

Nothing New Under the Sun

An Introduction to Islam

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*Nothing New Under the Sun:
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For Ginger, and in memory of Tahmoores Sarraf.

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We rely, in that about which we disagree, on the Book of God, the Sunna of His Prophet, and the Consensus of the Muslims, and what accords with that.

—*The Creed of al-Ash'ari (873-935)*

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

—*Attributed to Edmund Burke*

Religious belief systems are like bikinis: they generally provide inadequate coverage of an expanse which is much larger and lumpier than their owners care to admit.

—*Paul Culp*

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Santa Claus, Osama's Cause, and Why You Need this Book

Think about Christmas.

Better yet, think about the Christmas season. Imagine that you live in a highly commercialized contemporary Western society (as most of you do) and that you must explain the Christmas season to someone from a completely different culture. Now, considering how early the shopping season begins and the decorations go up, you might need to be an expert on Halloween and Thanksgiving as well, but let's be merciful here.

To explain the Christmas season, really *explain* it to someone who knew nothing about it, where would you start? Logically, you could begin with Christianity, which would require some understanding of Original Sin, monotheism, Judaism, the Greco-Roman world, Trinitarianism, and the Bible, to name just a few obvious—and challenging—topics. No doubt your alien friend would think of others. You would then need to explain why so many of the symbols and ceremonies of Christmas—like the tree and the December 25 date—have nothing whatsoever to do with the life or death of Jesus. In other words, how did non-Christian images and customs get mixed in? The whole topic of Santa Claus—from the historical St. Nicholas through all the iterations and evolutions, down to the contemporary Santa Cult—would test your powers considerably.

Having covered the preliminaries, then—because that's what we're talking about so far—you'd need to explain to your interlocutor the role Christmas plays in national life and consciousness, even among (perhaps especially among) people who are only nominally religious or not religious at all, or of some other religion entirely. Why has the Christmas season become the pattern for other holidays? What is its role in the annual cycle of life? What is its place in the economy? How

does the Christmas season relate to our assumptions about life, to our hopes and dreams, our childrearing practices and adult expectations, our national and cultural *mythos*?

Now imagine a different culture with a different religion and a different history and a different mixture of religious and secular symbols and customs and lifeways. Think about being in the same position, relative to that tradition, that your alien friend is in regarding the Christmas season.

Welcome to the serious study of Islam. You have just stepped, naked, out of mainstream thought (or non-thought) and into the real world.

The author of this work is not arrogant enough to think that he can do for you what you have just imagined trying to do for a hypothetical acquaintance. Even the *Encyclopedia of Islam* cannot do that—in twelve volumes and at a cost of more than \$4,000. What this book *can* do is enable you to think intelligently about Islam and Muslims, weigh the opinions you hear from friends and strangers and pundits and politicians, and lay a foundation for further study. The relationship between Islam and the West—often fruitful, sometimes stormy, and usually complicated—is a long story, and probably of no less importance at any time in the last thirteen centuries than it is today. It's just harder to ignore today—though millions of people want to keep trying. This book will relieve you of your ignorance and a fair amount of your ignorance. It will serve as a sort of primer or summary, and although you will not emerge from it as an expert, you will be responsibly informed.

Responsibility matters. Yes, it's important to be informed about Islam because of its role in history and its effect on Western culture—such as the contribution Muslim scholars made to the Renaissance by preserving and distributing ancient Greek manuscripts, or widespread fear of the Turks as part of the apocalyptic backdrop to the Protestant Reformation, to name two ready examples. The latter very much resembles today's evangelical Christian preoccupation with the Middle East and the role of Arabs in the End Time, concerning which more later. Knowing something about Islam is part of being an educated person with a proper appreciation for Western and other civilizations. As José Ortega y Gasset warned in *The Revolt of the Masses*,

we are not behaving well if we take for granted the world we live in and care nothing for the attainments which make its blessings possible. Today, however, responsibility takes on an added dimension, inasmuch as public opinion can play a crucial role in the formation of public policy, diplomacy, and war.¹

You owe it to yourself and to others to become the sort of person who is suspicious of “experts” who use “Muslim” and “Arab” interchangeably (most Muslims aren’t Arabs, and not all Arabs are Muslims; just ask any Lebanese), who refer to Iranians as Arabs (they’re mostly Persian and Azerbaijani, and the national language is Farsi), who refer to Shi’ites as more radical than Sunnis (which is like saying that Catholics are more radical than Protestants), who speak as if most imported oil comes from Arab countries (estimates range from twenty to thirty percent, and Canada is the leading foreign supplier of U.S. oil)², who speak of the Qur’an as if it were the “Muslim Bible” (in fact it’s more analogous to Christ as the Word of God made tangible), who argue that Allah isn’t the same deity as “God” in Judaism and Christianity (Arabs of all religions naturally refer to God in their own tongue, just like German Lutherans with “Gott” and French Catholics with “Dieu”), who say that “Muslims believe Jesus was just a prophet” (true in the sense that Muslims don’t believe in his divinity, but not quite right in the sense that Muslims believe in the Virgin Birth, the Second Coming, the miracles tradition, and—for some Muslims—the Immaculate Conception, or something akin to it), who state confidently that “Islam is a religion of peace” (for some Muslims it is, for others it isn’t) or that it isn’t a religion of peace (for some Muslims it isn’t, for others it is).

Islam is many things to many Muslims. How many? Islam is the second-largest religion in the world, with about 1.3 billion adherents,

1 Osama bin Laden justifies his attacks on civilians by arguing that since democracy is government by the people, the line between combatants and non-combatants is erased in democratic societies. Perhaps we should have been more precise in our use of the word “democracy,” for bin Laden’s argument would be somewhat weakened if we accurately referred to the U.S. as a democratic republic. Be that as it may, our opinions count for a great deal, even when they count only because a terrorist decides that they do and plans his activities accordingly. Perhaps Osama bin Laden has unwittingly empowered the ordinary American voter.

2 Jonathan D. Strong, “A Proven Way to Lessen Dependence on Foreign Oil,” *American Thinker*, 4 September 2006. www.americanthinker.com/2006/09 Access date 16 March 2007.

compared with about 2.1 billion Christians. Muslims outnumber Roman Catholics (1.1 billion) and dwarf the number of Protestants (370 million). In the United States, Muslims number about 4.66 million. To put that in perspective by looking at a few other religious groups, the U.S. has 5.3 million Jews, 4.9 million Mormons, 4.7 million Eastern Orthodox Christians of all jurisdictions, 3.2 members of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., and 2.3 million Episcopalians. The number of Muslims in the U.S. is about equal to the population of Colorado or Louisiana, or of LA proper, and a bit less than that of Minnesota. It's slightly larger than the population of the metro Boston area. The U.S. is a big country, of course—big enough that its Muslim population is larger than the total population of Ireland, Singapore, Norway, or New Zealand.³

Returning to the theme of Muslims and Arabs, it's instructive to note that if we rank countries according to the size of their respective Muslim populations, only two of the top ten are Arab countries.

Top 10 Largest National Muslim Populations

<i>Country</i>	<i>Number of Muslims</i>
Indonesia	170,310,000
Pakistan	136,000,000
Bangladesh	106,050,000
India	103,000,000
Turkey	62,410,000
Iran	60,790,000
Egypt	53,730,000
Nigeria	47,720,000
China	37,108,000
Algeria	30,442,000 ⁴

³ *World Almanac and Book of Facts*, 2006.

⁴ www.adherents.com/largecom/com_islam.html Access date 17 March 2007. www.mapsof-world.com/world-top-ten/world-top-ten-countries-with-largest-muslim-populations-map.html Access date 8 August 2007. One wonders whether the U.S. government has considered the significance of the Muslim presence in China, where Muslims serve in the military in numbers disproportionate to their share of the population, according to a Chinese Muslim interviewed by the author.

Most people realize that Islam predominates in North Africa, but they might be surprised to learn that the rest of Africa trumps the North by a score of 232 million to 180 million. The Middle East, with its 252 million Muslims, tops Southeast Asia's 239 million, but South Asia has a whopping 456 million Muslims.⁵ Europe has 44 million, with Muslims comprising nearly a tenth of the population of France, at 5 to 6 million. Germany has about 3 million adherents to Islam, mostly of Turkish descent, and Muslims account for 4.2 percent of the population of Switzerland and 2.8 percent of the population of the United Kingdom.⁶

My own introduction to Islam occurred at Oxford, where my teacher was a Belgian convert who had been raised Roman Catholic. I also lived in a heavily Muslim neighborhood. After teaching academic writing and research methods at a university in the West Bank, I spent a few months teaching high school English in a Muslim school in the U.S., one which was just beginning to serve as a magnet school of sorts for Muslims from throughout the United States and even abroad. I was one of about thirty teachers, and I was responsible for about sixty students, not exactly a vast number of people. In that group, however, I encountered ample variety: Jordanian, Chinese, Palestinian, Somali, Sudanese, Syrian, Iraqi, Indian, Indonesian, Moroccan, Ethiopian, Egyptian, Afghan, Albanian, Alabamian, African-American, Anglo-Saxon, Turkish, and Hispanic. Most of these acquaintances were Sunni, some were Shi'a, and at least one was from the Nation of Islam and therefore a Black Muslim and not merely a Muslim who happened to be black (to use George Carlin's phrase). Some were impoverished, newly arrived refugees, but many were from wealthy business and professional families. I suppose most were from somewhere in between.⁷ Some had been victims of racism—especially in liberal New England—while others exemplified it. At no point did I encounter anyone who approved of politically or religiously motivated violence, as

⁵ Data from Census Bureau and CIA documents cited in "Islam by Country," *Wikipedia*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_by_Country. Access date 17 March 2007.

⁶ "Muslims in Europe: Country Guide." British Broadcasting Corporation. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4385768.stm>. Access date 17 March 2007.

⁷ The corruption of the financial aid process, which involved quite a bit of prevarication and tax evasion followed by boasting about the good deal one had gotten, tended to make the true economic condition of some families a bit tricky to assess.

far as I know. The attitude toward other religions was generally benign. As we all realize, this is not to be expected in every case. To the best of my knowledge, only one of my colleagues was a polygamist. If there were any among the parents, I never knew it.

The point I am attempting to make here is that Muslims are an extremely diverse, widely distributed multitude, and not at all marginal in today's world. They are not going to disappear. Whether we regard Islam as good, bad, or indifferent—or something to be taken on a case-by-case basis—to remain ignorant of it is absurd.

Now that we've looked at the numbers, the "how many," what different things does Islam mean to its adherents? Islam purports to be the definitive and final form of the original, archaic monotheism of Abraham, but different Muslims practice their religion in different ways, or choose not to practice it to any significant extent. This should not surprise us, if we consider more familiar phenomena. Those of us who have lived in countries with large Christian and Jewish populations are familiar with one or more of the following: the hard-shell fundamentalist Protestant, perhaps with a streak of apocalyptic fanaticism and a marked willingness to embrace war as the ultimate solution; the strict ultramontane Catholic; the theologically moderate believer who accepts traditional authority but allows for evolving interpretation; the liberal or progressive adherent who regards his or her innovation as the fulfilment of an ancient faith; the "Christmas Christian" or "Easter Orthodox," for whom Christianity is for certain special days and no more; the Pentecostalist; the Charismatic, who practices Pentecostal fervor in a mainstream religious milieu; the lax Roman Catholic who sins enthusiastically and with premeditation on Saturday nights and then goes to confession on Sunday mornings for a dose of Grace, a clean slate and a new start; his Protestant counterpart, who has his "fire insurance" and therefore lives a less than exemplary life in his antinomian certainty of Grace and forgiveness without all that messy confession business introduced by those corrupt Papists; the dissenting Roman Catholic who openly disagrees with the Church on many (perhaps most) points but who remains in the fold and identifies himself as Catholic; the Eastern Orthodox who knows little about the Faith and for whom the Church is largely an ethnic club in which one

eats certain foods and wears certain clothes at certain times of year;⁸ the observant Jew, whether Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform; the Jew who is largely secularized but somewhat observant; and the thoroughly secularized Jew, with few if any religious beliefs, who definitely identifies himself as Jewish, though he might or might not give it much thought unless asked about it. This list is nowhere near exhaustive, but it aids our appreciation of the varieties and levels of religious affiliation and observance in our surroundings. Very well, Islam has its equivalent of all of the above, and then some. As with almost any other belief system or group affiliation, there are shades and gradations to take into account. Religion is religion and people are people.

Malise Ruthven, a leading scholar in Islamic studies, describes the matter succinctly:

Defining Islam is far from a simple matter. Using Western categories that may be alien to Muslim perceptions, we may state from the start that Islam may be both a religious faith and a political ideology; it is also, in some contexts, a mark of personal and group identity. These three definitions neither exclude nor include each other.⁹

Daniel Brown (not to be confused with Dan Brown of *The DaVinci Code* fame) issues a friendly warning:

[A]bout one-fifth of the world's people call themselves Muslims, and...many of those...people disagree vehemently with one another on the most basic matters of faith and practices. One cannot begin to study such a subject without some effort. Those who shy away from complexity had better stop here.¹⁰

⁸ When my wife worked in a department store as a teen, one of her colleagues was a Greek-American girl, proudly Orthodox. When asked about the teachings of her church, all she could say was, "Oh, I love being Greek." Many years later, after extensive experience with various Eastern Orthodox jurisdictions in the U.S., we attended an Orthodox service in Palestine. Palestinian Christians complain that their Western brethren do not love them or understand them—which is generally true, sad to say—but the Orthodox there clearly preferred persecution to visitors. Our experience was not unique; we knew an Orthodox priest from the U.S. who was treated the same way. The Protestants, Catholics, and Muslims were much more hospitable.

⁹ Malise Ruthven. *Islam: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 1987, p.2.

¹⁰ Daniel Brown. *A New Introduction to Islam*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, p. xv.

We shall discover, during the course of this book, that to a great extent Islam is what Muslims say it is, and that what they say tacitly might be more consequential for our world than what they say explicitly or what Islam says officially. I do not cite all of these caveats in order to discourage the reader; quite the opposite. I wish to offer reassurance and dispel false expectations. This book will not attempt to cut through all of the complication, or to do justice to every nuance, or to satisfy every appetite for information. It will (one hopes) give the reader a compass and map with which to navigate some demanding but fascinating topography. In the next chapter, we'll begin reducing the task to manageable proportions.

The Nature of Things: How Islam Views Itself

I think it only fair that students at the beginning of a course, or readers at the beginning of a book, know something about the background and presuppositions of the teacher or author. This one is a middle aged, married white male descended from Germans who migrated to North America three centuries ago in order to escape religious persecution. My interest in religious subjects is intense and life-long, my religious background quite broad. I have attained first-hand familiarity with most of the major Christian groups and many of the minor ones, as well as a few organizations sometimes described as cults. As a theologian, seeker, and worshiper, I have numbered among my friends and acquaintances an assortment of Protestant ministers; Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox priests and monks and nuns; and rabbis and imams, in addition to a multitude of learned and not-so-learned laypeople of many faiths. My own beliefs could be described as theologically and politically moderate. A substantial portion of my academic background is in Christian theology, not an unusual characteristic for an Islamic studies scholar; I can immediately think of three clergymen among the world's leading writers in the field: Jacques Jomier, W. Montgomery Watt, and Kenneth Cragg. Since I am scarcely worthy to change their printer cartridges (or typewriter ribbons), I mention them not in order to place myself on their level but in order to establish that I am following an example set by my elders and betters. My view of human nature, behavior, and experience also owes a great deal to the works of C.G. Jung; this will sometimes color my interpretation of ideas and events, or perhaps my terminology.

I have already said something about my experience of Islam. I also have indicated some of the complications which attend the study of it. It will be obvious by now that generalization is hazardous, yet

one must indulge in it if one wishes to avoid writing about everything or writing about nothing. Therefore what follows will deal largely with what Islam claims or mandates as a particular belief system with definite norms which may or may not be honored by individuals or groups in all times and places. It might be said that we shall sometimes operate at a catechetical level, enriching our theoretical approach with historical data and empirical observation. Perhaps, in this way, we might achieve an adequate understanding. As noted earlier, many Muslims are lax or aberrant in their beliefs and/or practices; this chapter's description of Islam is not about them. Later chapters will be. As Kenneth Cragg says:

Though the kind of compromise that happens to a faith is sometimes a clue to its nature, it is not in compromise that faiths should be finally judged. Students must acquaint themselves with all that Muslim literature and history have to tell us about what God came to mean to Muslims. But it will be soundest in the end if they assess the lights more than the shadows.¹¹

Therefore we must begin with what is broadly considered normative.

In an introduction to Islam, it is easy to think of Taoism, with its emphasis on conformity to the nature of things or to the governing principle of the universe. For Muslims, however, this is personalized (though some of the more philosophical might view this as largely rhetorical or symbolic) for the universe is governed by a personal deity, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and of Ishmael, the progenitor of the Arabs; the God of Jesus but also of Muhammad. *Islam* means *submission* to this God, who has mercifully made himself known in a series of revelations culminating in those given to Muhammad, which completed the preceding ones and corrected the accumulated human corruptions. All things, animate or inanimate, which conform to the divinely-ordained pattern for them, may be said to be Muslim. Unfortunately, as Nietzsche observed, Man is the sick animal, the one who strays from his own core and is in need of direction “in the

¹¹ Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, 3rd ed. Oxford: Oneworld, 2003, p. 59.

straight path” provided by “God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.” (Qur’an 1:1-7)¹²

In the Muslim view, the prophets all brought essentially the same religious doctrine, and this is true even of Jesus.¹³ “Islam always appeared as the Arab form of the eternal Biblical religion.”¹⁴ As the Qur’an and the Muslim community grew, however, the unfolding revelation emphasized the errors of Christianity and Judaism, and Islam’s superiority to them as a middle way between legalism on the one side and a lax over-emphasis on free forgiveness on the other. Though the Qur’an teaches that God has mercifully given every people a messenger to speak the truth in an idiom comprehensible to them, Muhammad is more than the Moses of the Arabs, for Islam is the last word, so to speak, and for everyone. Throughout history, to ignore or despise God’s messengers has been to assure one’s own annihilation, and the great question now is whether one will accept Muhammad and his teaching.¹⁵

In order to assent, one must begin with the acknowledgement that “there is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God.” On this simple foundation is constructed a vast edifice of ethical guidance, spiritual teaching, law, inspirational biography, mysticism, theodicy, cosmology, and political thought. The foundation and the superstructure represent a seismic upheaval in the religious thought of Muhammad’s Arabia, and Islam is permanently marked by the struggle with, and victory over, the proliferation of idols, which we will discuss in coming chapters.

Submission to God does not bring redemption from sin in quite the Christian sense, however. While God is ultimately the source of all events—and Muslim and non-Muslim thinkers alike differ with regard to the role and extent of predestination in Islam—he has created man as a responsible creature who brings evil on himself and his fellows. Man’s relationship to God is not that of a son who has rebelled, but

¹² Quotations from the Qur’an are taken from *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, trans. Marmaduke Pickthall. New York: New American Library, n.d.

¹³ Jacques Jomier, *How to Understand Islam*, trans. John Bowden. London: SCM Press, 1989, p. 38, 103.

¹⁴ Jomier 10.

¹⁵ Jomier 10.

Gai Eaton. *Islam and the Destiny of Man*. London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1985, p. 7.

that of a servant or slave who has lapsed via weakness, forgetfulness, or lack of resolve. God's self-disclosure through the Qur'an is not a revelation of his person but of his will or law, with the practical intent that humans obey the revealed precepts. Submission is intended not only to please God but also to promote the welfare of humans as the pinnacle of creation, to help them achieve personal and social health in line with the natural goodness God has given them.

God's provision for this blessing comes not via his introduction of himself into history in even the Jewish manner, let alone the Christian one; for although the Qur'an does contain narrative elements, the center of Islam is not a story or a conversation or a mystery, but the communication of God's expectations for man.¹⁶ Unlike Christianity and Judaism, which discover God in salvation history and the hard pedagogy of earthly experience, Islam emphasizes the Creator who is known via his messengers, teachers of correct belief and conduct.¹⁷ It is a religion of prophets, a *prophetic* faith above all.

Belief must issue in the Five Pillars of Islam: confession of faith, prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage. Beyond these externals, the Muslim is supposed to live a perpetually God-conscious life so as to be in right relation vertically—toward God himself—and horizontally, toward others. Therefore justice joins submission as a foundation stone of Islam. Submission reflects the willingness to try to see things God's way, while creation provides the opportunity for ethical living. This is the theory, in any case, along with a belief that there must be no compartmentalization of religious and non-religious aspects of life, sacred and profane. Though salvation is ultimately a gift from God, an act of grace rather than a product of good works, the unrighteous need not expect it, while the righteous may reasonably hope for it.

The resemblance to Christianity is obvious, and indeed Muhammad did not regard himself as an innovator but as someone appointed to recover the original Abrahamic monotheism, to dispense not only with rank paganism but also with the overlay of Jewish and Christian corruptions which had obscured true religion.¹⁸ However much his critics might think he had muddied the waters, Muhammad seems to

¹⁶ Cragg 42.

¹⁷ Jomier 39.

¹⁸ Annemarie Schimmel. *Islam*. State University of New York Press, 1992, p. 16.

have regarded himself as a simplifier; and although Islam has since developed its own diverse strains of thought and its own chattering, clashing sects, an uncompromising allegiance to its own clear-cut monotheism and its sense of its own archetypal authenticity remains normative within Islam. Notwithstanding the efforts of modernists—some sensitive, others less so—and a rich philosophical heritage, traditional beliefs have held up over time.

Muslim modernists complain that traditional beliefs have held up all too well, in the sense that they have hardened into something dry, lifeless, and disconnected from the realities of contemporary life. The ordinary Muslim is less likely to think in such terms than to adapt to the demands of the day as he sees fit, while seldom if ever consciously questioning or repudiating tradition. Today's politicized radical Islam has been conditioned by both modernists and archaists, the former with their demands for rationality and expedience while the latter locate their norms in a mythical, righteous, ultra-orthodox past. By combining futurism and archaism, political Islam identifies itself as a revolutionary movement like many others; Nazism and Soviet Communism come to mind.

At this point, however, we risk getting ahead of ourselves. Having considered what Islam claims to be, and how it sees itself, we must now go back to the beginning.

Prophetic Religion Versus Incarnationist Religion

Islam begins with Muhammad.¹⁹ Or not. From a strictly Islamic perspective, the only true religion is the religion of God himself, and Muhammad was only a messenger, albeit the ultimate one. From a purely historical perspective, however, Islam as we know it—a distinct and clearly identifiable religious system, movement, and community—began with Muhammad, approximately six centuries after Christ.

In treating this issue of origins, we put our finger squarely on one of the core features of Islam, perhaps the key to its deep logic and the point at which it diverges most sharply and tellingly from the Christian outlook. Islam is a *prophetic* religion, not an *incarnationist* one.²⁰ Christianity, in its historic and orthodox form, asserts that God became man in the person of Jesus and that God and man cooperate in the production of scripture and in the enterprise of the individual human life informed and permeated by the influence of the Holy Spirit. To the Muslim mind, this smacks of *shirk*, the most heinous of sins, the assignment of partners to God. Islam insists on the oneness, the *tawhid*, the pure unicity of Allah. In the Islamic view, incarnationism leads to excessive emphasis on human effort, human interpretation of divine utterances, and the human ego. We shall consider, by and by, whether Islam has avoided these ills or applied their remedies with notable

¹⁹ Spellings vary widely, as with many other Arab names. Because short vowels are not written as integral parts of Arab words, transliteration often is imprecise. Even educated Arabs do not always spell their names the same way when writing in English. Readers should also be aware—if they are not already—that Muslims of all nationalities tend to have Arabic names because of Arabic's centrality as the language of scripture and tradition.

²⁰ I am indebted to Oxford theologian Yahya Michot for his stress on the ramifications of this issue, having not encountered this emphasis elsewhere, in terms of it being treated as a key to understanding the logic of Islam. I take responsibility, of course, for the manner in which I employ the concept and for the conclusions I draw.

success.

For Muslims, Muhammad is not a source of revelation but merely its locutor, a herald delivering a message from a monarch. The Qur'an is not the word of God according to Muhammad, or the word of God conveyed through the words of Muhammad. Rather, it is the literal, word-for-word Word of God, delivered in Arabic to a receptive individual who faithfully repeated what he heard. That Muhammad was illiterate is an absolutely essential point in Islamic thought. His outright inability to engage in partnership with God, the necessity that he merely recite what God had taught him, makes him the paradigm or archetype for the Islamic experience. This model has contributed to the weakness of Islamic theology—relative to Christian theology—as an academic discipline or substantial factor in the life of the Muslim world. If a prophetic religion allows God to speak for himself, rather than empowering humans to speak about God, then adherents to the prophetic religion are less likely to believe that they can decently say anything important about the deity. *Kalam*, the enterprise of theology, thus has always been controversial in the Muslim world, with nothing resembling the influence that theological discourse has exerted within Christianity and Western Civilization. Islam has no equivalent of Augustine, Aquinas, Abelard, Luther, or Tillich.

The Arab people of Muhammad's time corresponded to the paradigm. Any civilized observer would have thought that the Arabs had no real history and no future whatsoever. That they embraced a radically new creed, achieved considerable unity, and garnered an empire in only a few years is indeed remarkable, and Muslims see the rise of the Arabs as inexplicable by any means other than by attributing it to divine intervention.

In truth, God and Muhammad did not start with much, and Muslims view this as an expression of God's might and sovereignty. The Arabs were not a blank slate exactly; one might say that the slate was encrusted with a layer of debris under which the writing surface was empty of letters or figures. The Arabs represented pure potential and were ready for monotheism, but only God could have seen that. As an expression of his power, he chose the most unprepossessing instruments to carry out his supreme revelation of his truth. This dynamic can scarcely be overemphasized. Though Muslims believe in the Vir-

gin Birth of Jesus, this has nothing to do with any need to preserve the Savior from Original Sin, as Muslims believe in neither a savior nor Original Sin. Rather, the Virgin Birth is a case of God displaying his strength by choosing what appears to be an impossibly weak instrument, in this case someone who becomes a mother without engaging in any form of sexual activity.

From a monotheistic standpoint, there was nothing spiritually virginal about the Arab milieu of Muhammad's early life other than the fact that the Arabs and monotheism had not been intimate nor even really flirted. Or so we have been told. The old adage that history is written by the winners might apply here, because most of what we have been told about pre-Islamic Arabia comes from the pens of Muslim historians writing more than a century later, no doubt with moralistic intent. We cannot be certain regarding the extent to which they exaggerated the decadence of pre-Islamic times in order to emphasize the magnitude of the Islamic achievement.²¹ One must assume, however, that where there's smoke there's fire; certainly Judaism and Christianity, though present in Arabia, had not been very influential.

The Arabs were organized tribally, with the overwhelming majority of the people being nomadic herders. Oases provided sites for cities along the caravan routes which supported lucrative commercial operations. Much of what the Arabs found virtuous we would consider sinful, as the raiding of caravans was considered not only economically necessary but righteous in a manly sort of way, and good sport too. An elaborate code of etiquette helped control inter-tribal feuding and promote hospitality in an extraordinarily challenging physical environment. On the whole, the Arabs tended to think that God helped those who helped themselves, even if that meant helping themselves to the other fellow's possessions. The supreme God, if there was one—and Arabs disagreed on that point—was remote, taking little interest in human affairs. The lesser gods—and nearly everyone believed in those—were interested primarily in the material affairs of people who respected bravery and panache this side of the grave and who expected nothing at all of the other side. The precise relationship between free will and pre-determinism had not been carefully and definitively described—and still hasn't—but it was clear that

²¹ Brown 14-16.

there was no ultimate reward or punishment for deeds committed in this life. In such a milieu Muhammad is said to have reached maturity, received the call to prophethood, and served as God's instrument of both revelation and revolution.

Most non-Muslim historians accept the basic lineaments of Muslim descriptions of pre-Islamic Arabia, perhaps with the introduction of some nuance regarding the extent if not the nature of the prevailing decadence. Non-Muslims also have no qualms about exploring the possible sources of Islamic practices and of Muhammad's ideas, a blasphemous notion to Muslims, who of course believe that the practices were established by God and that the ideas are not Muhammad's at all, that no human conditioning occurred. Readers should be aware of these arguments; adequate exploration of them would divert us from completing this book and would require a number of much larger volumes, but it would be worth our while to consider how well the prophetic religion has succeeded in its aim of extolling God's sovereignty and reducing the human ego—whether that aim was purely divine or conditioned by human experience. This might tell us more about the nature of Islam before we undertake further exploration of its history and doctrine.

It is difficult not to consider whether human aggrandizement might have entered Islam through the back door. From a psychological standpoint, it is noteworthy that an extremely backward people, exposed by trade contact to more developed societies with more advanced political and intellectual and religious attainments, would discover that the Creator of the universe spoke Arabic and wished to convey his ultimate revelation to humankind in that tongue. Certainly this discovery would go far toward ameliorating a sense of inferiority, as would the revelation that the Jews and Christians had gotten it wrong, necessitating that the Bible stories be corrected in order to restore the Arabs to proper heroic status in the drama of salvation history. Ishmael, not Isaac, was the son of promise.

Though Islam officially and strongly repudiates the idea of a Chosen People, the fact is that the Arabs are considered to have been tapped as the underdogs who made good, and they now effectively guard the approaches to divine revelation by the Islamic insistence that the Qur'an is technically untranslatable and must be read and heard in

the original to be the authentic article. Daily prayers, called *salat*, must also be said in Arabic, even if the supplicant is alone. God has chosen to reveal himself to humans, but that is no longer the point; the point is that contact with him is maintained through an archaic language which even modern Arabs must study as a distinct discipline. Just as an element of incarnationism has crept into Islam in the guise of a book rather than as a human, it would also appear that the Arabic language has become a *de facto* mediator. Something with human characteristics is necessary for contact with the Almighty. I would not go so far as to suggest that Arabs or experts in classical Arabic are the analogue of the medieval Roman Catholic priesthood. Rather, it might be that the language has become that, just as the book has become an analogue of Christ (concerning which more later).

It is not surprising that many Arabs, proud of their heritage as the people who first received Islam, have assimilated that heritage to their collective ego. While hardly a universal tendency, the inclination toward an air of superiority and entitlement is common among Arab Muslims, who ironically are as guilty as anyone else of conflating those two terms, as if what mattered to Arab Muslims as Arabs should matter to all Muslims as Muslims. Non-Arab Muslims have discovered this to their sorrow.²²

With regard to Muhammad, it is one of the remarkable achievements of Islam that Muslims display little or none of the process by which folk religion turns religious or political figures into quaint amalgams of Father Christmas and the Bogeyman (at least as far as I have seen). Islam has also displayed noteworthy tenacity in policing any urge to turn Muhammad into a redeemer figure. We cannot be certain, however, that something or someone human has not achieved an untoward back-door exaltation once more. While Muhammad does nothing to determine the content of revelation, he not only is at its center, he also implements the revelation in the manner of a perfect

²² I do not wish to exaggerate this problem; a pleasant example of its opposite was the daily Arabs-versus-Africans basketball game at the school where I taught. The custom of team affiliation by ethnicity seemed entirely good-natured, perhaps a mockery of some unsavory attitudes the kids had seen modelled by adults. The Arabs shattered various stereotypes by defeating the Africans more often than not, though they sometimes enlisted the aid of a Bengali in order to have enough players.

model. In effect, Muhammad becomes “a living Qur’an.”²³ In other words, he is the *de facto* if not *de jure* Word of God lived out in human form. Though not to be venerated, Muhammad is to be loved more than the Muslim loves himself, to be obeyed unconditionally as if interchangeable with God, and helped to succeed. *He completes the universe and is “the meaning and end of creation.”*²⁴ (italics mine)

I do not intend to dismiss Islam as merely an attempt to have Christianity without having the costs of it. Responsibility requires that I raise the point, however. In the Islamic version of the Jesus narrative, Jesus does not die—someone who resembles him is crucified, or perhaps Judas meets an ironic end—but he ascends to heaven nonetheless and will return one day to rectify things.²⁵ While Muhammad is not to be venerated, he is to be adored and followed to the uttermost. This is not because he has been elevated but because we have lowered ourselves and are less than we could be. In the Islamic view, humans are not tainted by Original Sin, are not inherently wicked, but are merely underperforming. We are less than fully human, in a sense; God wants us to live up to our potential as Muhammad has done. On the one hand, this outlook could devalue human life; on the other, it could lead to a feel-good religion with little emphasis on guilt, not unlike much of today’s pop Christianity.

Islam avoids a scenario in which God becomes man or indwells man, but while averting or deflecting ego inflation, this also relieves the individual of some of Christianity’s heavier responsibilities. Meanwhile a book and a language are invested with the qualities of divinity, so much so that Muslims have been known to treat illness by writing a verse from the Qur’an on a slip of paper, dissolving the ink in a glass of water, and drinking the contents. One immediately thinks of Orthodox Christians kissing the icons which they regard as logical extensions of the Incarnation. With good reason contemporary historian Mark Freshwater has described Islam as “Christianity in a fun-house mirror.”²⁶

²³ Not my words. Quoted directly from personal interview with a Muslim theologian. Name withheld.

²⁴ Schimmel 34.

²⁵ This recalls the ancient Christian heresy of docetism, according to which Jesus, being divine as well as human, only *appears* to suffer.

²⁶ Lecture, 1981.