their hearts, so they do not know.” (9:93) Those who would rather enjoy this life than the life to come are not willing to sacrifice for a higher cause and are summarily denounced: “Say, The enjoyment of this world is little, and the Hereafter is better for he who fears Allah” (4:77)

Indeed it is faith in the hereafter which has motivated many a Muslim to lay down his life in a holy war. In the Christian tradition, those who died a martyr’s death were generally assumed to have merited eternal life, and so in Islam the same principle applies. While Islam has clearly had religious zealots who have abused this concept like the suicide bombers of modern times, both religions have historically had cases of those who presumptuously put themselves in harm’s way to achieve the reward of heaven. Undoubtedly some souls have not been able to distinguish faith from stupidity. Nonetheless, the genuine Muslim martyr is assured of God’s reward in a number of verses. We are told, “If you are killed in the cause of Allah or die - then forgiveness from Allah and mercy are better than whatever they accumulate [in this world.]” (3:157) “And those who are killed in the cause of Allah - never will He waste their deeds.” (47:4) “So let those fight in the cause of Allah who sell the life of this world for the Hereafter. And he who fights in the cause of Allah and is killed or achieves victory - We will bestow upon him a great reward.” (4:74)

We have the theoretical call to jihad sketched out in the Quran, and while scholars can debate about when, where, and how a holy war is to take place, we can trace the historical record and observe how the Muslim has put this idea into practice over the last 14 centuries.

In the hundred years following the death of Muhammad, the religion expanded rapidly, and his followers conquered much of the Middle East and North Africa. It was certainly a political takeover of nations and kingdoms falling under Muslim rule, but by and large it wasn’t about conversion at the point of the sword. The campaign was certainly a military takeover, but the number of Muslims in charge was small compared to the native populations that they now governed, and they were more concerned with keeping peace and order in their new regimes.

To be sure, non-Muslims were discriminated against and did not enjoy the same privileges as the Islamic faithful. Christians in particular were second-class citizens who were required to pay a discriminatory tax (poll tax) to support the regime as was necessary to its survival. But the tax wasn’t particularly onerous. As “People of the Book”, Christians were given more respect than the practitioners of non-Judeo-Christian religions who were dealt with more severely. Over time, it was sheer economics that drove many people to convert to Islam rather than adopting the new faith at the point of the sword. Muslims clearly had more privileges than non-Muslims and this was a factor in conversion.

While Christians in particular were not afforded the same status that they had before Islam swept the region, it is well documented that they nonetheless welcomed the conquerors as a refreshing alternative to those who were previously in power. At least in Egypt and Syria, the Monophysite Christians were under constant persecution from the Diophysite Byzantine regime. The Christological controversies of the 5th century had left a practical schism with Egypt and Syria favoring the idea that Christ had one nature while Byzantium understood him to have two (human and divine.) The intolerance of the central authority in Constantinople made the Monophysites more than ready to get out from under its thumb. And so the people of Egypt and the Levant were ultimately happy that the new Muslim rulers did not persecute their beliefs and treated them much better than the Byzantines ever did.

Some historians suggest that the Syrians had won the trust of the Muslim invaders. In fact many of them were put in positions of power such as finance ministers and those charged with collecting taxes for the caliphate. The positive attitude of the Damascene Caliphs toward Christians might be seen in Umar Ibn Al Khattab who wrote many documents to provide for the safety of Christian churches and monasteries. Once on a trip to Jerusalem, this Caliph refused to pray in one of the churches, not as we would expect because of animosity toward the Christian faith but because he felt, “If I had prayed in that church then the Muslims would have turned that church into a mosque after my death.”

During the Golden Age of Islam, the era of the “1001 Arabian Nights” there was very little persecution against the non-Muslims of the realms to which the conquerors had spread. It was only after this prosperous time in which Islam thrived that hostility toward unbelievers began to grow. Particularly, active campaigns against non-Muslims intensified with the dawn of the Second Millennium. Many of the central Asians had become Muslim converts by that time and prided themselves on being devout members of the religion. It was one man in particular known as Timur (or Tamerlane) who lived in the 14th century whose animosity toward non-Muslims has not been rivaled in ferocity or scope for the whole Islamic era. It is estimated that he slaughtered ten million Christians all but exterminating what was once a vibrant and strong church in central and eastern Asia. His brutality was marked by the beheading of his victims and piling the skulls into a mountainous heap.

Notwithstanding the brutality against unbelievers in the Middle Ages in that part of the world, the Islamic takeover of the Byzantine Empire in the 15th century was a much more civilized affair. The Ottoman Turks had been slowly but surely encroaching on Constantinople for decades and as they assumed control of that Christian realm they initially treated their Orthodox subjects well. In fact it was the Byzantine Christians who in the end preferred the rule of the Turks rather than being subjugated to the Roman Pontiff in the West. Since the time of the Crusades, there was opportunity for the help of Europe in staving off the invaders, but in the end many of the Orthodox decided the price was too high to pay. So they chose the Sultan’s turban rather than the Pope’s tiara. Perhaps their decision was in part a recognition of how the Ottomans were by comparison

a more cultured and refined lot than the Europeans who were just emerging from the Dark Ages.

Chapter 3- New Testament Parallels

Narratives

With the broad topic of jihad in the Islamic faith, we conclude our analysis of Old Testament parallels to the Quran and turn to those aspects of the Muslim religion that have a basis in the New Testament. While Muhammad made much use of characters from the Old Testament, his treatment of New Testament figures was limited by comparison. The Quran only introduces us to the more prominent figures in the gospels starting with Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist.

Muhammad's rendition of the biblical narrative is fairly close to that of the gospels. Zechariah is presented as a righteous man who laments to God that he is old and doesn't have an heir. He mentions that it would be nearly impossible with his wife who is also old and barren. God hearing his prayer tells him that he should have a son named John, and when he asks for a sign that this should really be, he is told that he will be unable to speak for three days. However, this request for a sign is not interpreted as a rebuke for unbelief as it is in the gospel story.

We are not told about the ministry of John the Baptist other than that he was commanded by God to "take the scripture with determination." (19:12) Presumably Muhammad understood him as another key prophet in an ancient chain which would be followed by Jesus. Naturally, the Son of Mary figures most prominently in the stories of the Quran and it begins with the account of his birth.

Like in the gospels, the conception of Jesus Christ is also a miracle for Islam. While Judaism would deny that he came into the world through nothing more than the ordinary way, the Quran defends the Christian idea that Jesus had no earthly father. Speaking of Mary, the Muslim scriptures say, "And [mention] the one who guarded her chastity, so We blew into her [garment] through Our angel [Gabriel,] and We made her and her son a sign for the worlds." (66:11) We couldn't expect Islam to embrace the idea that the Holy Spirit accomplished this miracle, for that would be a violation of their anti-Trinitarian monotheism. Nonetheless, Muhammad affirmed that the Virgin Mary never knew a man.

The Quran goes on to speak of how the angel Gabriel announced the good news to Mary of how she would bare a son but provides an alternative scenario regarding the birth of Jesus. After the angel made his announcement to the virgin, we are told that he escorted her out into a remote place and presumably remained there for the duration of her pregnancy. Once in the pangs of childbirth the Quran indicates that Mary was forlorn: "Oh, I wish I had died before this and was in oblivion, forgotten." (19:23) But the angel encouraged her indicating that God had provided a stream for her to drink from. He also

told her to shake the palm tree she was sitting under and dates would fall from it that she could eat of.

Recalling the narratives of Genesis, Muhammad's rendition of the birth of Christ seems to be more of a throwback to the story of Hagar and Ishmael. We remember that Sarah told Abraham to get rid of her maidservant and her son, and so Hagar and Ishmael went out into the wilderness where they were on the verge of dying from thirst. It was then that a miraculous spring broke forth to save them. It seems that the details Muhammad provides in the story of the birth of Jesus are a tribute to Ishmael who as we know is also a pivotal figure in Islam, the progenitor of the people of Arabia.

As the story of Jesus' birth continues, we are informed that Mary returned from the wilderness with the child in her arms and presented him to her people, and they were astonished: "O Mary, you have certainly done a thing unprecedented. O sister of Aaron, your father was not a man of evil, nor was your mother unchaste." Mary is referred in this account to the "sister of Aaron" which seems to remember her namesake Miriam from the Book of Exodus.

At this point in the story, the people wish that they could somehow speak to the child, and miraculously Jesus begins a short discourse to them beginning his monologue with the words: "Indeed, I am the servant of Allah. He has given me the Scripture and made me a prophet." (19:30) That Muhammad attributes to the infant the powers of intelligent speech is perhaps not just a fanciful embellishment on his part but a reference to extra-biblical texts. While the gospels do not make any such claims, a few apocryphal books speak of Jesus talking maturely in his infancy. In particular the First Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ tells of the time that Joseph and Mary were in Egypt with the child, and at one point in the narratives they come across a couple of thieves named Titus and Dumachus. Suddenly the child informs his mother that the two men will be crucified with him on his right and on his left in 30 years time. (Infancy Gospel 8:6-7)

Not only does the Quran allude to this extra-biblical story, it also mentions another popular anecdote about the young Jesus that is to be found in apocryphal stories. Speaking of Christ, the Quran recalls, "When you designed from clay [what was] like the form of a bird with My permission, then you breathed into it, and it became a bird with My permission." (5:110) The infancy gospel describes a time when Jesus was at play with young children and "made clay into several shapes, namely, asses, oxen, birds, and other figures." Jesus commanded the clay mammals to move along the ground and the clay birds to fly to the amazement of the other children who reported all of these things back to their parents. (Infancy Gospel 15:1-7)

The Quran tells us yet another story of Christ that is not found in the gospels yet seems to be a rendition of an Old Testament account. The text reads, "O you who have believed, be supporters of Allah, as when Jesus, the son of Mary, said to the disciples, 'Who are my supporters for Allah?' The disciples said, 'We are supporters of Allah.' And a faction of the Children of Israel believed and a faction disbelieved. So We supported those who believed against their enemy, and they became dominant." (61:14) This could anecdote

could be a reference to when Jesus said, “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.” (Matthew 12:30) But it seems more likely to be a rendition of one of the stories of Moses of whom Muhammad was fond. Immediately after the Golden Calf incident, the Book of Exodus tells us that “[Moses] stood at the entrance to the camp and said, ‘Whoever is for the Lord, come to me.’ And all the Levites rallied to him.”

Not much is said directly of Jesus’ teaching, but the Quran seems to summarize it in the following verse: “Then We sent following their footsteps Our messengers and followed [them] with Jesus, the son of Mary, and gave him the Gospel. And We placed in the hearts of those who followed him compassion and mercy and monasticism.” (57:27) Islam views Jesus’ teaching of the Golden Rule as his major contribution to the deposit of faith. And when his mission was completed, he predicted that yet another prophet would emerge in his place: “And [mention] when Jesus, the son of Mary, said, ‘O children of Israel, indeed I am the messenger of Allah to you confirming what came before me of the Torah and bringing good tidings of a messenger to come after me, whose name is Ahmad.’” (Ahmad is another name for Muhammad.)

Islam presents a significantly different view of the end of Jesus’ life than we have in the Christian tradition. The Quran is emphatic on the point of his death saying, “And they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; but [another] was made to resemble him to them. And indeed, those who differ over it are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it except the following of assumption. And they did not kill him, for certain.” (4:157) In another place the Quran asserts that God miraculously protected Jesus from harm: “I restrained the Children of Israel from [killing] you when you came to them with clear proofs and those who disbelieved among them said, ‘This is not but obvious magic.’”

We must ask why Muhammad decided to make a departure from the gospel accounts on this matter. And to be sure, the answer to that question is the same reason that Terah and his countrymen were unsuccessful at burning Abraham in the fire, and why Joseph’s testimony was believed over that of Potiphar’s wife, and why Job is presented more as the recipient of God’s mercy than Satan’s testing.

The theology of the Quran makes clear that the righteous are safeguarded by God and kept from the powers of evil: “That is because Allah is the protector of those who have believed and because the disbelievers have no protector” (47:11) Remembering Moses as a case in point, the Islamic Scriptures recall that “Allah protected him from the evils they plotted.” (40:45) In fact all of the prophets and righteous people of the scriptures are depicted as being immune from harm in keeping with this understanding.

We are told in the Quran that Satan only has jurisdiction over those who do not cooperate with the way of God: “Indeed, there is for him no authority over those who have believed and rely upon their Lord.” (16:99) However Islam does seem to recognize that there are cases when the Evil One may be allowed to harm the faithful as a form of testing: “But he will not harm them at all except by permission of Allah.” (58:10) But with that being said, the Quran never paints the friends of God as victims of mishap or evil, and in this

theology it makes a departure from the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as the tradition of other major faiths throughout the world.

While the New Testament is never quoted directly in the Quran, many of its sayings seem to be paraphrased, and the Christian influence on Islam can be seen in a number of passages which bear a strong resemblance to something out of the gospels or epistles. Like Christianity, Islam had its problems with unbelief among the people and the Muslim scriptures sound very familiar to the New Testament on this topic. Muhammad writes, "We have placed over their hearts coverings, lest they understand it, and in their ears deafness" (18:57) and we are reminded of Christ's words from the gospel: "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving." (Matthew 13:14.) Jesus' opponents were always asking for miraculous signs, and Muhammad seems to echo this frustration: "And [even] if We opened to them a gate from the heaven and they continued therein to ascend, they would say, 'Our eyes have only been dazzled. Rather, we are a people affected by magic.'" (15:14-15)

For every religion is the problem of fighting against hedonism, and for Islam is no exception. The Quran laments that this is so quoting the hypothetical unbeliever who says, "There is not but our worldly life; we die and live, and nothing destroys us except time." It is the same universal motto of "eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die." (1 Corinthians 15:32.) Like the wealthy man in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Quran tells the self-indulgent: "You exhausted your pleasures during your worldly life and enjoyed them, so this Day you will be awarded the punishment of [extreme] humiliation" (46:20) Similarly, the Quran seems to have its own version of the problem of a rich man entering heaven, for it uses Christ's very words on the subject: "Indeed, those who deny Our verses and are arrogant toward them - the gates of Heaven will not be opened for them, nor will they enter Paradise until a camel enters into the eye of a needle." (7:40)

Like Christ in the gospels, the Quran tries to make contrasts between the prudent and the reckless people of this life, and in this verse we have something fairly similar to the Parable of Wise and Foolish Builders (Matthew 7:24-27): "Then is one who laid the foundation of his building on righteousness [with fear] from Allah and [seeking] His approval better or one who laid the foundation of his building on the edge of a bank about to collapse, so it collapsed with him into the fire of Hell?" (9:109)

The gospels communicate to us that God "sends rain on the just and unjust" (Matthew 5:45) for he shows his benevolence to all of his creatures. Islam seems to say something similar recognizing God's patience and good will toward the unbeliever in waiting for repentance: "But, [on the contrary], We have provided good things for these [disbelievers] and their fathers until life was prolonged for them." (21:44)

Ultimately God is waiting for a soul to convert which is what the epistles describe as being "called out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9) In a similar way, the Quran borrows that kind of language in its own description of personal conversion: "[He sent] a Messenger [Muhammad] reciting to you the distinct verses of Allah that He

may bring out those who believe and do righteous deeds from darkneses into the light.” (65:11)

Once a soul becomes converted to God, he is unquestionably assured of opposition even from his own kin. Christ said, “For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man’s enemies will be members of his own household.” It seems certain that Muhammad appreciated these words of Jesus for he wrote something similar in several places in the Quran: “You will not find a people who believe in Allah and the Last Day having affection for those who oppose Allah and His Messenger, even if they were their fathers or their sons or their brothers or their kindred.” (58:22) “O you who have believed, indeed, among your wives and your children are enemies to you, so beware of them.” (64:14)

But Christ taught us to love our enemies nonetheless and that perhaps in doing so we may also play a role in their conversion: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty give him something to drink. In doing this you will heap burning coals upon his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:20-21) The Quran picks up on this concept with a similar sentiment: “And not equal are the good deed and the bad. Repel [evil] by that [deed] which is better; and thereupon the one whom between you and him is enmity [will become] as though he was a devoted friend.” (41:34) Jesus also encouraged his followers to try to make peace with their opponents quickly and settle matters outside of the courtroom, and the Quran appeals to this concept as well: “And if two factions among the believers should fight, then make settlement between the two ... The believers are but brothers, so make settlement between your brothers.” (49:9-10)

For people of faith, meeting together for fellowship and prayer is important, and Christ assures his followers that “where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them.” (Matthew 18:20) Without a doubt Muhammad appropriate the same concept in the Quran with these words: “Have you not considered that Allah knows what is in the heavens and what is on the earth? There is in no private conversation three but that He is the fourth of them, nor are there five but that He is the sixth of them - and no less than that and no more except that He is with them [in knowledge] wherever they are.” (58:7)

A good Christian knows that he shouldn’t be presumptuous about his own life, for it is not promised that he should even have tomorrow. So James the brother of the Lord said a believer should say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” The prophet of Islam echoed the same sentiments against a brazen and overconfident attitude when he wrote, “And never say of anything, ‘Indeed, I will do that tomorrow,’ Except [when adding], ‘If Allah wills.’” (18:23-24)

A good believer also knows that he needs to be careful about the sins he commits for there will be a day of reckoning for everything that he has done in the flesh. Islam recognizes this idea and it is mentioned frequently in the Quran. In one particular verse we have an analogy made to the smallest of sins for which one must give account, and it

seems plain from the verse that the illustration was borrowed from Christ who used the metaphor hundreds of years earlier: “And We place the scales of justice for the Day of Resurrection, so no soul will be treated unjustly at all. And if there is [even] the weight *of a mustard seed*, We will bring it forth. And sufficient are We as accountant.” (21:47)

Some sins are more serious than others according to the Christian tradition, for the apostle John spoke of “sins that lead to death” and “sins that do not lead to death.” (1 John 5:16-17) That there are varying gravities to sins is a concept that is embraced by Islam, for the Quran says, “Those who avoid the major sins and immoralities, only [committing] slight ones. Indeed, your Lord is vast in forgiveness.” (53:32)

The one who avoids sins and is dedicated to the way of God is often assured of his special protection and help in time of difficulty. The Psalms indicate that “God will guard him in all of his ways” (Psalm 91:11) Christ at his arrest recognized this fact and said to his opponents, “Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” Muhammad seems to have appropriated the notion of angelic protection citing vast numbers of heavenly beings who come to the aid of a believer: “[Remember] when you said to the believers, ‘Is it not sufficient for you that your Lord should reinforce you with three thousand angels sent down?’ Yes, if you remain patient and conscious of Allah and the enemy come upon you [attacking] in rage, your Lord will reinforce you with five thousand angels having marks [of distinction]” (3:124-125)

Angelology

References to angels are many in the Bible and we should not be surprised that it is also so in Islam. For the most part, the theology of the Old and New Testaments regarding these celestial beings is mirrored in the Quran. The Judeo-Christian tradition understands angels to have wings based on the words of her prophets. There are of course the six-winged seraphs of Isaiah and the two winged cherubs which overshadowed the Ark of the Covenant. Muhammad saw no need to negate this idea for he wrote, “[All] praise is [due] to Allah, Creator of the heavens and the earth, [who] made the angels messengers having wings, two or three or four.” (35:1)

Both Ezekiel and John the Evangelist depict Four Living Creatures which appear to undergird the Divine Presence perhaps even carrying it about as if upon a cart. Muhammad saw significance in this as he identified the angels with this role: “Those [angels] who carry the Throne and those around it exalt [Allah] with praise of their Lord.” (40:7)

The Bible isn’t really definitive on the subject of the gender of angels, but Islam makes no hesitation to be dogmatic on the issue. Naturally, a strongly patriarchal religion would insist on an all male hierarchy. The Quran states, “Indeed, those who do not believe in the Hereafter name the angels female names.” (53:27) In another criticism the prophet condemns this notion saying, “And they have made the angels, who are servants of the Most Merciful, females.” (43:19)

Whether or not angels are male or female, both the Muslim and Christian faiths agree that these lofty beings have the special job of protecting mankind. In the gospels, Jesus speaks of little children and says, “Their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 18:10) Following this tradition, Muhammad writes, “There is no soul but that it has over it a protector.” (86:4) And he even suggests that there might be more than one assigned to a particular person: “For each one are successive [angels] before and behind him who protect him by the decree of Allah.” (13:11)

It is the job of the guardian angel not only to protect his charge but also to pray for the one entrusted to his care. There is an ancient Christian tradition that the angels intercede for us to God which if not intimated in the scriptures is stated clearly in the writings of the Early Church Fathers. In the Shepherd of Hermas, a 2nd century work that almost became a part of the permanent canon we read, “But you, [Hermas,] having been strengthened by the holy angel [you saw], and having obtained from him such intercession.” (The Shepherd 3:5:4) The prophet of Islam saw no reason to abandon this tradition for the Quran mentions this special function in a few places. He asks, “And how many angels there are in the heavens whose intercession will not avail at all except [only] after Allah has permitted [it] to whom He wills and approves.” (53:26) In another place he writes, “Those [angels] ... ask forgiveness for those who have believed, [saying], ‘Our Lord, You have encompassed all things in mercy and knowledge, so forgive those who have repented and followed Your way and protect them from the punishment of Hellfire.’” (40:7)

As a Semitic language, Arabic shares with Hebrew the fundamental concept of an angel in the root word *malak* meaning “messenger.” Related to the same Semitic word for “king,” an angel has the connotation of one who has been dispatched by monarch, even a Divine Regent like God. It is in this function that the Judeo-Christian tradition shares much in common with Islam who refers to “those [angels] who deliver a message.” (77:5)

Though God certainly can communicate directly with mankind, it is more the norm for him to delegate to his intermediaries such tasks. Many times people will say that God has spoken to them or given them a sign or helped them in some way. Certainly it is true that God is ultimately behind such human experiences, but more often than not, it is the angel, the servant of God who is actually directly interacting with a soul. We should not be surprised by this; after all, the beings of light also need work to do and helping with the affairs of men is no easy task.

The biblical evidence for this is great as we see angels coming to the aid of individuals and delivering messages throughout the pages of the scriptures. In fact the inspiration for the scriptures themselves comes through the angels who move within mystics to write down spiritual ideas. Often it is assumed that God dictated the bible in some way to the prophets as if they were stenographers for the Almighty but this is a gross oversimplification of the process.

On Mount Sinai we are told that God spoke the Ten Commandments to Moses and divinely etched the words into the Stone Tablets. While on the mountain for 40 days, tradition has it that the entire Pentateuch was dictated by the Lord to Judaism's premier prophet. While we can say that God was certainly involved in this important encounter, more than likely it was the angels who were actually engaged with Moses for that long period on the mountain as the messengers of God. That this was the case is suggested by Stephen the first deacon who said as much before he was stoned to death by a mob of angry Jews. He concluded his speech to them saying, "You who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it." (Acts 7:53) And the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians reiterates the same message.

The Quran is keen on this concept as well. It never indicates that God dictated a word to Muhammad over the period that the Muslim scriptures were being written. Rather it suggests that the angelic messengers were responsible for whispering in the ear of the prophet. Muhammad writes, "We do not send down the angels except with truth; and the disbelievers would not then be reprieved." (15:8) He continues in another place: "Indeed, these verses are a reminder; So whoever wills may remember it. [It is recorded] in honored sheets, Exalted and purified, [Carried] by the hands of messenger-angels." (80:11-15) And one angel in particular is acknowledged to be responsible for the transmission of such revelations, even Gabriel whom we know from the gospels: "So when We have recited it [through Gabriel], then follow its recitation." (75:18)

Not just conveying messages from heaven to earth, it is the work of the angels to do much more working behind the scenes to guide the affairs of humanity. They may be invisible but that doesn't mean that they are not intimately involved in directing mortals in the traffic of life in ways that are beyond our comprehension. The Quran recognizes this hidden job of God's messengers where it is penned: "The angels and the Spirit descend therein by permission of their Lord for every matter." (97:4) The Islamic scriptures refer to the angels as "those who arrange [each] matter" to suggest that these spirits are behind the ebb and flow of life. (79:5)

Mercy and Forgiveness

We have been exploring those aspects of Islam that either derive from or are greatly influenced by the New Testament and the Christian tradition. While the concept of justice and retribution is clearly linked with the old Mosaic Judaism, it is the message of mercy and forgiveness which is distinctly Christian. Though it is true that God is identified as forgiving in the Old Testament, it is a minor theme as compared with the message of vengeance upon those who transgress the ordinances of Yahweh.

Undoubtedly following the message of Jesus, the Quran actually inverts this, emphasizing God's mercy much more than his wrath. According to religious scholar Huston Smith, "God's compassion and mercy are cited 192 times in the Quran, as against 17 references to his wrath and vengeance. (The World's Religions, page 237) "Most Merciful" is a title attributed to God in the Quran which highlights his eagerness to extend forgiveness to those who seek it. In the Muslim holy book, God says, "Indeed, I

am the Perpetual Forgiver of whoever repents and believes and does righteousness and then continues in guidance.” (20:82) Like in the New Testament, we are assured that God is more than willing to pardon even the most egregious sinner who sincerely repents: “O My servants who have transgressed against themselves [by sinning], do not despair of the mercy of Allah . Indeed, Allah forgives all sins. Indeed, it is He who is the Forgiving, the Merciful.” (39:53)

Rather than short-tempered and capricious, the Quran depicts God as long-suffering and patient with his creatures who transgress him. He always give them a lot of time to amend there ways and offers ample warnings to remind them that judgment will come if they do not repent: “And We did not destroy any city except that it had warners” (26:208) Perhaps remembering Jonah who preached to Nineveh and Lot who preached to Sodom, Islam maintains that God always gives a warning before he administers punishment.

In passages that could just as easily find a home in the New Testament, the Quran indicates how intimate and caring God is toward his creatures. In a beautiful verse that describes God’s deep knowledge of man and his nearness to him, we read, “We have already created man and know what his soul whispers to him, and We are closer to him than [his] jugular vein.” (50:16) God’s eagerness to enjoy closeness to his people is probably best captured in an extra-canonical saying of Muhammad who uttered this vivid illustration: “God says, ‘Whoso seeketh to approach me one span, I approach him one cubit; and whoso seeketh to approach me one cubit, I approach him two fathoms, and whoever walks toward me, I run toward him.’” We hear in this formula words that might have been said by James the Lord’s brother who declared, “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” (James 4:8) But more than that, the verse conjures up the image of the Prodigal Son whose father ran out to meet him and embraced him after his long season of sin. Like in the New Testament, we get the idea that God loves his children much more than they love him, and he will reciprocate ten fold any small step that an individual should make toward him.

Certainly, it is God’s nature to extend forgiveness, but what does Islam say about the duty of man when his neighbor wrongs him. If we read the Old Testament, there is never a suggestion that a good Jew should ever forgive one who has done him harm. We only read about vengeance and retaliation. Of course the New Testament was revolutionary when it was said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matthew 6:44) And being greatly influenced by the Christian message Islam says the same.

While acknowledging that man may follow the law of retribution (e.g., “an eye for an eye”,) the Quran suggests that it is far better to forfeit one’s right to justice as a sacrifice to God: “And We ordained for them therein a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, and for wounds is legal retribution. But whoever gives [up his right as] charity, it is an expiation for him.” (5:45) In this sense it is acknowledged that one doesn’t accomplish much spiritually by practicing “tit for tat,” but a soul can make an atonement for its own sins by relinquishing the right to exact justice. Indeed, the Quran suggests that those who extend forgiveness will receive compensation from God if they turn away from demanding compensation from man:

“And the retribution for an evil act is an evil one like it, but whoever pardons and makes reconciliation - his reward is [due] from Allah.” (42:40)

Multiple times in the Islamic scriptures the faithful Muslim is encouraged to forgive his neighbor, sometimes through a reminder that the Final Hour approaches: “And We have not created the heavens and earth and that between them except in truth. And indeed, the Hour is coming; so forgive with gracious forgiveness.” (15:85) Moreover, the good follower of Islam is told to exercise patience and demonstrate kindness toward his fellow man: “And whoever is patient and forgives - indeed, that is of the matters [requiring] determination.” (42:43) “Kind speech and forgiveness are better than charity followed by injury.” (2:263)

Salvation Theology

Like in the Judeo-Christian tradition and for that matter many religious traditions, it is the way of mercy that leads to salvation for the Muslim. One must be in the habit of performing righteous acts if he expects to enter into the heavenly kingdom. The Quran identifies the people who fail to achieve everlasting life with those who say, “We were not of those who prayed, Nor did we used to feed the poor. And we used to enter into vain discourse with those who engaged [in it], And we used to deny the Day of Recompense.” (74:43-46) Rather it is “those who repent, believe and do righteousness; for those will enter Paradise.” (19:60)

The Apocryphal Book of Sirach says, “Those who honor their father atone for sins; they store up riches who respect their mother ... Kindness to a father will not be forgotten; it will serve as a sin offering – it will take lasting root.” (Sirach 3:3,4,14) In the Judeo-Christian tradition is a strong belief that we atone for our sins through good deeds thereby cancelling out our debts to God. Islamic theology preserves this belief asserting that “good deeds do away with misdeeds.” (11:114) The Quran affirms that those who concentrate on works of righteousness will ultimately do away with the consequences of their follies: “And those whose scales are heavy [with good deeds] - it is they who are the successful.” (23:102)

However, the Islamic scriptures make a point of saying that the motivation behind the good deeds is also very important. Jesus certainly warned about those who seek the praise of others by their outward righteous acts and suggested that one should attempt to do good in secret so that it is not observed: “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret.” (Matthew 6:3,4) Likewise, Islam maintains that the right attitude for doing good is reverence for God rather than the approval of others: “And they give food in spite of love for it to the needy, the orphan, and the captive, [Saying], ‘We feed you only for the countenance of Allah . We wish not from you reward or gratitude.’” (76:8-9) The Quran makes clear that intention is just as a much a factor in the merit of a good deed than the deed itself: “Your Lord is most knowing of what is within yourselves. If you should be righteous [in intention] - then indeed He is ever, to the often returning [to Him], Forgiving.” (17:25)

Unfortunately most people are more interested in pursuing their own selfish interests rather in doing kind acts toward their neighbor. Man is by nature preoccupied with worldly attractions seeking immediate gratification rather than storing up any treasure in heaven: “Indeed, these [disbelievers] love the immediate and leave behind them a grave Day.” (76:27) The Quran rebukes the lovers of this life saying, “O mankind, your injustice is only against yourselves, [being merely] the enjoyment of worldly life.” (10:23)

Solomon understood the vanity of earth life 3000 years ago when he wrote, “Meaningless! Meaningless! ... Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” (Ecclesiastes 1:2) Islam echoes the bible’s message of the transitory and fleeting nature of life using an illustration employed by the prophet Isaiah: “Know that the life of this world is but amusement and diversion and adornment and boasting to one another and competition in increase of wealth and children - like the example of a rain whose [resulting] plant growth pleases the tillers; then it dries and you see it turned yellow; then it becomes [scattered] debris ... And what is the worldly life except the enjoyment of delusion.” (57:20)

Indeed it is the pursuit of wealth that is the greatest folly, and the Quran is clear this interest will get man nowhere: “And it is not your wealth or your children that bring you nearer to Us in position, but it is [by being] one who has believed and done righteousness.” (34:37) Those who focus on worldly gain will only be the losers in the end: “Say, [O Muhammad], ‘Shall we [believers] inform you of the greatest losers as to [their] deeds? [They are] those whose effort is lost in worldly life, while they think that they are doing well in work.’” (18:103-104)

Eventually man comes to his senses recognizing that all that he holds dear in the present life is fleeting. It may take a significant illness, a major financial setback, or a loss of a loved one for him to be jolted from his delusion. But hopefully sooner than later he realizes the ephemeral nature of life. For this reason, Solomon wrote, “It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man.” (Ecclesiastes 7:2) The Quran reiterates this principle recognizing that man will be driven by his ambition until he finally realizes the common destiny of all life: “Competition in [worldly] increase diverts you until you visit the graveyards.” (102:1-2)

Once a soul embraces the futility of earth life, he can much more easily begin to invest in the next life for which alone there is hope. The Apostle Paul needed to remind his followers of this truth by saying, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” (Romans 8:18) The Quran repeatedly makes the contrast between this life and the next to encourage its readers to focus on the latter: “O my people, this worldly life is only [temporary] enjoyment, and indeed, the Hereafter - that is the home of [permanent] settlement.” (40:39) The Muslim scriptures draw a business analogy to illustrate the investment that the believer makes in the next life: “Indeed, Allah has purchased from the believers their lives and their properties [in exchange] for that they will have Paradise ... So rejoice in your transaction which you have contracted. And it is that which is the great attainment.” (9:111) One is

expected to make a contract with God selling him his belongings, his property, and his very life only to be repaid with a happy existence in the Hereafter. Of course it takes some degree of faith to make this investment, but those who have found this current life wanting can more easily muster that belief. The Quran challenges the believer to make a leap of faith expressing that they would easily make many sacrifices in the present life could they know what awaits beyond the grave: “And this worldly life is not but diversion and amusement. And indeed, the home of the Hereafter - that is the [eternal] life, if only they knew.” (29:64)

Spiritual Discipline

Like so many other religions, the goal of Islam is clear. One has been successful in the religious life if in the end he comes to inherit the kingdom of heaven. But getting there requires a life of discipline and spiritual practices that shape the soul in preparation for existence on the other shore. Up until this point in our exploration of this religion we have been using the word “Islam” without any commentary to its meaning or origin. We have been treating it as a mere label for one of the world’s great religions. But buried within the word is the very essence of the faith which is not readily apparent to those not native to the Middle East. Islam derives from the Semitic root S-L-M from which the familiar Hebrew “Shalom” comes. It therefore means “peace” in an immediate sense but also “surrender” in a deeper sense. “Therefore Islam signifies the peace that comes when one surrenders his life to God.” (The World’s Religions, pg 222) Of course this is the message of all of the major religions; that one is finally at rest when he has directed his will fully and entirely toward God.

A follower of Islam is known as a Muslim which is an analogous term meaning “one who is in submission to God.” It is a beautiful description that perhaps all religious people everywhere can identify with. The Quran speaks of Muslims in this context several times to underscore that a member of this faith has taken a pledge to give his life to God: “Say, ‘It is only revealed to me that your god is but one God; so will you be Muslims [in submission to Him]?’” (21:108) “Bear witness that we are Muslims [submitting to Him].” (3:64)

Muhammad cuts to the heart of the Islamic faith when he writes, “The only statement of the [true] believers when they are called to Allah and His Messenger to judge between them is that they say, ‘We hear and we obey.’” It is the simplistic and humble submission that Jesus advocated when he said, “Say we are altogether unprofitable servants – we have only done what is required of us.” (Luke 17:10) Islam recognizes that there are many forms of slavery in the world but only one brand ironically brings freedom. For “to be a slave to God is to be freed from all other forms of slavery – ones that are degrading, such as slavery to greed, or to anxiety, or to desire personal status (The World’s Religions, pg 240)

In the Muslim World, one serves as a true slave to God by following five principles that are to be woven into the fabric of his life. Many verses of the Quran capture these fundamental elements of the faith which in many respects mirror the same important

practices that we find in any other major religion: Those who believe and do righteous deeds and establish prayer and give zakah will have their reward with their Lord, and there will be no fear concerning them, nor will they grieve.” (2:277)

The first of these important tenets is belief as the verse intimates. In the New Testament we read, “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (Hebrews 11:6) So it is in any religion that faith becomes the doorway into the spiritual life, for no one is willing to invest his time in the other world without some conviction that it is really there. For the Muslim, the heart of his belief is a simple slogan: “There is no god but God and Muhammad is his prophet” which as we have mentioned before is analogous to the Hebrew Shema: “Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” (Deuteronomy 6:4)

A Muslim is first and foremost one who makes this simple profession of faith (“shahadah”) in the one God and in his latest prophet Muhammad. With this affirmation he is enjoined to believe everything that the prophet has said (the Quran) and do his best to surrender to God as the Muslim holy book says.

Without faith, there is no progress in the spiritual life, and certainly without it no one would dare to offer up a prayer to an unseen deity. Like other faiths, Islam recognizes the practice of prayer as an important key to spiritual development. The Quran notes that man may be full of vices but not those who pray: “Truly man was created very impatient; Fretful when evil touches him; And niggardly when good reaches him; Not so those devoted to Prayer.” (70:19-23)

For this reason, the Muslim faith requires regular intervals of prayer throughout the day as a form of discipline for the faithful. The second pillar of the Islamic faith instructs that prayers are to be offered five times per day – before sunrise, just after noon, in the late afternoon, immediately after sunset, and before retiring to bed. The Quran suggests this kind of schedule in a number of passages that encourage routine prayer times: “Establish regular prayers - at the sun's decline till the darkness of the night, and the morning prayer and reading: for the prayer and reading in the morning carry their testimony.” (17:78)

There is a legend concerning this set number of prayer sessions that the faithful are required to observe. It is said that Muhammad was originally commanded that the people should pray 50 times a day when he experienced his famous mystical Night Journey. In a tale that most certainly is an adaptation of Abraham’s bargaining with God over Sodom, we are told how Muhammad negotiated this number down to 5. The naïve Muhammad would have accepted the number 50 except that he met Moses in his celestial journey who told him that that number was unreasonable and too hard for the people to manage. So Moses sent Muhammad back to God to ask for a reduction, and according to the legend he went back and forth about as many times as Abraham did with God until the number was whittled down to a more reasonable 5 times a day.

While there are just five times per day that the Muslim must pray, this does not mean that he cannot exceed that in whichever way he pleases. The New Testament bids the Christian to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17) Many of the Orthodox have taken this to heart and recite the famous Jesus prayer over and over again throughout the day: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” In a similar way, the Muslim always has the Shahadah on his lips: “There is no god but God.”

Some Muslims actually take some liberty with the Shahadah and say instead, “There is nothing but God.” As the mystics of Islam they are keen on deeper meanings beyond the exoteric ideas that form the backbone of a religion. It is they who were less concerned with outward observances and more with inner significance, for they were fond of saying, “Love the pitcher less and the water more.” It is the substance of religion that attracts them more than the externals and rightly so. The Sufi’s attention is focused primarily on God’s love which they see as the core of the universe. Like in the Judeo-Christian tradition, they see God as a consuming fire and want to be “burned” by him, ignited by his love. “Someone who was ignorant of fire they observe could come to know it by degrees: first by hearing of it, then by seeing it, and finally by being burned by its heat.” (The World’s Religions, pg 259) It is the Sufi’s goal to become immersed in this fire which they equate with God himself.

All religions have their ascetics, and the Sufi is probably that class of Islam that we would identify most with that type. Some Sufis practiced all night vigils praying through the wee hours of the morning. The Quran encourages such devotion in a number of verses: “[It] is one who is devoutly obedient during periods of the night, prostrating and standing [in prayer], fearing the Hereafter and hoping for the mercy of his Lord.” (39:9) The Islamic scriptures speak of those who deprive themselves of slumber saying, “They used to sleep but little of the night, and in the hours before dawn they would ask forgiveness.” (76:26)

It was the Medieval Christian saint Peter of Alcantara who slept but one hour per night and stood on his feet for the rest as a form of penance and devotion to God, and it seems that Muhammad was not surprisingly given to such practices as well. The Quran praises the prophet in these words: “Thy Lord doth know that thou standest forth (to prayer) nigh two-thirds of the night, or half the night, or a third of the night, and so doth a party of those with thee.” (73:20) The offering of prayer through the night hours is certainly a sign of great dedication to God in any religion, but clearly it is a sacrifice that relatively few are willing to make.

Following the important principle of prayer, Islam enjoins the practice of charity upon the faithful as its third pillar of spiritual discipline. Works of charity are encouraged in all major religions and the Muslim faith is not exception. The Quran invokes this concept under the word “zakat” which literally means purification but refers to an obligatory tax based on one’s income and the value of one’s possessions. The payment of this tax is thought of as a means of purifying one’s wealth.

This compulsory form of alms-giving in Islamic countries has served as a source of revenue to help the poor, to fund the Islamic clergy, to fund the fight for Islamic causes, and also to aid new converts. We could call it a welfare system in which the “haves” relieve the needs of the “have nots.” In many respects it is also analogous to the Old Testament Jewish tithing which was primarily for the support of the Levitical priestly tribe which were dedicated to their religious work.

In the modern world, zakat is not universally enforced but has become more a matter of voluntary charity dependent on individual conscience in most countries. The Quran certainly commands that believers be generous with their wealth: “Make not thy hand tied (like a niggard's) to thy neck, nor stretch it forth to its utmost reach, so that thou become blameworthy and destitute.” (17:29) So being tight with one’s resources is very much condemned in Islam.

In its condemnation of those who fail to follow the way of God, the Quran cites several moral violations: “Nay, nay! but ye honour not the orphans! Nor do ye encourage one another to feed the poor! And ye devour inheritance - all with greed, and ye love wealth with inordinate love!” The Islamic scriptures seem to be very concerned particularly about the orphan in a similar way to the Minor Prophets of the Old Testament. At a time when men were given to confiscating the inheritance of orphans, Muhammad spoke out against such injustice commanding, “To orphans restore their property (When they reach their age), nor substitute (your) worthless things for (their) good ones; and devour not their substance (by mixing it up) with your own. For this is indeed a great sin. (4:2)

The fourth pillar of Islam is yet another universal spiritual discipline that just about everyone can relate to. Fasting has always been a means to foster detachment from this earthly life and to learn control over the demands of the body. It also makes one aware of his dependence on God for everything and can stimulate virtues like compassion.

There are a few important verses in the Quran which address the topic and prescribe protocol for this discipline: “O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that ye may (learn) self-restraint. (Fasting) for a fixed number of days; but if any of you is ill, or on a journey, the prescribed number (Should be made up) from days later. For those who can do it (With hardship), is a ransom, the feeding of one that is indigent. But he that will give more, of his own free will, - it is better for him. And it is better for you that ye fast, if ye only knew. Ramadhan is the (month) in which was sent down the Quran, as a guide to mankind, also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgment (Between right and wrong)
” (2:183-185)

As indicated in the passage, the official days of fasting are set for the whole month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar in which traditionally the Quran was given to Muhammad. Fasting begins at sunrise and is in force until sunset. During that time, both eating and drinking are forbidden.

The fifth pillar of Islam is perhaps fairly particular to the Muslim faith but a similar tradition exists in other religions as well. In Christendom, it was a fairly common thing for the faithful to walk even hundreds of miles to a special shrine in Medieval Europe, and among Hindus climbing a mountain to a temple is also a religious practice. The idea of pilgrimage has a precedent in all religions but in Islam there is a formal mandate to make a ritual journey to Mecca once in his lifetime if he is physically and financially able to do so.

The Quran details that pilgrimage as follows: “And proclaim the Pilgrimage among men: they will come to thee on foot and (mounted) on every kind of camel, lean on account of journeys through deep and distant mountain highways. That they may witness the benefits (provided) for them, and celebrate the name of Allah, through the Days appointed, over the cattle which He has provided for them (for sacrifice): then eat ye thereof and feed the distressed ones in want. Then let them complete the rites prescribed for them, perform their vows, and (again) circumambulate the Ancient House.” (22:27-29)

When the faithful arrive in Mecca, they must remove their secular attire and then don two simple white sheets for their entire stay. In removing their plain clothes they symbolically abandon the status they have in the outside world so that all gather as equals with a sense of solidarity. Then as the passage indicates there are important rituals which are performed while in the city including circumambulating the Kaaba seven times in a clockwise direction as well as performing an animal sacrifice. There are also rites involving running back and forth between two sacred hills, drinking from a holy well, standing in vigil in the surrounding plains, and symbolically stoning the devil.

Resurrection

As we indicated earlier, it is clearly only souls that have at least a little faith that might be willing to make the investment in the spiritual life that such disciplines require. Ultimately, it is because of a conviction that there should be some day of reckoning that many will make an effort to live their lives as best as possible. And that is certainly true in Islam.

There is a major eschatological focus throughout the entire Quran which centers on the grand climax of history, the so called Last Day. Those familiar with the term will recognize it as one which is also part of the fabric of the Christian tradition, and there is no doubt that Islam’s beliefs on the subject were shaped by the influence of Jesus and the subsequent writings of the New Testament. As a belief in the Second Coming is central to the faith of a Christian, so too is a conviction in a final day that should consummate all human history fundamental to Islam. The Quran offers up such basic summaries of belief in many passages to indicate what is essential to being Muslim: “It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces towards east or west; but it is righteousness- to believe in Allah and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers.” (2:177)

We remember that Jesus said that the day of his Second Coming would not be known by anyone except for the Father (Matthew 24:36), and it seems that Muhammad piggy-backed on this prophecy in his own teaching on the Last Day: "Men ask thee concerning the Hour: Say, "The knowledge thereof is with Allah (alone)": and what will make thee understand?- perchance the Hour is nigh!" (33:63)

The prophet of Islam also appears to have remembered Jesus' words that he would come again in a cloud (Luke 21:27 & Revelation 1:7) and appropriated it for the majestic visitation of Allah on the Last Day: "And [mention] the Day when the heaven will split open with [emerging] clouds, and the angels will be sent down in successive descent." (25:25) Muhammad foresaw God descending in majesty upon a throne at the culmination of history in language very similar to that of the New Testament: "Then, when one blast is sounded on the Trumpet, And the earth is moved, and its mountains, and they are crushed to powder at one stroke,- On that Day shall the (Great) Event come to pass. And the sky will be rent asunder, for it will that Day be flimsy, And the angels will be on its sides, and eight will, that Day, bear the Throne of thy Lord above them." (69:13-17)

In fact, the prophet uses apocalyptic language not unlike Peter in his epistle where he wrote, "The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare." (1 Peter 3:10.) The Quran says, "The Day that We roll up the heavens like a scroll rolled up for books (completed),- even as We produced the first creation, so shall We produce a new one: a promise We have undertaken: truly shall We fulfill it." (21:104) One acquainted with the Judeo-Christian tradition will immediately notice the promise of a new heavens and a new earth that was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 65:17 , 2 Peter 3:13, Revelation 21:1)) Muhammad writes clearly, "One day the earth will be changed to a different earth, and so will be the heavens, and (men) will be marshaled forth, before Allah, the One, the Irresistible." (14:48)

The Pauline letters repeatedly mention that the events of the Second Coming will be immediately preceded by a trumpet blast (1 Corinthians 15:52 & 1 Thessalonians 4:16) and naturally the Quran also finds this as an appropriate herald for the Last Day. One passage suggests that the long awaited Day of the Lord will begin with the angelic horn blast: "And the Trumpet shall be blown: that will be the Day whereof Warning (had been given)." (50:20) It is this sounding of the trumpet that will also signal another very important eschatological event for Muslims which we identify as the Resurrection of all men: "The trumpet shall be sounded, when behold! from the sepulchers (men) will rush forth to their Lord! It will be no more than a single Blast, when lo! they will all be brought up before Us!" (36:51,53)

Though there are several interpretations connected with it, the idea of resurrection from the dead precedes Islam by many centuries in a few different religions. Muhammad's immediate source of inspiration would again appear to be Jesus who used the term a number of times in the gospels. He spoke of a time coming when "those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned." (John

5:29) And in the following chapter in which Christ identifies himself as the Bread of Life, he says a few times, "I will raise him up at the last day" referring to those who consume his Body and Blood. While many Christians may only see this as some sort of spiritual resurrection, others do in fact recognize these passages and others (1 Thessalonians 4:16) to refer to a physical bodily resurrection and it would seem that Muhammad embraced that literal tradition in the pages of the Quran.

Over and over again, the Quran affirms a bodily resurrection of all mankind on the Last Day: "And verily the Hour will come: there can be no doubt about it, or about (the fact) that Allah will raise up all who are in the graves." (22:7-9) There is almost a constant rebuke throughout the pages of the Islamic scriptures who find this too incredible to be true: "The Unbelievers say (in ridicule): 'Shall we point out to you a man that will tell you, when ye are all scattered to pieces in disintegration, that ye shall (then be raised) in a New Creation?'" (34:7)

Immediately after the resurrection of the dead it is expected that eternal justice will be meted out to all who have ever lived on the face of the earth. We are told that it is the work of the angels to record the deeds of men while they are alive to serve as a testimony for or against them on that dreadful day: "But verily over you (are appointed angels) to protect you, Kind and honorable, - Writing down (your deeds): They know (and understand) all that ye do." (82:10-12) Centuries earlier, the Apostle John wrote, "And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were open." Indeed the prophet Muhammad expected that the record of each one's life would be revealed on the Last Day, for "That Day will every soul be requited for what it earned; no injustice will there be that Day, for Allah is Swift in taking account." (40:17)

The Rewards of Heaven

The deeds of a soul will be weighed in the balance on that Great Day, and if the judgment should fall in his favor, the reward of paradise will be given to him forever. Though like in the Christian tradition, the deeds of an individual are compensated proportionately so that those who have labored harder will also attain a higher degree of happiness: "See how We have bestowed more on some than on others; but verily the Hereafter is more in rank and gradation and more in excellence." (17:21) Like for the Christian mystics, for Muhammad the splendors of paradise have everything to do with the Beatific Vision. In Medieval theology, the greatest joy for the believer is to see God face to face and be enveloped in his love and this is also true for the sages of Islam. From an extracanonial text, the prophet tells us, "to see God's face night and morning is a felicity which will surpass all the pleasures of the body, as the ocean surpasses a drop of sweat" (words of Muhammad quoted in Ali, Spirit of Islam.)

Nonetheless, Islam understands that a new material world will replace the old one much like what the Judeo-Christian tradition would call the Garden of Eden restored. So while in the New Testament, heaven is portrayed more as a place of spiritual delight it is not so with the Muslim tradition. The Apostle Paul said, "The kingdom of God is not a matter

of eating or drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 14:17) But this kind of sentiment doesn’t really find a good home in the Quran.

It is really a lush Garden of Eden that the Muslim faithful expect as a reward for their goodness on earth. Christ said, “the meek shall inherit the earth,” and it would seem that the Quran endorses this idea indicating that the renewed planet is the inheritance of the believer: “They will say: ‘Praise be to Allah, Who has truly fulfilled His Promise to us, and has given us (this) land in heritage: We can dwell in the Garden as we will: how excellent a reward for those who work (righteousness)!’”

We are informed of the details of paradise in various passages but one cites a familiar promise that has been caricatured the world over: “Shall I inform you of [something] better than that? For those who fear Allah will be gardens in the presence of their Lord beneath which rivers flow, wherein they abide eternally, and purified spouses and approval from Allah . And Allah is Seeing of [His] servants.” (3:15) The Quran speaks of “purified spouses” as a reward for the faithful Muslim in the afterlife, and by this is meant ones that do not defecate, urinate, or menstruate. That one who merits heaven should receive 72 virgins as his prize is apparently a non-canonical opinion that most Muslims find grossly exaggerated.

That notwithstanding, the Garden is described as a lavish place in which each believer is more or less treated as royalty: “For them will be Gardens of Eternity; beneath them rivers will flow; they will be adorned therein with bracelets of gold, and they will wear green garments of fine silk and heavy brocade: They will recline therein on raised thrones. How good the recompense! How beautiful a couch to recline on!” (18:31)

The Book of Revelation suggests that the eternal order will be one that is free of the pain and sorrow of the mortal life: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes.” (Revelation 21:4) Identifying with this idea, the Quran exclaims, “Praise be to Allah, Who has removed from us (all) sorrow: for our Lord is indeed Oft-Forgiving Ready to appreciate (service): Who has, out of His Bounty, settled us in a Home that will last: no toil nor sense of weariness shall touch us therein.” (35:34-35)

In this idyllic setting, the faithful will enjoy choice foods and drinks to partake of to their hearts content: “(Here is) a Parable of the Garden which the righteous are promised: in it are rivers of water incorruptible; rivers of milk of which the taste never changes; rivers of wine, a joy to those who drink; and rivers of honey pure and clear. In it there are for them all kinds of fruits; and Grace from their Lord.” (47:15) While partaking of delectable morsels, the righteous will be waited on by devoted servants who will attend to their every need: “And We shall bestow on them, of fruit and meat, anything they shall desire. Round about them will serve, (devoted) to them, young male servants (handsome) as Pearls well-guarded.” (52:22,24)

The Punishments of Hell

While the rewards of the Garden are exceedingly pleasant to the senses, the reverse is unfortunately true for those who die outside of God's friendship. Hell in all religions is a wretched destination, but the experience of it is not the same for every unbeliever. According to the Quran, "To all are (assigned) degrees according to the deeds which they (have done), and in order that (Allah) may recompense their deeds, and no injustice be done to them." Depending on the gravity of one's offenses, so will the punishment be, and while this idea appeals to our sense of fairness, it is likely that Muhammad was influenced by Jesus' words in the gospels. To indicate varying degrees of punishment in hell, Christ had said, "That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows." (Luke 12:47-48)

The idea of gradations of chastisement in hell was one popularized by Dante Alighieri in his famous "Inferno" in which he depicted many layers within that abysmal place. At the highest point of hell, life could be almost palatable while the lowest point represented continual despair and utter agony. For Dante, the punishment had to fit the crime, and so he depicts blasphemers hanging by their wretched tongues and adulterers hanging from their private parts. He imagined flatterers being steeped in human excrement and corrupt politicians being boiled in pitch (because of their "sticky" fingers.)

It seems certain that the medieval poet was inspired to some degree by an apocryphal work of the early church known as the Apocalypse of Peter which vividly conceived of similar fates for the unjust: "And some there were there hanging by their tongues; and these were they that blasphemed the way of righteousness, and under them was laid fire flaming and tormenting them. And there were also others, women, hanged by their hair above that mire which boiled up; and these were they that adorned themselves for adultery. And the men that were joined with them in the defilement of adultery were hanging by their feet, and had their heads hidden in the mire. (Apocalypse of Peter, Akhmim fragment, verses 22,24)

With similar detail, the Quran describes the suffering in hell: "And thou wilt see the sinners that day bound together in fetters;- Their garments of liquid pitch, and their faces covered with Fire." (14:49-50) "When the yokes (shall be) round their necks, and the chains; they shall be dragged along- In the boiling fetid fluid: then in the Fire shall they be burned." (40:71-72) "If they implore relief they will be granted water like melted brass, that will scald their faces, how dreadful the drink!" (18:29)

Muhammad compounds this torture by depriving the citizens of hell of all their senses except that of touch, for they must feel the fire but apparently not see it, hear it, or speak about it: "On the Day of Judgment We shall gather, them together, prone on their faces, blind, dumb, and deaf: their abode will be Hell." (17:97) There is also an indication that the prophet had a conviction that they way one left the mortal life would be the way he would enter into eternal punishment, for he wrote, "Those who were blind in this world, will be blind in the hereafter, and most astray from the Path." (17:72) He may have been inspired by Christ's hyperbolic words in the gospels where he said, "If your eye causes

you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.” But it is likely that the Apocalypse of Peter or similar ancient texts were his source, for that document says, “And hard by this place of torment shall be men and women dumb and blind, whose raiment is white. They shall crowd one upon another, and fall upon coals of unquenchable fire.” (Apocalypse of Peter, Ethiopic Text)

In the Christian tradition, at least in modern times it is a popular idea that it will be devils or demons who torture the victims of hell. Naturally the image of a devil with a pitchfork comes to mind. But this is not the teaching of the Quran which rather sees angelic beings charged with administering punishment. Muhammad writes, “We have set none but angels as Guardians of the Fire.” (74:30-31) The prophet exhorts the faithful saying, “O ye who believe! save yourselves and your families from a Fire whose fuel is Men and Stones, over which are (appointed) angels stern (and) severe, who flinch not (from executing) the Commands they receive from Allah, but do (precisely) what they are commanded.” (66:6) As the servants of God, the angelic hosts were perhaps the logical choice to perform this unsavory job, but once again, it is also possible that the Christian apocryphal writings were a source of Muhammad’s thought. The Apocalypse of Peter also states, “And I saw also another place over against that one, very squalid; and it was a place of punishment, and they that were punished and the angels that punished them had their raiment dark, according to the air of the place.”

It is also a popular belief in modern Christian thought that the abodes of heaven and hell are so intrinsically isolated from each other that there should be no contact or awareness of the conditions of those who inhabit the opposite realm. Perhaps because of the Apostle John’s statement that there should be no tears in heaven there is a natural belief that somehow the whole matter of hell should be eternally quarantined from the blessed. Yet this has not been an entirely historical conviction.

Certainly in the gospels is the familiar story of the Rich Man and Lazarus which impresses upon us that there is a cognizance of those in heaven about those in hell and vice versa. Though there was a vast chasm between them, the Rich Man in hell begged Abraham to send Lazarus to him from Paradise with a drop of water to quench his thirst. With that biblical precedent, the medieval mystics continued the tradition which we see embodied in the words of St. Catherine of Siena: “And their (the blessed) will is so united with Mine, that a father or his mother in Hell, do not trouble themselves, and even are contented to see them punished as My enemies.”

Such thoughts are indeed troubling to modern sensibilities, though it wasn’t so for Muhammad who wrote a similar verse in the Quran about a denizen of the Garden looking upon the fires of hell: “(A voice) said: ‘Would ye like to look down?’ He looked down and saw him in the midst of the Fire. He said: ‘By Allah! thou wast little short of bringing me to perdition! Had it not been for the Grace of my Lord, I should certainly have been among those brought (there)!’” (37:54-57) In another passage there seems to be even dialogue portrayed between the two eternal destinations: “(They will be) in

Gardens (of Delight): they will question each other, And (ask) of the Sinners: ‘What led you into Hell Fire?’” (74:40-42)

Predestination

Inevitably there will be souls who populate the blissful garden and others who fill the bowels of hell, but who ultimately ends up in either location is in itself a complicated subject. Like many major religions, Islam believes in some form of predestination whereby God’s invisible hand is directing affairs towards the end that he had determined long before anything ever came to pass. Like the Christian scriptures, the Quran makes use of deterministic words as in the following generalization: “Indeed, all things We created with predestination.” (54:49)

The theologians of many religions have wrestled with how to reconcile Divine determinism with human freedom for millennia with the mind of man producing no good resolution. In his work on the world’s religions, Huston Smith writes, “It must be admitted that in Islam human freedom stands in tension with God’s omnipotence which points toward predestination. Islamic theology has wrestled interminably with this tension without rationally resolving it. It concludes that the workings of the Divine Decree remain a mystery to humans, who nevertheless are granted sufficient freedom and responsibility to make genuine moral and spiritual decisions.” (The World’s Religions, pg 240-241) Huston goes on to quote the Quran where it nonetheless emphasizes human accountability, for “whoever gets to himself a sin, gets it solely on his own responsibility ... whoever goes astray, he himself bears the responsibility of wandering.” (4:111, 10:103)

The Quran is not afraid to say point blank that some of God’s creatures were expressly fashioned for the fire: “Many are the Jinns and men we have made for hell.” And while such language might be disturbing it is not very different from the words of the Apostle Paul who said, “What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction” (Romans 9:22) The Quran has its targets of wrath just like the bible, for Muhammad identifies one such unhappy soul in the story of Lot: “Except the family of Lot; indeed, we will save them all. Except his wife; Allah decreed that she is of those who remain behind.” (15:59-60) Of course Jesus himself used such language to describe the damned, and we recall his reference to Judas in the gospel of John: “While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by the name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that scripture would be fulfilled” (John 17:12)

While human responsibility is a theme within both the Christian and Muslim scriptures, there is on the other end a strong message of the soul’s impotence to follow God of its own accord. We are told in the Quran, “It is not for a soul to believe except by permission of Allah.” (10:100) And this sounds very similar to Paul’s words on the same subject where he wrote, “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.” (Ephesians 2:8) Christ himself was fairly forward

on the subject when he told the crowds, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” (John 6:44)

Biblical and Quranic terminology seem to overlap considerably on this topic of predestination, and we can't help but suggest that the former influenced the latter. The Muslim scriptures say, “He punishes whom He wills and has mercy upon whom He wills, and to Him you will be returned.” (29:21) Anyone familiar with the New Testament will recognize the corollary to Paul's words: “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” (Romans 9:15)

The language is yet stronger in both holy books even suggesting that while God helps some to come to faith in him, he actively turns away others. The Bible plainly says that God hardened the heart of the Pharaoh of the Exodus, and while we offer no commentary or interpretation on such difficult words, we merely point out that the analogous verses belong to Islam as well. Paul writes, “God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.” (Romans 9:18) And Muhammad follows suit in various passages uttering much the same idea: “Allah sends astray [thereby] whom He wills and guides whom He wills. And He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise.” (14:4)

Chapter 4- Islam and other Religions

Intolerance for other Religions

The scriptures of many religions are full of difficult words and this is true of Islam on a number of subjects particularly with regard to its sentiments towards those of other faiths. We find many decidedly intolerant verses in the Quran which condemn unbelievers to hell in no uncertain terms. The foundational pillar of Islam cannot be compromised, for the Islamic scriptures declare, “if any believe not in Allah and His Messenger, We have prepared, for those who reject Allah, a Blazing Fire!” (48:13) Similarly, one will be judged severely for not accepting the writings of the Prophet: “But as for those who disbelieved and denied Our verses and the meeting of the Hereafter, those will be brought into the punishment [to remain].” (30:16) And the Quran never hesitates to assert that it proclaims the true faith without which one cannot be saved: “If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to Allah), never will it be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter He will be in the ranks of those who have lost (all spiritual good).” (3:85)

What is one to do with these uncompromising words from one of the world's three monotheistic religions? Before taking offense at the apparent narrow-minded views of the prophet, we should also remember that there are similar kinds of verses in the Bible itself. Without hesitation, the Psalms declare across-the-board that the religions of non-Jews are all invalid, for we are told, “All the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.” (Psalm 96:5) Then in the New Testament, the apostle John, the one who is associated with his call to love God and others spells out a simple litmus test for who is on the “right side of the fence:” “He who has the Son of God has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.” And we infer from this verse that those who do not embrace Christ will not be in a good way in the afterlife. We may be inclined

to dismiss these statements, for they didn't come out of the mouth of the religion's founder, but the same kind of disturbing words also were spoken by Jesus in the gospels. Before his ascension, Christ plainly said to his apostles, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:16)

While we would certainly be very reluctant to say that Jesus is intolerant, we are forced to find an explanation for apparently bigoted statements like this in the Bible and in the Quran and in other holy books for that matter. Naturally, when someone embraces a religion, he does so because he is convinced of the teachings and subscribes to the practices of that faith. For the person immersed in that form of worship, it is decidedly the "true religion" for which he must devote himself without reservation. It is certainly important that members of a particular faith receive confirmation that they are on the "right path" to the exclusion of others, and so many holy books unabashedly announce that the religion they endorse is the only way to salvation.

We should not feel that these kind of "intolerant" statements are misleading or harmful to the practice of respecting others. Rather we should understand them simply as normative or idealistic verses which are designed to validate the religion for the believer. Particularly for those not very far along the spiritual path, concrete theology and "black and white" teachings are necessary to provide a foundation to a fledgling person of faith. And so we should see the dogmatic words of Muhammad, Moses, and even Jesus in this context.

The scriptures of various religions can and do appeal to different caliber souls at all points along the spiritual journey, and while what is perceived as intolerant doctrine is more for the novice, inclusive and all embracing teachings are for the advanced soul. It may be ironic that one of the more intolerant verses of the Quran points out what is true on a high level of spirituality. There is a passage in the Muslim scriptures which mocks the unbeliever who glibly says, "For you is your religion, and for me is my religion." (109:6) While this possibility is inconceivable to a fundamentalist and dogmatic Muslim, it is in fact very close to the truth, for undoubtedly various religions exist to lead different kinds of souls to God, and this is all a part of the Divine Plan.

Tolerance for other Religions

If this assertion is in fact true, we would expect to find support for it in the texts of various religions, perhaps even alongside the more inflexible and rigid statements that we have offered as examples. Within the Christian tradition, the Apostle Paul seemed to feel that the Gentiles who knew nothing of the Jewish religion were justified simply by living according their consciences and does not condemn them because they had no access to the "true religion." (Romans 2:12-16) It may be surprising for many to learn that Muhammad had also penned a good number of very tolerant and inclusive verses in the Quran and in extra-scriptural writings which paint him as a fairly progressive prophet.

In a verse apparently recognizing the legitimacy of other religions as a path to God, the prophet wrote, "To every People have We appointed rites and ceremonies which they

must follow: let them not then dispute with thee on the matter” (22:67) As if the diversity in religion were part of God’s ultimate plan, Muhammad suggests that if God really wanted he could have made the whole world one nation and one faith, perhaps like before the time of the biblical Tower of Babel; but this wasn’t his purpose. So Islam’s messenger writes, “To each among you have we prescribed a law and an open way. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute” (5:48)

Muhammad seemed to recognize that every soul is unique and at a different place along the spiritual journey and so wrote emphatically, “Let there be no compulsion in religion.” (2:256) Recognizing that each person is at a certain stage of development, he seemed to acknowledge that God’s requirements for each soul and the path that each soul must take are particular to its own ability. Along these lines the Quran says, “We charge no soul except [with that within] its capacity, and with Us is a record which speaks with truth; and they will not be wronged.” (23:62) In a famous extra-scriptural motto, Muhammad is quoted as saying, “Will you then force men to believe when belief can come only from God?” Far from being interested in converting people at the point of the sword, Muhammad was happy to receive into the new Muslim faith whichever persons God was inclining toward it but none more.

Islam’s disposition toward Jews and Christians

We can see a thread of verses in the Quran which are unquestionably bigoted against other faiths and yet others which appear to be open-minded. This mixture of sentiments has played out particularly in Islam’s relationship with its spiritual forbears, the Jews and the Christians, and we now have a look at what the Quran has to say about the “People of the Scriptures” with which there has been a love/hate relationship from early on.

It is of course common knowledge that there exists a fair amount of hostility against Jews and Christians within the Middle East. There is not one Islamic country that is in the least sympathetic with the reemergence of Israel as a political entity in the region, and there are some nations which would be thrilled to see it wiped off the map. The origin of such antipathy is ancient with its root in the Muslim scriptures and is based upon two perceived failures of the People of the Book.

The first such failure is one which is recognized even by the Jews themselves, the failure to live up to the calling that God had given them. The Quran remembers how despite the many signs and proofs that they were given, the people still obstinately worshipped the Golden Calf which for Islam is inexcusable. (4:153) After they were entrusted with divine ordinances, the people repeatedly broke faith with God. The Muslim holy book notes that “(They have incurred divine displeasure): In that they broke their covenant; that they rejected the signs of Allah; that they slew the Messengers in defiance of right” (4:155) In fact it seems that the Quran is particularly angry with the Jews for their treatment of the prophets of old who were the very emissaries of God himself: “But how

many were the prophets We sent amongst the peoples of old? And never came there a prophet to them but they mocked him.” (43:6-7)

The Muslim scriptures recall the chronic disbelief and the demands for unreasonable signs from the prophets: “They (also) said: ‘Allah took our promise not to believe in an messenger unless He showed us a sacrifice consumed by Fire (From heaven).’ Say: ‘There came to you messengers before me, with clear Signs and even with what ye ask for: why then did ye slay them, if ye speak the truth?’” (4:183) For the hostility toward Jesus Christ, Islam’s penultimate prophet the Quran is indignant toward the Jews. It is outraged that they should attempt to slander Mary his mother: “That they rejected Faith; that they uttered against Mary a grave false charge” (4:156) And it is enraged that the Jews arranged for the murder of a special prophet: “That they said (in boast), ‘We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah.’” (4:157)

While a large part of the Muslim grievance is against Jews, Christians are also under fire not as much for moral failures but for theological distortions. As we have noted, the Christian belief in the Trinity is nothing less than polytheism for the follower of Islam. The Quran’s main objection to the Christians is their perceived omission of parts of the message that were given to them: “From those, too, who call themselves Christians, We did take a covenant, but they forgot a good part of the message that was sent them: so we estranged them, with enmity and hatred between the one and the other, to the day of judgment.” (5:14)

In addition to these failures of the People of the Book, Muslim hostility to Jews and Christians has to do with the failure of these peoples to accept the revelation that was given to Muhammad. As we have noted earlier, for the Muslim, Muhammad represents the final message of God completing a long chain of prophets from the beginning. That Jews and Christians who were entrusted with the majority of the ancient messages should reject the final one is offensive.

The Quran suggests that there was adequate evidence to believe in the message of Muhammad and so condemns the People of the Book: “Indeed, those who conceal what We sent down of clear proofs and guidance after We made it clear for the people in the Scripture - those are cursed by Allah and cursed by those who curse.” (2:159) “Ask the Children of Israel how many a sign of evidence We have given them. And whoever exchanges the favor of Allah [for disbelief] after it has come to him - then indeed, Allah is severe in penalty.” (2:211) “But (now), when the Truth has come to them from Ourselves, they say, ‘Why are not (Signs) sent to him, like those which were sent to Moses?’ Do they not then reject (the Signs) which were formerly sent to Moses? They say: ‘Two kinds of sorcery, each assisting the other!’” (28:48)

For their rejection of his message, Muhammad condemns Jews and Christians with eternal punishment: “Those who reject (Truth), among the People of the Book and among the Polytheists, will be in Hell-Fire, to dwell therein (for aye). They are the worst of

creatures.” (98:6) And he forbids any good Muslim to associate with them: “O ye who believe! take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors.” (5:51)

Despite all of this rancor against the People of the Book, the more tolerant side of Muhammad also appears throughout the Quran and in stories of his own life with a more positive view of Jews and Christians. When Muhammad became the leader of the city of Medina, he enacted a charter guaranteeing religious freedom: “The Jews who attach themselves to our commonwealth (extended later to Christians) shall be protected from all insults and vexations; they shall have an equal right with our own people to our assistance and good offices: the Jews and all domiciled in Yathrib shall practice their religion as freely as the Muslims”

His progressive religious views are evident from one particular anecdote that is recorded of him. On one occasion, Muhammad invited visiting Christians to hold a service in his mosque saying, “It is a place consecrated to God.” In fact it seems that Muhammad regarded all of the monotheistic religious places of worship as houses of God which should be respected: “[They are] those who have been evicted from their homes without right - only because they say, ‘Our Lord is Allah.’ And were it not that Allah checks the people, some by means of others, there would have been demolished monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques in which the name of Allah is much mentioned. And Allah will surely support those who support Him.” (22:40)

While Muhammad certainly didn’t believe that all Jews and Christians were on the right track, he had a conviction that there were nonetheless many who were righteous people: “Not all of them are alike: Of the People of the Book are a portion that stand (For the right): They rehearse the Signs of Allah all night long, and they prostrate themselves in adoration. They believe in Allah and the Last Day; they enjoin what is right, and forbid what is wrong; and they hasten (in emulation) in (all) good works: They are in the ranks of the righteous. Of the good that they do, nothing will be rejected of them; for Allah knoweth well those that do right.” (3:113-115)

In another passage he indicates similar feelings: “And there are, certainly, among the People of the Book, those who believe in Allah, in the revelation to you, and in the revelation to them, bowing in humility to Allah: They will not sell the Signs of Allah for a miserable gain! For them is a reward with their Lord, and Allah is swift in account.” (3:199) “Of the people of Moses there is a section who guide and do justice in the light of truth.” (7:159)

Despite his vitriolic comments cited earlier about even associating with Jews and Christians, he nonetheless in another section of the Quran permits Muslims to marry People of the Book: “The food of the People of the Book is lawful unto you and yours is lawful unto them. (Lawful unto you in marriage) are (not only) chaste women who are believers, but chaste women among the People of the Book, revealed before your time.” (5:5)

Muhammad is wisely open-minded in several passages of the Quran admitting that judgment ultimately belongs to God and that people from various religions will make it to Paradise. “Those who believe (in the Quran), those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Sabians, Christians, Magians, and Polytheists,- Allah will judge between them on the Day of Judgment: for Allah is witness of all things.” (22:17) Those who believe (in the Quran), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians,- any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. (2:62) He predicted that Paradise would indeed be populated with People of the Book: “In the Gardens of Pleasure, A [large] company of the former peoples And a few of the later peoples,” (56:12-14)

As mentioned earlier, history seems to indicate for us the prevailing sentiment of Islam to those of other faiths. While there have been periods of severe persecution in different periods and even in the present time, by and large the Muslim has had a sense of fraternity with Jews and Christians. It is true that all three peoples lived harmoniously together in Moorish Spain. For many centuries in Spain, India, and the Middle East, Christians, Jews, and Hindus lived quietly under Muslim rule. And they held positions of influence and could practice their own religion freely. With all other things being equal, the record of Muslim abuse of non-Muslims is no worse than that of Christianity which has both the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition to its demerit.

In fact, in one sense it is ironic that the Crusades were a boon to Western Europe, for it was because of contact with both Muslims and Byzantines that the Renaissance and the Revival of Learning was triggered where the Dark Ages had a strong grip for centuries. It was particularly during the 9th and 10th centuries that Greek texts on philosophy and science were translated into Arabic and preserved after the Roman Empire collapsed and knowledge went into hiding. While there was darkness in Europe, intellectual life flourished in Baghdad where there was an academy with a library and an observatory. The emergence of the European universities owes much to the Arabic texts that were brought back during the Crusades to reignite the Western mind.

Chapter 5- Summary

Therefore Christianity owes a certain debt to Islam for the intellectual spark it provided it in the Middle Ages, but it seems that this was really in turn a repayment to Christianity for its contribution to the emerging Muslim religion in the 7th century. As we have seen, the identity of Islam cannot be understood without reference to its parent religions, Judaism and Christianity which together with indigenous tribal religions spawned this third major monotheistic religion. In many respects we can suggest that Islam really isn't an independent faith, but rather a spin-off or daughter religion of the other two Abrahamic religions.

That Islam borrowed so much from Judaism and Christianity was in no small way a result of Muhammad's exposure to the People of the Scriptures among whom he lived for many years prior to his own mystical experiences. Undoubtedly he heard many stories from

Old Testament sources and the Talmud as well as New Testament books and Apocryphal texts that he integrated into the new faith that he was charged with establishing.. The prophet wove together themes from the Old and New Covenants into a fabric that has become distinctly Islam. We might call it then a religion of synthesis mixing justice and mercy, religious war and spiritual discipline, and animal sacrifice and the pursuit of heaven altogether in a unique approach to spirituality.

Like a teenager pushing its boundaries, Islam hasn't always gotten along with its Jewish and Christian parents and at times there has been much hostility. Although at other times the family of three religions has gotten along more or less harmoniously in an atmosphere of tolerance if not respect. For better or for worse, we suggest that each of these faiths has been called into being with a purpose, for each one in its own way is leading souls along the path to God which is humanity's common goal.