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FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Axel M. Oaks Takacs

I craft this editorial introduction just under a week before my spring semester begins. Many of our readers may likewise be recovering from their winter breaks and gearing up for the semester. Reading through this issue has allowed my mind and body to focus on the details of editorial work, giving me a respite from other academic tasks before returning to them refreshed and renewed. Our editorial team already has two other issues lined up for 2025, evidence that the *Journal of Interreligious Studies* is functioning as a dynamic space to share research and pedagogies related to interreligious/interfaith studies and its adjacent disciplines.

Issue 44 is rolling submissions issue comprising five peer-reviewed articles, six book reviews, and one book review essay.

In "Practices, Beliefs, and Identities: Muslim Immigrants' Acculturation in the Southeastern United States," Kylee Smith and David J. Marshall explore the experiences of Muslim immigrants in the culturally Christian and politically secular southeastern United States, focusing on how interreligious and intercultural encounters shape their religious practices, beliefs, and identities. Their study highlights a dual reality where positive interactions based on shared values coexist with Islamophobic discrimination, prompting many Muslim immigrants to engage in self-reflection and deepen their faith. The mosque emerges as a vital hub for worship, community, and intercultural exchange, fostering a stronger emphasis on religious identity amidst these encounters.

Halil Avci's article, "Christian-Muslim Relations after the 'A Common Word' Initiative of 2007: Towards a Muslim Self-Understanding in Relation to Christianity," examines how Islamic theology navigates interreligious dialogue with Christianity. Using the 2007 "A Common Word Between Us and You" initiative as a case study, the paper highlights the importance of reciprocal and dynamic engagement in addressing religious diversity. Avci emphasizes the need for a dialogical framework that balances interreligious and intra-religious considerations.

Najib George Awad's article, "'The Quest of the Historical Jesus' within the Framework of Interreligious Relations in the Middle East," examines how 20th-century Arab Christian and Muslim authors engaged with the historical Jesus through the lens of historical criticism. Despite resistance to this scholarly method within institutional Christian and Muslim theology, Awad analyzes four key discourses—two Christian and two Muslim—that reflect a contextual and non-Western approach to understanding Jesus. This study offers a comparative and interreligious framework for understanding how Arab Middle Eastern scholars reinterpreted Jesus (ʿĪsā al-Masīḥ) for contemporary audiences using innovative and controversial methods.

In "The Logic of Religion? A Critique of Hans Küng's Philosophy of the Dialogue of Religions," Daniel Pratt Morris-Chapman challenges Hans Küng's framework for understanding the essence of the Abrahamic faiths. The author proposes an alternative method rooted in the Aristotelian principle of "epistemic fit," which uncovers the intrinsic logic of religious traditions to highlight parallels between them. This approach is contrasted with Küng's global ethic framework, offering a fresh perspective on interreligious dialogue through an inductive examination of religious systems.

Finally, Madelyn Starr's article, "Material Memories: Narratives of the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict," is timely and significant, given the ongoing violence in Gaza, Palestine, and Israel. Starr explores how historical memory and material culture shape the everyday experiences of structural violence and resistance in Israel/Palestine. Based on extensive interviews and participant observation, the study examines how Israelis and Palestinians use objects and images as "material memories" to reconstruct the past and navigate mutual distrust and tension. These memories both reinforce cycles of violence and serve as tools for resistance against violence, occupation, and dehumanization.

These five articles are followed by six book reviews:

- *Religious Diversity in Contemporary Shi'i Thought: The Views of Ayatollah 'Abdullah Javadi-Amoli and Professor Mahmoud Ayoub*, by Saeid Sobhani, reviewed by R. David Coolidge
- *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, the People, the Bible*, by Mitri Raheb, reviewed by David J. (Sandy) Marshall
- *Christian Perspectives on Transforming Interreligious Encounter: Essays in Honor of Leo D. Lefebure*, edited by Peter C. Phan and Anh Q. Tran, reviewed by Peter Admirand

- *A Christian-Muslim Comparative Theology of Saints: The Community of God's Friends*, by Hans A. Harmakaputra, reviewed by Charles Tieszen
- *The Religious Dimensions of Shared Space: When and How Religion Matters in Space-Sharing Arrangements*, by Paul D. Numrich, reviewed by Kevin McCarty
- *A Global Racial Enemy: Muslims and 21st-Century Racism*, by Saher Selod, Inaash Islam, and Steve Garner, reviewed by Valeria Vergani

The issue closes with a book review essay by Steven Jacobs reflecting on two of Mark Juergensmeyer's books: *When God Stops Fighting: How Religious Violence Ends and God at War: A Meditation on Religion and Warfare*.

As usual, I remain grateful to our Senior Editor, Lucinda Mosher, for her work copyediting this issue and editing our book reviews, as well as to Sze-Long Aaron Wong, our Research Fellow, for his work managing book reviews and executing production and layout for the issue.

I hope you enjoy this issue and find it intellectually stimulating and insightful. Thank you for your continued support and interest in the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*.

Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Th.D.
Editor-in-Chief
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ARTICLE

Practices, Beliefs, and Identities: Muslim Immigrants' Acculturation in the Southeastern United States

Kylee Smith and David J. Marshall

Abstract

This paper explores how interreligious and intercultural encounters in the politically secular yet culturally Christian southeastern United States shape Muslim immigrants' religious practices, beliefs, and identities. Situated at the intersection of interreligious studies, migration studies, and cultural geography, it examines the experiences of Muslim immigrants in North Carolina's "Bible Belt." These encounters reveal a dual dynamic: positive interreligious relationships rooted in shared family and moral values and Islamophobic marginalization. Using an interreligious and grounded theology framework, this study draws on interviews with Muslim immigrants and second-generation Muslim Americans, alongside participant observation at a local mosque. Findings suggest that navigating life as a religious minority often prompts self-reflection, knowledge-seeking, and intentionality, which deepens personal faith (*imān*). The mosque emerges as a vital space for worship (*ʿibādah*), community connection, and intercultural engagement. This process of self-reflection and community-building highlights how interreligious and intercultural interactions foster resilience and strengthen religious identity, transforming the challenges of migration into opportunities for spiritual growth and communal belonging.

Keywords

immigration, acculturation, Islam, Muslim, grounded theology

Muslim immigrants to the United States encounter a diverse multireligious and multicultural environment upon arrival, one that is nominally secular yet dominated by Christian belief and practice, particularly in the so-called "Bible Belt" of the southeast. For many, though not all Muslim immigrants, it is their first time living in a non-Muslim majority society. Not only do Muslim immigrants encounter a multireligious environment in the US, but they also often encounter an environment of superdiversity within the American Muslim community itself.[1] Three quarters of American Muslims are first- or second-generation immigrants representing myriad languages and ethnicities from throughout the world, as well as diverse expressions of Islam.[2] How does the process of acculturating to a predominantly Christian yet nominally secular and multicultural society affect the religious practices, beliefs, and identities of Muslim immigrants to the US, and how do these practices, beliefs, and identities, in turn, inform this process of acculturation to life in the US? In seeking answers to these overarching questions, this research focuses specifically on Muslim immigrants to North Carolina, a southern state that has experienced a high volume of international and domestic migration in recent decades.

Notions of citizenship and belonging in the US have been tied to race and ethnicity since its founding.[3] White Christians have instilled Christian morality and identity into US laws, governance, holidays, and everyday life.[4] Indeed, despite nominally secular legal and political structures and a highly diverse cultural and religious landscape in the US, White Christian identity, norms, beliefs, and practices continue to dominate definitions of "Americanness" and shape public life and discourse in ways both subtle and overt.[5] This is particularly true in the US south, where socially conservative Baptist and evangelical denominations of Christianity hold particular

1 Steven Vertovec, "Super-Diversity and Its Implications," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 6 (2007): 1024–54.

2 Besheer Mohamed, Gregory A. Smith, Alan Cooperman, and Anna Schiller, "US Muslims concerned about their place in society but continue to believe in the American dream," Pew Research Center, July 26, 2017. https://www.pewresearch.org.

3 Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

4 Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York University Press, 2003). See also Robert P Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020).

5 Khayati Y. Joshi, *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

cultural and political sway. In North Carolina, seventy-seven percent of adults identify as Christian, and less than 1 percent identify as Muslim. However, North Carolina is not immune to the growing rise of unaffiliated or religious "nones" in the US, with twenty percent of adults in the state identifying as such. Likewise, although most self-identified Christians categorize themselves as belonging to a particular denomination, most also report not being an active member of a particular church.[6] As such, Muslim immigrants to North Carolina find themselves as religious minority in an environment where their religion is not the norm but, increasingly, "one human possibility among others."[7] Given that religious identity is not static and unchanging, but rather negotiated and evolving in relation to the social dynamics of intersectional identity played out in one's daily experiences and encounters, this paper examines how religious identities and practices transform within the context of transnational migration.[8]

The field of migration studies has tended to focus on religion in a utilitarian manner, emphasizing religion as an individual coping mechanism or marker of group membership. Going beyond static and instrumentalizing conceptions of religion, this present research employs the theoretical lens of grounded theology to understand how everyday interreligious and intercultural interactions affect the religious views, practices, and identities of Muslim immigrants to the US.[9] In doing so, this research addresses deficiencies in migration studies regarding religious identities, while also integrating immigrant voices and experiences into the interreligious studies literature. Interreligious studies seeks to understand how intersectional identities and interreligious encounters shape religious beliefs and practices. The experiences of immigrants from minoritized religious backgrounds can potentially provide profound insights into immigration as a form of interreligious encounter, an understudied topic. In this study, grounded theology provides a framework for understanding Islam not as a monolithic identity or individual coping mechanism, but rather as a dynamic, contested, active, and evolving expression of beliefs, practices, and identities

6 Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. "Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics" (2014).

7 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

8 Kristi Del Vecchio and Noah J. Silverman, "Learning from the Field: Six Themes from Interfaith/Interreligious Studies Curricula," in *Interfaith/Interreligious Studies: Defining a New Field*, eds. Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah Silverman (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018), 49–54.

9 Justin KH Tse, "Grounded theologies: 'Religion' and the 'secular' in human geography," *Progress in Human Geography* 38, no. 2 (2014): 201–220.

that Muslim immigrants continuously negotiate during their everyday interactions with non-Muslims, the American cultural and political context broadly, and diverse communities of other Muslims. Specifically, this paper argues that the new spatial and cultural context of the US and Islam's minority status prompts Muslim immigrants to evaluate their beliefs critically and determine how to practice the *deen/dīn* (religion) of Islam most fully in this new context, often strengthening religious faith (*imān*) in the process. [10]

Islam and Muslims in America

Popular perceptions of Islam in the US often regard it as a foreign religion. However, the historical presence of enslaved African Muslims throughout the Americas and the Caribbean goes back some 400 years, even before the rise of the transatlantic slave trade.[11] Although precise figures are unknown, it is estimated that fifteen- to thirty-percent of Africans brought to the Americas as part of the transatlantic slave trade were Muslim.[12] Enslaved African Muslims formed a significant presence in rice plantations along the Carolina coast, in what is now referred to as the Gullah-Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, spanning the Carolinas and reaching into Georgia and Florida.[13] In North Carolina specifically, Omar ibn Said, a Fula Muslim scholar who was abducted and sold into slavery in the early 1800s, authored the only known surviving Arabic slave narrative in the US.[14] Although cultural and religious practices of West African Muslims left a lasting legacy in this region, it was only in the early 20th century that Black Muslims officially established

10 The remainder of this essay will use *deen*, as it reflects the English vernacular and normative American Muslim spelling as opposed to the standard academic transliteration of *dīn*.

11 Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America: From the new world to the new world order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). See also Brent Singleton, "The *Ummah* Slowly Bled: A Select Bibliography of Enslaved African Muslims in the Americas and the Caribbean," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 22, no. 2 (2002): 401–412.

12 Richard Brent Turner, "African Muslim Slaves and Islam in Antebellum America," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, edited by Juliane Hammer and Omid Safi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 28–44.

13 Jeffry R. Halverson, "West African Islam in Colonial and Antebellum South Carolina," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 36, no. 3 (2016): 413–426.

14 Omar Ibn Said, *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar Ibn Said* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011). See also the recent monograph: Mbaye Lo and Carl Ernst, *I Cannot Write My Life: Islam, Arabic, and Slavery in Omar Ibn Said's America* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2023).

the first known *masjid* (mosque) in North Carolina.[15] Originally founded in 1958 as Muhammad's Mosque No. 34 under the Nation of Islam, Durham's Masjid Muhammad (now known as Ar-Razaaq Islamic Center) was established in 1975 after the death of Elijah Muhammad, representing a shift toward Sunni Islam under the leadership Imam W.D. Muhammad.[16] Today, Durham continues to have a thriving Black Muslim community, as well as a growing immigrant Muslim community in the Research Triangle area between Raleigh-Durham and Chapel Hill.

The Muslim immigrant population in the US began to grow after 1965 when the Hart-Cellar Act abolished the National Origins Formula, originally designed to favor white/protestant immigration. This immigration reform, in part the result of the ongoing Civil Rights Movement of the time, removed barriers for would-be immigrants from Africa and Asia, including Muslims. Muslim communities began to grow as skilled professionals and students from Muslim-majority countries came to the US in the late 1960s and 70s pursuing careers and education.[17] Expansive higher education and research opportunities in North Carolina, along with jobs in the medical, engineering, and technology sectors, combined with a relatively low cost of living, continue to be pull factors for Muslim and other migrants to the state. In addition, for the past few decades, North Carolina has been a top-ten refugee resettlement state, resettling an increasing number of refugees from Muslim-majority countries, with Guilford County (home to Greensboro) being the largest recipient of refugees in the state and one of the largest in the region.[18] There are currently more than fifty mosques in North Carolina, including about eighteen in the Central Piedmont Triangle (spanning the cities of Winston-Salem, High Point, Greensboro, and nearby Burlington) and the Research Triangle areas, where this research was conducted. Although former NOI mosques often serve predominantly Black Muslim communities, and while some mosques cater to specific immigrant ethnic communities, many if not most mosques in this area, including those represented in this

15 In what follows, we use the English words "mosque/mosques" rather than the transliterated "*masjid/masajid,*" which avoids the need to impose English pluralizing conventions on the Arabic term *masjid* (for example, "masjids").

16 See Nazeeh Z. Abdul-Hakeem, *The Athaan in the Bull City: Building Durham's Islamic Community* (Lulu, 2015) and Sapelo Square, "Remembering the First Mosque in North Carolina." *The Muslim Vibe* (September 5, 2018).

17 Ilhan Kaya, "Muslim American Identities and Diversity," *Journal of Geography* 106, no. 1 (April 6, 2007): 29–35.

18 Lauren Sastre and Lauren Haldeman, "Environmental, nutrition and health issues in a US refugee resettlement community." *MEDICC review* 17 (2015): 18–24.

research, serve a broad cross-section of the diverse Muslim population in the state, including a growing number of white and Latino converts to Islam.

As a diverse group, Muslim Americans experience racism, xenophobia, and other forms of prejudice unique to their individual backgrounds. Additionally, Muslim Americans also experience discrimination *as* Muslims, a marginalized and racialized religious minority in the US. In recent years, Islamophobia has risen in the US and around the globe. Dominant media portrayals frequently frame Islam as the violent, collective "Other" that is incompatible with "Western values," further isolating Muslim immigrants from acceptance in the mainstream.[19] Such views, rooted in longstanding Orientalist discourses and white supremacy, are reproduced in dominant political discourses, laws, and policies.[20] From widespread surveillance and suspicion of Muslims following the events of September 11th, to more recent attempts to ban sharia law and curb Muslim migration to the US, Muslim immigrants continue to face barriers to belonging and acceptance in the US. Such societal and political forces have sometimes pressured Muslim immigrants to emphasize civic engagement and service provision and downplay critiques of US foreign policy or racial prejudice in the US to prove their loyalty and patriotism.[21] Nevertheless, Muslims across the US, including North Carolina, have undertaken significant outreach, advocacy, education, and interfaith dialogue efforts to overcome prejudice and build bridges of understanding on their own terms.[22] We turn now to an examination of the literature on the relationship between religion and immigration, with a focus on Muslim immigrant communities in the US.

Acculturation, Religion, and Interreligious Encounters

For many immigrants, Muslim or otherwise, the experience of leaving home and creating a new life in a new country is a tumultuous one. In the immigration studies literature, this process, referred to as acculturation, is

19 Yvonne Haddad and Nazir Harb, "Post-9/11: Making Islam an American Religion," *Religions* 5, no. 2 (June 12, 2014): 477–501.

20 K. A. Beydoun, *American Islamophobia: Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear* (Oakland, University of California Press, 2018).

21 Rosemary R. Corbett, *Making Moderate Islam: Sufism, Service, and the "Ground Zero Mosque" Controversy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

22 Brian Rea, "Local community calls for change to Muslim portrayal in media," *Elon News Network* (September 11, 2019); Sara Cheikh Husain, "Muslim Community Organizations' Perceptions of Islamophobia: Towards an Informed Countering Response," *Religions* 11, no. 10 (2020): 485–509.

understood as a multi-dimensional and multi-directional process in which individuals and groups from different cultural backgrounds come into sustained intercultural contact, resulting in shifting social, cultural, and psychological attitudes, values, and behaviors.[23] Recognizing acculturation as a dynamic process of mutual, albeit uneven, exchange and interaction among multiple cultural groups challenges prior normative models emphasizing assimilation as a unidirectional process of an incoming minority group actively conforming to the dominant culture.[24] Conceptualized as a process occurring at both the group and individual psychological levels, many studies examine acculturation from the perspective mental and physical health outcomes.[25] Research on the role of religion in the acculturation process has shown that religion can help immigrants mitigate acculturative stress.[26] Religious practices provide people with a pattern to conduct their lives during a time of uncertainty, equipping immigrants with a mechanism to gain a sense of stability within a seemingly disjointed life. For Muslim refugees, research has demonstrated how *ʿibādah* (ritual worship including salah or prayer) and the moral guidelines provided by Islam can provide stability and solace during the difficult process of resettlement.[27]

In addition to serving as an individual psychosomatic coping mechanism, religion can also serve as an important source of community and identity for immigrants and refugees upon arrival to a new country. Ethnic places of worship have long provided immigrants with culturally familiar spaces to find solidarity and support from those with similar backgrounds and experiences, including in the American South.[28] Religious

23 John W. Berry, "Acculturation: A conceptual overview," *Acculturation and Parent-child relationships* (2006): 13–32.

24 Liliane Sayegh and Jean-Claude Lasry, "Immigrants' adaptation in Canada: Assimilation, acculturation, and orthogonal cultural identification," *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne* 34, no. 1 (1993): 98.

25 Shireen Ghaffarian, "The acculturation of Iranian immigrants in the United States and the implications for mental health," *The Journal of Social Psychology* 138, no. 5 (1998): 645–54.

26 Robert Schweitzer, Jaimi Greenslade, and Ashraf Kagee, "Coping and Resilience in Refugees from the Sudan: A Narrative Account," *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 41, no. 3 (March 2007): 282–88.

27 Goździak, Elžbieta M, "Spiritual Emergency Room: The Role of Spirituality and Religion in the Resettlement of Kosovar Albanians," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 15, no. 2 (June 2002): 136–52.

28 Charles Hirschman, "The role of religion in the origins and adaptation of immigrant groups in the United States 1," *International Migration Review* 38, no. 3 (2004): 1206–33; Patricia Ehrkamp and Caroline Nagel. "Immigration, places of worship and the politics of citizenship in the US South," *Transactions of the Institute*

activities and services establish social relationships and networks for newly arrived immigrants, making religious institutions hubs of social networking and belonging, particularly for refugees who have experienced the collective trauma of displacement and stress of resettlement.[29]

Although the notion of religion as a beneficial coping mechanism for immigrants is largely positive, this perspective reduces religion to an immutable resource to be used instrumentally, failing to capture how the immigration and acculturation process may transform religious beliefs, practices, and identities. Likewise, though mosques no doubt serve as important spaces of community and belonging, processes of community-building and identity formation are not straightforward given the racial and ethnic diversity of Muslims in the US and the cultural heterogeneity of most American mosques. In examining how religious practices, beliefs, and identities are transformed through the process of immigration within the context of religious and ethnic diversity in the southern US, this article seeks to bridge research on religion and immigration with interreligious studies.

As a subdiscipline of religious studies, interreligious studies aims to examine the encounters between different religions and non-religious worldviews to understand the dynamics of those intersections and their implications on peoples' beliefs and practices.[30] The interreligious interactions can manifest through "interpersonal conversations" and everyday encounters amongst individuals of different religions, including the "intersections of religion and secularity."[31] As such, interreligious studies fits within a lived religion framework, which seeks to examine religion as it is practiced and negotiated within the complex contexts of everyday life, as opposed to how it is conceived of abstractly solely within religious doctrines or institutions.[32]

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of British Geographers 37, no. 4 (2012): 624–38.

29 Wendy Cadge and Elaine Howard Ecklund, "Immigration and Religion," *Annual Review of Sociology* 33, no. 1 (2007): 359–79; G. Odessa Benson, Fei Sun, David R. Hodge, and David K. Androff, "Religious Coping and Acculturation Stress among Hindu Bhutanese: A Study of Newly-Resettled Refugees in the United States," *International Social Work* 55, no. 4 (2012):538–53.

30 Paul Hedges, "Editorial: Introducing Interreligious Studies," *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 27, no. 2 (July 1, 2014): 127–31.

31 Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Kate McCarthy, "(Inter)Religious Studies: Making a Home in the Secular Academy," in *Interfaith/Interreligious Studies: Defining a New Field*, eds. Patel, et al., 4–15 at 12.

32 Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

In recent years, several valuable ethnographic studies have illuminated our understanding of the everyday lived religious spaces and identities of Muslim immigrant communities in the US. For example, Zain Abdullah provides ethnographic insights into how African Muslim immigrants in Harlem negotiate Islam, Blackness, and belonging within the context of racial politics in the US and ethnic diversity in the Muslim community.[33] Similarly, JoAnn D'Alisera's research with Muslim immigrants from Sierra Leone in the Washington, D.C. area highlights the complex ways in which Muslim immigrants negotiate boundaries of sacred space and religious identities within the context of a secular public sphere in the US.[34] Perkins likewise has examined how Muslim Americans in the metro-area of Detroit navigate religious pluralism in the US and cultural pluralism in the Muslim community, emphasizing the compatibility of Islam with public life in the context of American multicultural and secular democracy.[35] Situated in suburban Chicago, Howe's research examines the production and negotiation of an everyday American Islam through the performance of leisure and consumerist practices.[36] What these studies share in common with the present research is a focus on how Muslim spaces and identities are negotiated, performed, and produced through everyday spaces and practices situated in the context of the racial politics of American multiculturalism, Muslim ethnic diversity, and a secular public sphere. The small-scale qualitative study presented in this paper represents an initial attempt to extend such examinations into the peri-urban areas of the American south, with a particular emphasis, not on one immigrant community, but on diverse Muslim immigrant communities and the ways in which their interreligious and intercultural encounters affect the religious views, practices, and identities of Muslim immigrants.

In introducing the voices and experiences of Muslim immigrants into the study of lived interreligious encounters, this research examines everyday expressions and practices of Islam in relation to broader transnational affiliations and transcendent understandings of the *deen*. In adopting this dialectical and multi-scalar approach, this study draws upon the notion of "grounded theology" from cultural geography. Geographer Justin Tse

33 Zain Abdullah, *Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

34 JoAnn D'Alisera, *An Imagined Geography: Sierra Leonean Muslims in America*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

35 Alisa Perkins, *Muslim American City: Gender and Religion in Metro Detroit* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

36 Justine Howe, *Suburban Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

argues that grounded theologies are not abstract theories, but rather refer to the concrete implications for how transcendent theologies and worldviews ground themselves within "processes of cultural place-making, the negotiation of social identities, and the formations of political boundaries."[37] Such socio-spatial boundaries include discursive and legal delineations between personal religious belief and a supposedly secular rational public sphere, itself a historically contingent construct that situates religious institutions and believers in particular ways and places.[38] This concept has also been used to examine immigrant religious practices, emphasizing the need to understand religious lives of immigrant communities within the inner logics and language of that community, rather than conceptualizing such communities within the normative secular framework often adopted by immigration studies scholarship. Taking a grounded theology approach, this study examines how Muslim immigrants interweave their religious beliefs, practices, and identities into the new context of Christian-glossed American secularism and multiculturalism. An Islamic worldview is transcendent, yet Islamic practices are grounded in particular places and times. A grounded theology approach draws our attention to how Muslim immigrants reconfigure their relationship to a perceived historically and spatially transcendent Islam and global Muslim Ummah in a new spatial context in the US marked by interactions with non-Muslim and diverse Muslim communities.

Methods

Participants in this study included first-generation Sunni Muslim immigrants and second-generation Sunni Muslim Americans of at least 18 years of age residing in the central peidmont areas of North Carolina between the Triad and Triangle areas of the states. A snowball sampling method was employed to recruit participants by utilizing the researchers' connections within the Muslim community in the area, and by recruiting participants from local mosques and Islamic centers. The researchers conducted twenty semi-structured interviews with seventeen Muslim immigrants and three second-generation Muslim Americans. To gain a diverse array of perspectives, the first- and second-generation Muslim immigrants came from the Middle East and North Africa (12), the Indian Subcontinent (5),

37 Tse, "Grounded Theologies," 202.

38 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

and Sub-Saharan Africa (3), representing the three most prevalent regional backgrounds of Muslim immigrants in the research area. Most participants came from ethnically and religiously diverse societies, where Sunni Islam is nevertheless demographically dominant, or at least constitutes a sizeable and well-established minority religion. Most participants are or come from well-educated, professional, middle-class households. Although the research presented in this paper draws upon a small sample size of participants, this data is supplemented by an ongoing and longstanding personal and professional relationship with Muslim leaders and institutions in the research area, providing deep and detailed insights into one specific area in the American South where Muslims are building community and living out their values and beliefs.

Due to Covid-19, the interviews for this research mainly took place via virtual platforms, lasting from thirty-five minutes to an hour. Virtual interviewing has limitations including possible distractions in the surrounding environment and the potential for missing out on important non-verbal cues. Nevertheless, virtual interviews have also been found to be beneficial in accessing marginalized or difficult-to-reach populations, establishing rapport, and eliciting rich data.[39] For this research, the flexibility and accessibility offered by communicating with interviewees via a platform commonly used by the community, WhatsApp, required less time and effort from participants, making it easier for them to participate. Moreover, these formal interviews were complemented and contextualized by observations and informal interactions in online and in-person events at a local mosque in the research study areas, facilitated by the researchers' longstanding and ongoing relationship with this mosque. Prior and ongoing relationships between the researchers and members of the Muslim community allowed for a high degree of trust and rapport which, when combined with a private and secure mode of communication, most likely resulted in candid responses from participants. Both researchers identify and present as white, English-speaking, native-born US citizens, with one identifying as a practicing Muslim with Arabic-language fluency and insider community connections, contributing to an insider/outsider researcher dynamic. This, combined with an explicit informed consent process and assurances of anonymity, enabled participants to share detailed views and experiences, be they affirming, critical, positive, or negative.

39 Sam Keen, Martha Lomeli-Rodriguez, and Helene Joffe. "From challenge to opportunity: virtual qualitative research during COVID-19 and beyond," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 21 (2022).

The interview transcripts were analyzed utilizing a grounded theory approach, involving coding the transcripts to identify emergent themes.[40] These themes included a critical self-reflection of how one perceives the central tenants and beliefs of Islam (*ʿaqīdah*) in light of a new cultural context and how one can best practically implement Islam in daily life, including ritual worship (*ʿibādah*) like prayer and fasting (salah and *ṣawm),* and one's manners and behavior (*akhlāq* or *adab*). In the following sections we examine two overarching and intertwining themes. One relates to the process of critical self-reflection, questioning, and knowledge-seeking that is brought about through interreligious encounters with non-Muslims, and intercultural encounters with fellow Muslims in diverse Muslim community spaces. For many, though not all participants, these encounters resulted in a deeper commitment to and belief in Islam (faith, i.e., *imān*) and more meaningful and intentional practice of Islam, even if, for some, this meant letting go of particular practices. A second and related theme emerged which is, for some, the increased importance of one's identity as a Muslim, and differing perspectives on the intersection between national and religious identity. We turn now to these empirical findings in the sections below.

Questioning Muslim Values and Beliefs in the Bible Belt

> I didn't expect to have that same experience when I moved down South [from New York] because as a stereotype of the Bible Belt being conservative with very, very rigid values. But honestly, I feel more at ease and more closely related in values here in the South, in terms of family values, social wellbeing. Politics is different [laughs], but in what makes a household happy, what makes a community move forward together, I feel there's far more warmth down south, maybe because of that open, slowed down pace that we have time to talk to one another.

Jamal, a Kikuyu Muslim immigrant from Kenya who previously resided in New York City, echoed the sentiment of many other interviewees in recounting the positive experiences associated with living in the southern "Bible Belt," specifying the centrality of family and religious values one observes in the semi-rural/peri-urban piedmont region of North Carolina.

40 Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990).

Despite the racialization of Islam in the South, where white evangelical Christianity predominates, interviewees expressed an appreciation for the religiosity of their neighbors as providing a sense of commonality. Fatima, an immigrant from Pakistan, said that "in some kind of strange way, it's been comforting to know that the people around me are mostly religious people, even though it's not the same religion, but there are so many similarities between our faiths that I feel like on some level I can relate to where they're coming from." For Fatima, Christianity, as an Abrahamic faith, shares similar values and beliefs as Islam, allowing her to feel some sense of reassurance about her new cultural surroundings. Beyond feelings of religious proximity, Fatima further explained how interreligious interactions with Christian neighbors prompted her to ask critical questions about the status of her own belief in Islam, what Howe calls "everyday interpretive acts."[41] She asked rhetorically: "How can you claim to have the one truth when there are other people who believe in the exact same thing, but slightly differently and hold the same values?" As this section demonstrates, for many of those who participated in this research, interreligious interactions brought about by immigration prompted critical self-reflection that led to a greater appreciation for, and deeper connection with, Islam, alongside a renegotiation of how best to practice Islam in a non-Muslim environment.

Though many regard the Christian environment as a positive aspect of life in the South, other respondents did not shy away from questioning the supposedly Christian values of the surrounding community, contrasting them with Islamic norms and customs. As Hind, a mother and educator from Palestine observed in conversation, "Our neighbors are very connected to the Church, and family, which is good, and they are very nice, but it was also a shock to see how everyone dresses here, and the dating, the drinking, so there are still some cultural differences, but you have to accept that when you chose to live in the US." Overall, many interviewees concurred that most of their social interactions since arriving in North Carolina had been friendly and hospitable, and that their interreligious interactions with their Christian neighbors, specifically, allowed them to better appreciate and understand their own religion.

Although many interviewees emphasized their positive experiences as new residents in the South, a majority also discussed experiences of marginalization and discrimination, resulting from their racialized and minoritized status as Muslims. Many interviewees described verbal harassment in public due to their Muslim identity, but also said that such

41 Howe, *Suburban Islam*, 159.

experiences were "normal" and "expected." As Safa, a college student from Algeria, put it: "Have I been told to go back to my country or whatever? Yeah, I think that's normal. That is almost a coming-of-age experience, being the child of immigrants or being an immigrant here. It's very normal." For better or worse, most respondents demonstrated resiliency in overcoming experiences of discrimination, which are perceived as expected and normal, albeit in contrast with the general congeniality that characterizes most everyday interactions and encounters.

Still, such experiences can take their toll over time. As Hind again recounted: "My daughter was bullied at school because she wears hijab, and kids at my son's school made comments about 9/11 and terrorism, even my colleagues at work have asked me questions about Muslims being violent and I'm like 'look at your country!'" Although Hind observed that such experiences might stem from her particular identity as a Palestinian immigrant, most other interviewees described similar experiences specifically related to their identities as Muslims. Rima, a mother from Syria, described the "constant struggle" to "always have to explain things and always…prove the media wrong" about Muslims. Likewise, Jamal, from Kenya, described how countering negative stereotypes was the most difficult part of living in the US as a Muslim.

According to a 2014 survey, some sixty-two percent of Americans have never met a Muslim, meaning that most of their knowledge of Islam most likely stems from often negative media portrayals.[42] Indeed, while some studies have shown that even short face-to-face interactions with Muslims can reduce Islamophobia, both in person and online, other studies have shown that such interactions can reinforce negative stereotypes, especially when such encounters take place within a socio-political context marked by anti-Muslim and xenophobic political and media discourse.[43] Although the number of Americans who have met a Muslim may have increased in the past decade, most of the participants in this research described experiences of being the only Muslim in their school, workplace, or neighborhood. As

42 Lipka, Michael. "How many people of different faiths do you know?" Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, July 17, 2014.

43 For the positive effects, see Kathryn Benier, Nicholas Faulkner, Isak Ladegaard, and Rebecca Wickes, "Reducing Islamophobia through Conversation: A Randomized Control Trial," *Social Psychology Quarterly* (2024); Maisoon Osama Alsebaei,"Facebook as a Safe Sphere: The Influence of Facebook Intergroup Communication on Reducing Islamophobia in the United States," *Global Media Journal* 19 (2021): 1–12. For the reinforcing effects, see Randa Abdel-Fattah, *Islamophobia and everyday multiculturalism in Australia* (London: Routledge, 2017).

such, many participants reported being questioned about Islam by colleagues and neighbors. As Saad, an immigrant from Saudi Arabia, stated, "I have been asked so many times for my input about what's going on [in the Middle East] and how 'Islam' is doing this, and 'Islam' is doing that." For Jamal, such questions about Islam, whether curious or accusatory, prompted him to better educate himself on various topics in Islam, particularly the more "controversial topics" related to violence, gender, and views of other religions. "I found myself always seeking to inform myself to learn more so that I can share about my religion accurately," Jamal said, because "growing up as a Muslim and living in a Muslim predominant area, there's some things you take from knowledge and practice for granted." Other interviewees articulated similar sentiments, that interreligious dialogues with neighbors and colleagues led to a perceived need to study Islam more closely to better explain it to others, rather than taking Islamic beliefs and practices for granted as conventional wisdom.

Although arguably defensive in nature, this process of questioning and knowledge-seeking can, for some, lead to a stronger connection to Islam. As a refugee from Syria, Rana has lived in several different countries. Having only previously lived in predominately Muslim countries, however, she never faced questions about her religion, as she has in the US. Nevertheless, Rana enjoys these questions because, as she put it, "it made me stronger in religion. I learned the value of things, the meaning behind things that I used to do, just because everybody's doing it." As with Jamal, the experience of being questioned about Islamic beliefs and practices lead to a process of learning and questioning that brought him beyond convention toward deeper conviction.

Similarly, Samia highlighted that getting challenging questions about Islam "strengthened my faith and made me feel like, if I'm going to have to justify it and explain it to other people, then I better have a good understanding of it myself." Specifically, Samia recounted how being a religious minority strengthened her *imān*, or faith in Islam:

> [Islam] is very much, almost ritualistic second nature in Algeria because it's the predominant faith there, whereas here, being a minority as a Muslim, it challenges you to truly find faith and commit to it, and I've had to actively choose to be Muslim and to remain a part of that minority faith. Because of those challenges, I think I've chosen the religion for myself, so it means a lot more to me than it does to a lot of my relatives in Algeria, because there, they just kind of go through the ritual because that's just the thing to

> do and that's just how everybody lives. You never really go through a moment of choosing faith and understanding what you believe.

Being in the religious minority, Samia must consciously choose to actively commit to practicing Islam. Another college student, Rami from Lebanon, spoke similarly about finding Islam for himself after coming to the US. He stated that he "started practicing my faith more and trying to learn more about it, learn beyond the superficial kind of cultural aspects that I grew up with but try and discover the truth behind things." Many of those who participated in this study distinguished between an unconscious, habitual, instinctive, or even "cultural" practice of Islam in their home country, and a conscious, deliberate, and intentional practice of Islam where it is not part of the dominant religious environment.

This process of self-examination and re-commitment to Islam is by no means straightforward for Muslim immigrants. In conversation, some participants offered cautionary tales of other Muslim immigrants they knew who, when unrestrained by the societal expectations of a predominantly Muslim community, felt the liberty to date, drink, engage in questionable business practices such as selling alcohol, or abandon the practice of Islam almost altogether. Given the largely secular environment of the US, Koffi, an immigrant from Ivory Coast, feared that immigrating to the US would cause his commitment to Islam to weaken. However, in Koffi's observation, the opposite was true. "I know people here who are not religious back home, but they are more religious here. I see a lot of them." Almost all the first-generation immigrants interviewed in this study shared Koffi's fear that their practice of Islam would be weakened in the US, and all unanimously agreed with his sentiment that immigrating strengthened their faith (*imān*).

Although both men and women in this study reported experiences of discrimination as well as a pressure to represent Islam, the visual association of the veil as a gendered symbol of Islam necessarily situates Muslim men and women differently regarding this topic. Research has shown that Muslim women who wear the veil face greater experiences of institutional and interpersonal discrimination and feel more pressure to represent Islam positively.[44] Many of the women who participated in this research reported shifting perspectives on the hijab after coming to the US. Rima, an immigrant from Syria, stopped wearing the hijab after arriving in the US because she felt that "wearing a hijab was another layer between [her] and other people."

44 Fatima Koura, "Navigating Islam: The hijab and the American workplace," *Societies* 8, no. 4 (2018): 125.

Safa echoes similar reasoning for not wearing the hijab in that she "doesn't mind wearing it when [she] goes to certain events" but that she "doesn't wear it in public [or] to work" because she believes "there is that stigma out there even professionally" with the hijab and Islam. Safa, a second-generation American, had worn the hijab growing up, but said "when I went to college, I realized it wasn't for me. To me, it was almost more distracting to me than it was constructive", so she stopped wearing it. Both Salma (who wears hijab) and Hind (who does not) made a distinction between what they considered to be the surface-level display of Islam as represented by the veil and the enactment of Islamic values of respect and modesty in one's interpersonal interactions, comportment, and physical appearance, arguing that the latter is more important than the former. Hind noted that she feels her daughter wears the veil more as a way of defiantly identifying and signaling to the world that she is Muslim, so she tries to make sure her daughter knows that Islam is more than just a piece of clothing, and that the hijab must be accompanied by an attitude of respect and modesty as well as self-confidence.

Other interviewees similarly conveyed the notion that wearing the hijab functioned as a marker of Muslim identity and sought to instill pride in their daughters not to shy away from wearing it in the US. Rana stated that "I wanted my kids to see me wearing the hijab. I have three girls, and I felt like…you should present yourself as a Muslim woman and be proud of it." Salma further explained:

> Hijab, for me, is more of an identity thing…Islam is such an important and major part of my life that I love sharing this part of my identity with everyone. So when you see me 150 yards away, you would say, "There is a Muslim woman out there." Or I am stepping in for a job interview; I want my potential employer to know that this is a proud Muslim person, and this is part of my identity. So if the practices of this firm, or this university, would contradict with my faith tradition or practices, I would graciously decline or I would want them to choose somebody else who's better suited for the job.

Regardless of their decision to wear the veil or not, the women in this study emphasized that this was an intentional decision brought about by a desire to practice Islam in a sincere and meaningful way in a new cultural environment, rather than merely conforming to cultural expectations, whether of the US or their country of origin. As an older woman from Pakistan commented in a mosque discussion group, "back home, people just

follow the culture, but here in the US I have actively chosen to wear hijab and assert my rights as a Muslim woman."

It could be argued that an idealized spatial division between a nominally secular public sphere and a private, religious sphere brings about a deeper sense of personal spirituality in contrast with a generalized public practice of Islam. However, the cultural, communal and inter-personal context here is key. According to the interlocutors in this research, it was the morally proximate yet nevertheless contrasting cultural environment of the predominantly Christian surroundings that created opportunities for interreligious encounter and dialogue, prompting a process of questioning, self-reflexivity, and knowledge-seeking that, for some, resulted in stronger *imān* and, for women especially, a more intentional process of choosing how to embody the practice and display of Islam. However, this process of knowledge-seeking does not occur in a vacuum. For Rami, his knowledge of, and faith in, Islam grew through his involvement with the Muslim Student Association at his university, and, later, with mosques in the area. This is true for most of the other participants in this research who attend mosque not only for prayers and communal gatherings during Ramadan and Eid, but also for in-person and virtual classes and *ḥalaqa*s, or discussion groups. For some like Samia, who lacked a strong Muslim student community at her university, knowledge-seeking involved relying on the plethora of English-language videos, classes, and other resources that have proliferated online, particularly during the Covid-period. Whether through individual or collective study and religious refinement, many interviewees described practicing a deeper and "more authentic" Islam than they had practiced "back home," raising the question of what constitutes this more authentic Islam in practice. We turn to the question of practicing Islam in a majority non-Muslim context in the following section.

Practicing Islam in a non-Muslim Context

For some of the participants in this research, the process of questioning and reflecting upon one's previously unexamined religious beliefs extends to an examination of how they put those beliefs into practice on a daily basis. Practicing Islam in a non-Muslim majority context poses certain practical challenges, as addressed in classical and modern Islamic *fiqh al-aqallīyāt* (jurisprudence of minorities).[45] Most participants in this research, however,

45 Munazza Akram, "Issues of Muslim Minorities in Non-Muslim Societies." *Islamic Studies* 58, no. 1 (2019): 107–26.

emphasized the simplicity and adaptability of Islam that allows it to be practiced anywhere, having historically adapted to new cultural contexts as it spread throughout the world.[46] As Saad put it, "Islam is very flexible. You can be Muslim anywhere in the world, and you should have no problem." For Saad and others, the ability to buy halal food and find a mosque to pray in on Fridays during a lunch break was all he needed to be able to practice Islam fully in his adopted home of North Carolina.

Other participants in this research described needing to be more conscious and mindful of salah in a cultural environment and spatial context that does not reinforce or easily accommodate the five daily prayers. Echoing the sentiments of others, Amadu, from Ghana, observed: "back home the places of worship are within walking distance, you also hear the call for prayer all the time," but in the US, "we don't hear anything, you have to figure out the time by yourself and go." Similarly, Mohammed, from Jerusalem, stated that he knew a lot of Muslims who stopped regularly going to the mosque because of the distance and conflict with work hours. However, Muhammad said that he made a point of asking his employer for flexibility and additional time for prayer on Fridays, even if he must make up the work time later. He said that doing so would, hopefully, make it easier for other Muslims at his workplace in the future. Fellow interviewees echoed similar sentiments, in that they worked with their employers to establish a prayer space in their workplace to take time throughout their workdays to pray. Others discussed the permissibility of delaying or combining *ẓuhr* and *ʿaṣr* (noon and afternoon) prayers if one cannot pray them at work. Although interviewees recounted a variety of responses to the challenge of upholding a foundational practice of Islam, salah, most emphasize the ease, flexibility, and adaptability of Islam and, crucially, discussed the increased intentionality needed to maintain prayer in an environment that is not always conducive to it. Likewise, most also indicated that such additional effort and intentionality resulted in an increased sincerity and, ideally, reward. To underscore this point, at a hybrid masjid gathering, the imam addressed this challenge and importance of attending prayers in the masjid and discussed how God rewards Muslims for travelling greater distances to pray congregationally, and that the effort and intentionality required to do so is a special opportunity to which Muslims in the US have access.

As Muhammad indicated, however, some Muslim immigrants find the hectic, work-focused lifestyle of the US as a barrier to prayer. As Fatima

46 Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, "Islam and the cultural imperative." *CrossCurrents* (2006): 357–75.

explained, "I haven't even bothered trying so much [to pray five times a day] in the US because I know how difficult it would be to find the time during work hours." For Fatima, who does not normally wear hijab, doing so to observe prayer in her workplace could serve as an additional barrier, particularly as such a conspicuously spiritual practice in an overtly secular environment might bring about further unwanted attention. Although she prays occasionally at home, reads Qur'an, fasts during Ramadan, and tries to provide her children with a grounding in Islam, immigrating to a non-Muslim majority environment prompted her to pick and choose which aspects of Islam to emphasize:

> Well, in some ways it has made me more of, I guess, a cherry-picker. There are some aspects of Islam that I still fundamentally really believe in, that guides the way I think, politically, ideologically, socially, in terms of equality, egalitarianism and charity and those things…But then other things like rituals, or you have to do this this way, you have to use your right hand to do this or that. Those kinds of things, a lot of those things, I don't believe in or care about anymore, because they seem trivial or in some ways, it's not really meaningful.

Here, Fatima describes focusing more on Islamic values rather than practices, be they prescribed (*farḍ*) or customary (*sunnah*), ranging from prayer to etiquette. In conversation, Fatima contrasted what she considers to be the more rigidly "religious" outward expressions of Islam and a more "spiritual" inward, reflective, and values-based understanding of Islam. In doing so, Fatima reproduces a growing distinction that many within the secularizing US make between organized religion and a more individualistic and supposedly more authentic expression of spirituality.[47] Likewise, the "cherry-picking" of religious practices reflects a more consumer-oriented approach to religious practice not uncommon in the contemporary American context.[48] Nevertheless, Fatima said she would not go so far as to call herself "unmosqued," in the way that some American Christians have become "unchurched," stating that, if anything, the mosque has become not only more accessible to her here in the US as opposed to in Pakistan, but also more important to her and her family as a locus of religious worship,

47 Nancy T. Ammerman, "Spiritual but not religious? Beyond binary choices in the study of religion," *Journal for the scientific study of religion* 52, no. 2 (2013): 258–78.

48 Graham Harvey, "If 'spiritual but not religious' people are not religious what difference do they make?" *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 6, no. 2 (2016): 128–41.

community engagement, and cultural belonging.[49] In the US, she says, "there is a much more concentrated effort from the community to go to the mosque, to take your children to the mosque," than back home in Pakistan, and she values this.

Indeed, although interviewees differed somewhat in their views and approaches to salah, all emphasized the increased significance that the masjid has taken on in their life in the US.[50] For Amadu, and about half of the other interviewees, the difficulty in "finding a mosque, finding a community of Muslims…and finding a place of worship here in North Carolina" proved "the main challenge" of moving to the US. One interviewee expressed how if she and her husband wanted to pray at the mosque, they would have to drive over an hour to Raleigh. Noor immigrated to Greensboro from Jordan in 1990 when, "There was not yet at that time a big Muslim community, just a few students there, and there was not much, there was no masjid, there was not much, like, community like we used to have back home" and for her "it was kind of hard, especially being lonely." Interviewees note that although they can pray anywhere, in the US, only a mosque provides them with a sense of community and unity. Muslim immigrants describe how coming to the US encouraged them to spend more time in the masjid to stay connected to their religion, build a sense of belonging with fellow Muslims of different backgrounds, and connect with members of the Muslim community with shared cultural backgrounds. Likewise, the mosque can provide an important space for newcomers, especially refugees, to make connections for housing, employment, and everyday survival in a new context.

Even for participants like Fatima who report being more relaxed about daily prayers in the US, the mosque remains a central point for community and worship, especially during Ramadan and Eid holidays. As previously acknowledged, the US cultural calendar revolves around Christian holidays, presenting difficulties for those in the US following minoritized religions, including Islam. Most interviewees discussed at great lengths the drawbacks of celebrating Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr in the US compared to their home countries, where the solidarity of fasting and breaking fast together form part of the communal cadence of everyday life in a Muslim-majority country. In

49 Joseph O'Brian Baker and Buster Smith, "None too simple: Examining issues of religious nonbelief and nonbelonging in the United States," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 4 (2009): 719–33.

50 For more on the nuances of salah among Muslims in America, see Rose Aslan, "Salah: Daily Prayers in Muslim America," in *The Practice of Islam in America: An Introduction*, Edward E. Curtis, ed. (New York: NYU Press 2017), 15–35.

contrast, as Fatima explains, "none of that exists [in the US] so you have to really be very disciplined and motivate yourself to wake up and prepare your own morning meal and wake up your family and do all of that stuff that would be so much easier in a Muslim country." School and work schedules present obstacles for Muslims celebrating Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr in the US. As Abdul, an immigrant from Pakistan, notes, "Unfortunately the holidays, especially Eid, our equivalent to Christmas, those holidays are not recognized. We have to take the day off, or sometimes you can, sometimes you can't. You tend to only take one day off rather than taking two or three or four days off, just to really celebrate that." About half of the other interviewees discussed how work and school schedules proved an obstacle to observing Ramadan, and others, in conversation, discussed concerns about how to make Ramadan feel unique and important for their children, in contrast with what they perceived to be the more commercial and secular expression of holidays in the US, like Christmas.

Despite added difficulties, most interviewees stated that they found ways to observe Ramadan and Eid, with some touting the special benefits derived from such special efforts. Salma said she finds Ramadan in the US to be even more spiritually meaningful and fulfilling than in her home country of Egypt, famous for large-scale communal iftar meals on the streets of Cairo. For Salma, the quiet and contemplative solitude of being the only one at work fasting, and completely shifting one's schedule while the surrounding world carries on at its usual pace, can be a profound experience. Others echoed the sentiment that there are greater heavenly and earthly rewards to be accrued from the extra effort needed to observe Ramadan in the US. As Jamal explained, because "you have to put so much effort to bring community together, there is a greater sense of belonging and being together and practicing together, and sharing in the benefits and joys and the teachings of Ramadan" in the US. As with daily salah and attending communal prayer and events at the mosque, practicing Ramadan within a largely secularized Christian-majority spatio-temporal context potentially yields greater spiritual insights and benefits, as well as stronger community bonds.[51]

51 See also Jackleen Salem, "Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha: Fasting and Feasting," in Curtis, ed., *The Practice of Islam in America*, 83.

Encountering the Ummah and Being Muslim in North Carolina

As noted above, for the participants of this study the mosque took on heightened importance in their social and religious lives upon moving to the US. This is particularly true for women who may have only rarely attended mosque in their countries of origin but who reported feeling a strong sense of belonging and connection in mosques in the US, giving them opportunities to engage with other Muslims. Although many Muslim immigrants come from ethnically diverse countries, American Muslims encounter a context of "superdiversity" in most American mosques, given that the US has the most ethnically diverse Muslim community in the globe. As an example, the imam of a medium-sized mosque in the study area reckoned that their membership included about 200 families from over forty different countries throughout the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and South Asia, as well as white, Latino, and Black American Muslims. Encountering this kind of ethnic, national, racial, and linguistic diversity in one's local mosque is a unique experience for many Muslim immigrants, which some equated with the kind of diversity one might encounter on hajj. As Rami explained, in Lebanon, "everyone's the same. You go to the mosque. And in the village, they all know each other. It's like they're the same people in the mosque for years and years and years," but in the US "there's people from Pakistan, from Africa, Arabs, and all different kinds of people." For many participants in this study, this diversity reinforces that Islam is a global religion with the ability to be practiced in any culture.

For Rana this internal ethnic diversity within the Muslim community affirmed and deepened her faith in Islam. As she put it, experiencing this diversity "made me value that we all have different languages, we all look different, we all come from different backgrounds, but we still have one Imam saying 'God is great,' [in] the call for the prayer, we all line up and we start praying together." Most of those interviewed in this research shared similar feelings about how diversity in the Muslim community has had a positive impact on their view of Islam and that, as Rana states, "it just made me love my religion more…it just makes me very happy, and it makes me a strong believer." The affective experience of praying alongside those from diverse backgrounds serves as a grounded theological embodiment of what Muslims believe is the universal message of Islam open to all regardless of background. Likewise, the physical act of lining up in straight rows shoulder to shoulder with people of different backgrounds also serves as a manifestation of the egalitarian ethos of Islam that Fatima emphasizes.

While most interviewees described positive experiences of intercultural interactions in the mosque, others indicated that their mosque could do a better job at encouraging inter-ethnic interaction, as well as greater diversity and inclusion in masjid leadership. Jamal, for example, noted that "internally as Muslims, we need to do a better job of not just looking diverse but practicing diversity in terms of leadership at the mosque, in terms of the image and message we want to send to the community," noting that mosques in the area sometimes have a diverse membership that is not reflected in the masjid leadership, which remains dominated by a one immigrant community. At his mosque, board members are chosen to represent different identity groups, including the Arab, South Asia, African, and American/convert communities, though it lacks explicit representation from Black American Muslims. Jamal described the disagreements that sometimes come up between communities in the mosque because, as he put it, "people want to do things the way they did it back home." From typical disagreements about sighting the moon for Eid al-Fitr and the number of *rakʿah* to perform in *tarāwīḥ* (nightly Ramadan prayers), to questions about gender segregation, Jamal said that the community had to work to overcome and accommodate people's differences and preferences, and separate cultural preferences from religious mandates, for the sake of unity. Indeed, many participants differentiated between the "cultural" expressions of Islamic practices back home and a purer more "authentic" form of Islam they feel they are learning about through the process of questioning and knowledge-seeking prompted by immigration. Such appeals to a pure or stripped-down Islam cohere with more Salafist understandings of Islam, an issue that was raised by one participant in conversation at a masjid event.[52] Others, however, point to the emergence of a culturally inflected American Islam through this process of sifting through and negotiating prescribed Islamic practice and cultural custom.

Although cultural and ethnic diversity in mosques comes with its challenges and shortcomings, for most participants in this study, the diversity within the Muslim community re-affirmed their commitment to Islam. Many also described a process of intercultural exchange at the mosque. In conversation, many fondly recalled the delicious assortment of delicacies that marked Ramadan iftars in pre-Covid times, representing Middle Eastern, South Asian, and typical "American foods" like pizza and fried chicken, symbolizing the diversity of the mosque and constituting a kind of typical American iftar. Hind talked about being gifted beautiful scarves and clothing from Pakistan by a friend from the mosque, and how she loves to see when

52 See also Howe, *Suburban Islam*, 7–8.

people of the masjid wear *kufiyeh*s (keffiyehs) in solidarity with Palestine, "even if they aren't Arab." Others are concerned about maintaining a balance between cultural representation at the mosque and keeping the focus on religious refinement. For example, a proposed Palestinian cultural and solidarity night at a local mosque was transformed with an "Ummah Solidarity" event, featuring talks about the political situation in Palestine with an emphasis on its religious significance, as well as discussion and *du'ā'* (prayer of supplication) about other places in the world where Muslims are facing oppression, such as China, Myanmar, and the Central African Republic. Similarly, at one of the first in-person events at the mosque as Covid restrictions were easing, the event organizers urged people to sit with and get to know community members from different countries, evoking the *āyah* (verse) from the Qur'an explaining that the purpose of ethnic diversity is to "know one another."[53]

This topic of inter-ethnic diversity and solidarity in American mosques led to discussions about how such interactions affect one's own identity as a Muslim immigrant in the US. Does the ethnically diverse environment offered in the mosque, the focal point of community for many Muslim immigrants, contribute toward a shift of emphasizing one's religious identity as a Muslim over one's ethnic or national identity? Does the ethnic diversity of the masjid contribute to the production of a specifically American Muslim identity? Salma, from Egypt, stated that, regardless of whether she was living back in Egypt or in the US, her identity as a Muslim "takes the front and center position" over her national or ethnic identity as an Egyptian, American, or Arab. In this way, she argues, the place she finds herself in has no bearing on her primary identity as a Muslim. However, she did state feeling that "America provides so much room for individuality, that [she] can celebrate [her] Islamic identity within or along with [her] American identity with no problem, absolutely none" and she goes so far as to say that she "enjoys the interweaving of [her] Islamic identity with her American identity more than [she] does interweaving my Islamic identity with [her] Egyptian identity." Although this perspective might seem to contradict statements by others in this research who expressed difficulties in openly practicing Islam or identifying as Muslim, Salma spoke with specific reference to the secular Arab nationalist context in Egypt, where overt expressions of religiosity are viewed with suspicions as conspicuous displays of potentially political Islam. For Salma, in openly and proudly displaying her visible "Muslimness" she

53 Quran 49:13, "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another" (Sahih International).

is also embodying what she most values about the US and her American identity, namely, personal religious and political freedom and protections. In this, Salma echoes the sentiments of most others in this research who express a "fragile optimism" in the "American political project," as Howe put it.[54]

Although for Salma the question of her Muslim identity taking precedence over all other identities was not a question at all, this question prompted a diverse array of discussions and responses from other participants. Jala, a second-generation Pakistani American, considers herself to be "an American who happens to be Muslim," stating that being American and being Muslim mean many different things and cannot be limited to a single definition. Fatima, from Pakistan, expressed similar feelings: "Muslim American is a much more inclusive, a much more American term" because "you are American, who just happens to be Muslim." She specifically contrasted this with being "Pakistani American," which she characterized as being less inclusive due to its connection with national identity. Ali, a Muslim immigrant from India, also downplayed national identity, but emphasized his Muslim identity without qualifiers. Rather than being an American who happened to be Muslim, instead he considers himself a Muslim who happens to be American. As he put it: "I can't call myself an Indian Muslim, I am a Muslim from India. Or, I'm a Muslim from China. Similarly, I'm a Muslim in America." Likewise, Aisha, a second-generation Arab American, identities first with Islam because "it just means identifying strongly with my religion in a country that's not...and I don't want to say very welcoming of Muslims, but I want to say the Muslim presence has not always been the most welcomed." For Aisha, the fact that her Muslim identity has historically been marginalized and threatened in the US prompted it to come to the fore over and above her American identity. For the other participants in this study, being Muslim in America or American Muslim functioned as the two primary identity markers for interviewees, with most prioritizing their Muslim identity over their national or ethnic origins. Many, though, emphasized that American and Muslim were broad and mutually compatible umbrella identities, and that there were many ways of expressing or enacting these identities.

Conclusion

The above findings demonstrate the value and necessity of interdisciplinary approaches to better understand the complex acculturation process of

54 Howe, *Suburban Islam*, 219.

Muslim immigrants in the southeastern US. Specifically, this paper illustrates how the acculturation process affects the religious views, practices, and identities of Muslim immigrants and how, in turn, this process contributes to the emergence of an indigenous American Islam, as negotiated among Muslims from diverse backgrounds in their co-production of Islamic community space. To do so, this paper draws upon the concept of grounded theology to examine the dynamic interaction between transcendent religious beliefs and everyday spatial contexts and practices. This concept helps to highlight how Muslim immigrants' religious identities transform through their interactions with their new surroundings, communities, and broader societal forces, including intercultural and intra-religious encounters, showing religious identity formation and acculturation to be mutually constitutive. This approach offers a holistic view of acculturation that includes not just economic and social factors, but also spiritual and religious dimensions, beyond the view of religion as mere coping mechanism, cultural retention tool, or domain of social capital accrual.

Muslim immigration to the southeastern US has produced a form of interreligious encounter between Muslim immigrants and their non-Muslim neighbors, friends, and colleagues. Such encounters are situated within a political context of secular democratic multiculturalism and a cultural context dominated by white Christian Protestantism, both of which are infused with a mix of Islamophobic and xenophobic discourses alongside values of tolerance and hospitality. Although experiencing anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant prejudice is seen as being a "normal" part of the acculturation process, such experiences are also outside the norm of most everyday encounters. Indeed, the study reveals how many Muslim immigrants feel at home within the so-called "Bible Belt" due to cultural values centered on religion and family. Everyday interactions within this context, for the participants in this study, prompted a process of reevaluating assumptions about Islam and, for many, inspired a deeper commitment to the intentional practice of Islam. As part of this process, the mosque emerges as a site of central importance, not only for worship, but for belonging, knowledge-seeking, and identity formation.

In addition to the role of interreligious encounters in shaping the beliefs, practices, and identities of Muslim immigrants to the US, this research has also shown the importance of intercultural encounters within Muslim communities in contributing to the emergence of new feelings of Muslim identity rooted in place. In this research, participants described how their local mosque served as an everyday site where the universality of Islam and the diversity of the global ummah manifested itself. Although

mosques continue to serve as sites of national and ethnic affiliation and cultural belonging, participants also described how in the superdiversity of mosques, in which no one ethnic group predominates, one's Muslim identity takes precedence over and above national identity. Likewise, the context of political secularism, the surrounding cultural influence of Christianity, experiences of religious discrimination, all contribute to an emphasis on one's Muslim identity.

Limitations of this research relate to the remote nature of the interviews and the small and selective sample size. Due to Covid-19, the interviews largely took place via remote platforms, potentially limiting the ability to engage with and observe participants in their everyday environments. Then again, the remote nature of the interviews also allowed interviewees with the ease and comfort of participating from home. The context of social distancing could have also provided participants with time and space for self-reflection. Moreover, interviews were supplemented by ethnographic participant observation and informal interactions in online, hybrid, and in-person events at local mosques prior to and following completion of the interviews for this research. However, using mosques for recruitment could have skewed the sample toward more religiously observant Muslim immigrants, overemphasizing the role of mosques in the acculturation process. Still, snowball referrals partially mitigated this. Some participants were identified outside of any connection they might have to a local mosque, and participants varied in their level of mosque involvement. Although this study contributes new empirical insights by focusing on an ethnically diverse population in peri-urban areas of the southern US, more research is needed in the diverse spaces of the south to better understand the practice of Islam in this cultural region, how Muslims have and continue to shape southern cultures, and how racialized southern identities are negotiated by Muslims in this cultural region in ways that contribute to particular expressions of American Islam.

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ARTICLE

Christian-Muslim Relations after the "A Common Word" Initiative of 2007: Towards a Muslim Self-Understanding in Relation to Christianity

Halil Avci

Abstract
This paper explores an Islamic theology of religions that considers the theological borders of interreligious dialogue, emphasizes reciprocal relationship, and recognizes the dynamic of a dialogical relationship (i.e., going forth and coming back) to address intra-religious and interreligious dynamics in grappling with religious diversity. The "A Common Word Between Us and You" initiative of 2007 serves as a case study.

Keywords
Islam, theology of religions, A Common Word, Christian-Muslim relations

Interreligious dialogue necessitates an account of one's self-understanding in relation to the dialogue partner. Before we seek to understand what Muslims and Christians have in common, we must first identify what is distinctly precious to us as Muslims or as Christians. Without grounding fully "who I am" and "who you are," any fellowship is difficult to sustain. A crucial example of this principle in action exists in the Catholic church, where a theology of religions was developed in the documents *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate* to enable a dialogical relationship with believers

of other religions.[1] A similar moment exists in the history of Christian-Muslim relations when 138 Muslim religious leaders addressed a letter titled *A Common Word between Us and You* to the Catholic Pope and 26 other Church leaders. It has been interpreted by Vebjørn Horsfjord as an Islamic *Nostra Aetate*.[2] This is a moment of distinctly Islamic leadership producing constructive interreligious relations. It is significant because, through the document, Muslims established a theology for relationship building with Christians. Furthermore, *A Common Word* provides a valuable case study for the operation of interreligious dialogue. I argue that any form of interreligious dialogue requires a certain theology of religions to be fruitful.[3] I assert that, the goal of interreligious dialogue of mutual understanding (including the way one religion relates to the other—that is, theology of religions) is aided when theological exchange is centered, as opposed to other kinds of exchange (that is, dialogue of life, action and spirituality).[4] The interpretation of the model of interreligious dialogue displayed in and after the letter, specifically about theology and the nature of relationship building between Christians and Muslims, is an asset for better understanding Christian-Muslim dialogue and how to pursue it. Ultimately, this paper puts forward that this initiative constitutes an (inclusivist) Islamic theology of religions, one that considers how Muslims view their involvement in interreligious dialogue with Christians. In other words, *A Common Word* is an attempt to articulate a Muslim theological understanding of what it means to be in dialogue with Christianity and identifies those theological issues that relate to a Muslim self-understanding in relation to Christianity.

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1 *Nostra Aetate* is the declaration on the relation of the Church to Non-Christian religions. For reference, see the document archives at www.vatican.va.

2 Vebjørn Horsfjord has suggested that *A Common Word* could be taken as an Islamic *Nostra Aetate*. See: Vebjørn L. Horsfjord, "A Common Word Between Us and You—a Carrier of Hope," *Concilium* 4 (2020): 22–33; Vebjørn L. Horsfjord, "A Common Word," in *Routledge Handbook on Christian-Muslim Relations*, edited by David Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2018).

3 I argue that *A Common Word* is compelling for establishing a theological account of relationship building with Christians (that is, theology of religions). Theology of religions is the branch which explores the relationship between one religion to the other. For interreligious dialogue this branch appears as an account of how religious traditions have developed a theological rationale for how to relate to believers of another religion. For more on theology of religions, see: Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002); Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality* (New York: Editions Rodopi B.V, 2011).

4 These forms of dialogue emerged as the standard Catholic teaching of dialogue. See: *Dialogue and Proclamation* (May 19, 1991), 42, https://www.vatican.va.

First, I summarize the content of *A Common Word*. Second, I interpret the results of the dialogue process initiated by this open letter. In this section, I display the limitations of such dialogue and explore the possibilities it opens. Following a brief discussion of the dialogue as envisaged by the signatories of *A Common Word,* I consider the criticisms to make some conclusive observations on its vital importance to future Christian-Muslim dialogue.

Content of the *A Common Word* Initiative

It is important to note that the initiative known as *A Common Word* followed another similar action. One year prior to issuing *A Common Word*, Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal of Jordan, joined by 37 other Muslim leaders from around the world, published the Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI as a joint response to Pope Benedict's Regensburg Lecture (hereafter: RL) from 2006.[5] As a direct follow-up, and because of the lack of response from the Vatican, the work on another initiative began.[6] Exactly one year after issuing the first letter, the author of the Open Letter increased the number of signatories to 138 and issued the new letter, titled *A Common Word between Us and You*.[7]

Near the end of the month of Ramadan in 2007, *A Common Word between Us and You* was signed by 138 Muslim scholars. It was addressed first and foremost to the Pope and to 26 other senior church leaders; it called for the two faiths to unite around the principles of "love of God and love of neighbor."[8] The letter is divided into three parts. The first section explores

5 The "Open Letter" appeared on October 13, 2006. See: "A Open Letter to the Pope" at https://ammanmessage.com.

6 Tim Winter notes, "The Vatican's reply was dilatory enough to provoke Prince Ghazi into crafting a much longer open letter" (Tim Winter, "The Inception of A Common Word," in *The Future of Interfaith Dialogue: Muslim-Christian Encounters through A Common Word* (ed. Yazid Said and Lejla Demiri: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 22.

7 H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan is the author of the documents. See: HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal, *A Common Word Between Us and You: 5-Year Anniversary Edition* (Amman: The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2012), 252.

8 See: "A Common Word Between Us and You": https://www.acommonword.com/the-acw-document/. As Douglas Pratt helpfully summarizes, this letter "was addressed to Pope Benedict XVI; the Patriarch of Constantinople, His All-Holiness Bartholomew I, and a further 19 named heads of Eastern (Orthodox) Churches; together with the Archbishop of Canterbury and four heads of Western Churches including the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches and, indeed,

Christian-Muslim ideas and scriptural parallels pertaining to the love of God. The second section speaks about the concept of love of neighbor in Christianity and Islam. The final section issues a call to Christian leaders to come to a common ground, to build relationships, and to open the door to interreligious dialogue and collaboration. The core claim of *A Common Word* is "The Unity of God, the necessity of love for Him, and the necessity of love of the neighbour is thus the common ground between Islam and Christianity."[9] This is followed by the list of 138 signatories, given in alphabetical order. The signatures are integral to its message and shows that the letter was supported by scholars, clerics, and intellectuals, representing all significant denominations and schools of thought in Islam.

A Common Word recognizes the common ground between Christianity and Islam based on the two foundational principles which they share: love of God and love of neighbor. It identifies Q 3:64 as expressive of this idea. The authors contend that this common ground between Christians and Muslims can be found in the holy scriptures of both traditions.[10] Hence, it may be said that *A Common Word* rests not only on the Qur'ān; it also grounds itself in some key Biblical passages.[11] In this regard, its use of scripture is quite unique and arguably a step forward in interfaith dialogue.[12] Islamic scholars treated the Christian scripture with benevolence and intellectual seriousness. Lejla Demiri praises it for its "graciousness" in "addressing the 'Other'" and in "hearing of the Other's" scriptures. Demiri confirms that the text is not written with a polemic edge. Rather, the aim is to direct the attention of the reader to what grounds Christians and Muslims have for a theological engagement shaped by mutual trust and friendship.[13]

'Leaders of Christian Churches, everywhere'" (Douglas Pratt, *Christian Engagement with Islam: Ecumenical Journeys since 1910* [Leiden: Brill, 2017], 212).

9 *A Common Word Between Us and You* (October 18, 2007), Summary and Abridgement, https://www.acommonword.com/the-acw-document/.

10 Horsfjord, "A Common Word between Us and You—A Carrier of Hope," 23.

11 To quote Vebjørn Horsfjord: "The text, which has the flavour of a theological treatise, contains extensive quotes from the Qur'ān (30 percent of the entire text) and the Bible (10 percent) as well as number of Hadiths" (Horsfjord, "A Carrier of Hope," 23).

12 To quote Lejla Demiri: "What makes it quite exceptionally refreshing, for all its imperfections and the criticisms which it has attracted, are the striking graciousness of its language in addressing the 'Other' and its openness to a balanced and fair hearing of the Other's sacred scriptures" (Lejla Demiri, "Introduction," in *The Future of Interfaith Dialogue: Muslim-Christian Encounters through A Common Word* (ed. by Yazid Said and Lejla Demiri: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 2.

13 Demiri, *The Future of Interfaith Dialogue*, 2–3.

It is important to recognize that *A Common Word* uses Qur'ānic scripture as its primary framework for engagement with Christians.[14] For example, the title of the letter is taken from the verse mentioned above, which reads:

> Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner to Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside Allah. And if they turn away then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him). [Q. 3.64] [15]

This verse supports Muslim engagement with Christians (and Jews), indeed, requires it by Qur'ānic command. Peter Colwell confirms that the letter uses the Qur'ānic message here as a framework of engagement, stating, "we can therefore see that the framework being set out here for Muslims to engage with Christians is one the signatories believe is authorized by the Qur'ān."[16]

It is significant that *A Common Word* cites not only the Qur'ān, but also the Bible.[17] In *A Common Word*, several central quotes from the Qur'ān and hadith are interpreted considering Biblical concepts. For instance, in the final paragraph of the first section of the text that deals with love of God, it states,

> …we can now perhaps understand the words [by Muhammad] "The best that I have said—myself, and the prophets that came before me" as equating the blessed formula "There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things" precisely with

14 To quote Peter Colwell: "It is important to recognise from the outset that for Muslims the Qur'ān is the source of direct revealed authority and therefore the letter 'A Common Word' begins with an appeal to the Qur'ān and addresses Christian leaders within a framework already set down in the Qur'ān" (Peter Colwell, *Above Us and Between Us: An Introduction and Resource on the letter ... A Common Word Between Us and You ... signed by 138 Muslim Scholars* [London: Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 2008], 8–9).

15 M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'ān: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 39.

16 Colwell, *Above Us and Between Us*, 5–7.

17 As Vebjørn Horsfjord states, "it is novel that a text that carries the authority of a wide collection of Islamic scholars consistently uses concepts that have their origin in the Bible as a prism to understand the Qur'ān" (Horsfjord, "A Carrier of Hope," 24).

> the "First and Greatest Commandment" to love God, with all one's heart and soul, as found in various places in the Bible.[18]

In the same section, the author understands the hadith through a Biblical context in stating, "that the Prophet Muhammad was perhaps, through inspiration, restating and alluding to the Bible's First Commandment. God knows best, but certainly we have seen their effective similarity in meaning."[19] *A Common Word* reinterpreted this hadith in light of Biblical concepts to establish the common ground on which Christians and Muslims stand.[20] Another example of reinterpretation of Islamic sources through a Biblical lens is to be found in the second section of the letter, when the author attempts to reinforce the Islamic tradition's equivalent of the commandment to love neighbor, "[N]one of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself."[21] According to *A Common Word*, the Islamic tradition's equivalent of the commandment to love neighbors is to be found in this hadith. Strikingly, the two hadiths are equivalent to the Biblical principles of "love of God and love of neighbour."[22]

It is suggested that *A Common Word* may be an attempt to speak to Christians by appealing to the Bible and not just to Islamic sources. But the letter does more than appeal to Christians based on their own scriptures; it actually embraces certain Biblical principles as Islamic.[23] It is this scriptural

18 *A Common Word*, I.

19 *A Common Word*, I.

20 The exegetical efforts have helped for the dialogue initiative, but it has been also criticised for not treating exegetical efforts with methods of historical criticism. Lutz Berger's article gives an excellent account of the criticism the letter has attracted for the "(mis)use" of Qur'ānic passages. See Lutz Richter-Bernburg, "A Common Word Between Us and You: Observations on the (mis)uses of Koranic Exegesis in Interreligious Dialogue," *42nd Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA)*, Washington, DC, 22–25 November 2008.

21 *A Common Word*, II; Vebjørn Horsfjord notes: "Although this does not literally command love for neighbour, it is a rare example in Islamic scriptures of relating the words 'love' and 'neighbour' to each other" (Horsfjord, "A Carrier of Hope," 24).

22 With regard to the author of *A Common Word* in the format of a letter, Vebjørn Horsfjord notes: "from the beginning, it was assumed that the document to a large extent had been written by Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan, King Abdullah II's cousin and the director of the Aal Al-Bayt Institute. Later Ghazi let it be known that he was not only a leading author, but *A Common Word*'s sole author" (Horsfjord, "A Carrier of Hope," 25).

23 As Vebjørn Horsfjord states: "The substantive and theological significance of the Biblical principles equivalence is reinforced with a reference to the Islamic

appeal to both religions that is critical to advance interreligious relations. It is necessary for Muslims to be mindful of the centrality of the principle of "love of God and love of neighbor" and for Christians to think of the dual commandment as a call for collaboration with Muslims. Thus, the twin love commandments form the basis for interreligious understanding between Christians and Muslims in *A Common Word*.

In sum, *A Common Word* is a call based on the Qur'ānic message [Q 3:64] to come to "a common word." It suggests that to dialogue with Christians is part of what it means to be a Muslim, because the call for relationship building has a Divine origin. The aim of this common word is to promote dialogue and cooperation in the spirit of mutual understanding and respect. It allows for religious commonalities based on scripture that testifies to the strong desire to build bridges. It is a witness that Christianity and Islam together hold resources for collaborating on the basis of the twin commandments and on issues of justice and peace. It has served as a key to opening the door for many into the world of interreligious dialogue and paved the way for theological discussion on the suggested common ground (the shared principles of the two love commandments). However, it has been criticized for its treatment of the common ground in theological terms from certain Christian quarters. This will be discussed in greater detail later. There are many reasons why believers of various religions should dialogue with one another. Overall, *A Common Word* offers a specifically theological argument for why Muslims engage in dialogue activities, viz., that Christians and Muslims believe in the One God and embrace the twin commandments. However, as implicitly stated in *A Common Word* formatted as a letter, this theological openness on a common ground between Christianity and Islam is driven out of socio-political concerns.

I would like to examine the background of *A Common Word* as a 2007 initiative and, in doing so, consider causes for tension, both political and theological, in Christian-Muslim relations. A full discussion of this topic cannot be adequately done here. Therefore, let me summarize the main points. First, the letter introducing *A Common Word* justifies the timing of its message, stating that "our common future is at stake".[24] The history of

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conviction that the central characters of Jewish and Christian tradition, including Moses and Jesus, were prophets sent by God, and that Muhammad as the final messenger in principle brought 'nothing new'" (Horsfjord, "A Carrier of Hope," 24).

24 *A Common Word*, III; Prince Ghazi, in speaking about *A Common Word*, lists causes from both sides leading to tensions between Christian and Muslims (or West and Islam). He says, "On the Western side are the fear of terrorism; a

Muslim and Christian encounter is marked by mutual misunderstanding and incidents of war and conflict in both distant past and present. Current day theological and cultural misunderstandings are deeply rooted in the conflictual memory of the past (for example, the Crusades and the expulsion of Muslims from Andalusia) and current social and political issues arise that carry a religious aspect (such as the meaning of Muslim identity in Europe).

Second, *A Common Word* as an initiative serves as a counter narrative to that of the "clash of civilizations" argument. It attempted to define Islam against an increasingly negative global image of the tradition. I assert that *A Common Word* was responding to a vision of religious violence represented by the "clash of civilization" thesis.[25] Huntington's thesis claims that future conflicts will erupt around religious and cultural fault lines. *A Common Word*, however, provides a compelling counter discourse to that of a "clash of civilizations" and increasing interfaith tensions.[26]

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loathing of religious coercion; suspicion of the unfamiliar; and deep historical misunderstandings. On the Islamic side is first and foremost the situation in Palestine: despite the denial of certain parties, Palestine is a grievance rooted in faith (since Muslim holy sites lie occupied). Added are discontentment with Western foreign policy (especially the Iraq War and Occupation 2003-09); fear and resentment of the massive missionary movements launched from the West into the Islamic World; wounded pride arising from the colonial experience, poverty and unemployment, illiteracy, ignorance of true Islam and of the Arabic language, social and political oppression, and a technology gap" (HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal, "On 'A Common Word Between Us and You'," in *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor*, edited by Miroslav Volf, HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal, Melissa Yarrington [Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010], 6).

25 The term "clash of civilizations" was popularized by political scientist Samuel Huntington in a controversial article (S.P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993). Huntington later developed the main ideas of this article into a book: S.P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). In recent scholarship it is noted that the "Clash of Civilization" thesis served to place Islam and the West as adversaries. Douglas Pratt notes, it "began to surface, coalescing around the idea of 'Islam, the new enemy.' […] the phrase 'clash of civilizations' can be traced some years further back; it became common currency in the wake of the publication of Samuel Huntington's article of that title in *Foreign Affairs* in the summer of 1993" (Pratt, *Christian Engagement with Islam*, 7).

26 Similarly, Vebjørn Horsfjord notes: "This shows in fact that those behind ACW and the Christian leaders who involved themselves in the subsequent conferences and exchange of documents created a counter narrative to that of a clash of civilisations or religions" (Horsfjord, "A Carrier of Hope," 31).

Third, to understand the genesis of *A Common Word* and the context in which it arose, it is also important to consider the accomplishments of the *Amman Message* of 2005.[27] One must take into account that the *Amman Message* is an important precursor to *A Common Word* and that this intra-Islamic initiative was consequential during the lead-up to *A Common Word*. While I cannot explore the significance of the *Amman Message* in detail, I will note that *A Common Word* grew out of what began as an intrafaith exploration of theological principles regarding the representation of Islam, resulting in the document that became the *Amman Message*. This sequence highlights an important progression in interfaith dialogue as a process: specifically, the precedence of self-knowledge to the invitation to dialogue of the other.

In the next section, I explore why the initiative insists on a theologically derived argument for "a common word" between Christians and Muslims and consider the criticisms to make some conclusive observations on its vital importance for the future of Christian-Muslim dialogue.

Interpreting Interreligious Dialogue in "A Common Word"

Any dialogue presupposes a certain understanding of oneself and the relation of one dialogue partner to the other. A productive dialogical relationship needs to be open, clear, and unambiguous to build trust between the partners. For the signatories of *A Common Word*, the misinterpretation of Islam by prominent members and communities of the Christian tradition was so profound that no form of dialogue (dialogue of life, action, spirituality) could be sustained without first initiating a dialogue of theological exchange. Even if the initiative was driven by socio-political concerns, the argument is theological, and so the exchange with Christians was primarily a theological conversation. *A Common Word* is significant for its articulation of a distinctly inclusivist Islamic theology of religions.28 In

27 *The Amman Message*, Amman, Jordan: The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2007. Available at: https://ammanmessage.com

28 One type of inclusivism (open inclusivism) asserts that "religious traditions are genuinely different but therefore not incommensurable…inclusivists affirm that religions do make truth claims and that at least some of those truth claims are not already found in (their) traditions. So, open inclusivists affirm the possibility of interreligious learning" (John J. Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2020], 68–69). For further reference on inclusivism, see John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, eds., *Christianity and other Religions: Selected Readings* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1980), 19–38; Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions*

other words, *A Common Word* is an attempt to articulate a Muslim theological understanding of what it means to be in dialogue with Christianity and identifies those theological issues that relate to a Muslim self-understanding in relation to Christianity. The aim of this section is to assess how *A Common Word* as an initiative contributes to our understanding of interreligious dialogue. That is, to see what kind of dialogue this initiative envisioned, how it pursued its purpose, and what were the results. The question is then: what type of dialogue did the signatories envision, and to what did the claims about common ground in the letter lead?

In short, the dialogue envisioned by the signatories of the letter is that of a dialogue based on assumed common theological ground between Christianity and Islam. The intention is to show that within the revelatory content of the Islamic traditions are teachings promoting peaceful coexistence with other faith communities. It does so by suggesting that Islam shares the twin commandments found within the Biblical texts (Deuteronomy 6:4–5; Leviticus 19:17–18; Mark 12:28–31), and it invites Christians to agree on this common ground to work together for a more peaceful future. Thus, *A Common Word* intends a theological exchange between Christians and Muslims and suggests this dialogue ought to be based on mutual theological ground of love of God and love of neighbor. In doing so, the *A Common Word* initiative galvanized a new era of Christian-Muslim interaction. As I will demonstrate, the claims put forward in the letter have led to a model for expressing Muslim self-understanding in relation to Christianity, which leads to different possibilities of relating to each other.

It must be noted that much of the impact of *A Common Word* itself is dialogical in character. The significance of the letter as a dialogical model grew out of the involvement of Christian leaders who responded to the Muslim call. Horsfjord notes that the letter, together with the responses, forms and informs the *dialogue process* of *A Common Word*. He states,

> A Common Word between Us and You would have been an interesting document even without the many responses from church leaders and others, but it would not have *fulfilled the expectations of its drafters* […] The numerous Christian responses' interaction with the Muslim letter makes it meaningful to speak of a Common Word *dialogue process* that is of greater interest than the sum of the texts seen independently of each other.[29]

(Oxford Blackwell, 1986), 80–115.

29 Vebjørn L. Horsfjord, *Common Words in Muslim-Christian Dialogue: A Study of Texts from the Common Word Dialogue Process* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 55. Emphasis mine.

That is to say that the subsequent exchange of the responses is integral to the initiative overall. Horsfjord calls the letter from Yale Divinity School "a prime example of a response text to *A Common Word*, which, in the process of responding, enhances the significance of the original dialogue initiative itself."[30] On its own, *A Common Word* would have expressed a compelling Muslim self-understanding of dialogue; however, without the responses from Christian leaders, dialogue could not have taken place and the purpose of the letter to initiate dialogue based on authentic knowledge of self and other would have been unfulfilled.

A vast majority of responses were published on the official *A Common Word* website (www.acommonword.com) and most of the early responses to the initiative were positive.[31] However, the subsequent dialogue process has generated a huge amount of debate and criticism. As Demiri notes,

> By no means has every response been fully approving of its tone, language or content. Plenty of critics have interrogated its choice of scriptural passages, its theology, its style and its vocabulary. […] Some respondents have taken issue with Muslim doctrinal or contextual presuppositions which they find to be present and problematic in the ACW document. Yet virtually all respondents acknowledged the genuineness of its call for dialogue, receiving it

30 Horsfjord, *Common Words in Muslim-Christian Dialogue*, 96. Lejla Demiri notes, "The letter, entitled 'Loving God and Neighbour Together' was written and coordinated by Miroslav Volf of the Yale Divinity School, and was published as a full-page in the *New York Times* in November 2007" (Demiri, *A Common Word*, x).

31 Douglas Pratt notes, "The official ACW website is an interactive repository of response documents and related material. It includes formal Christian responses from leaders, organisations, and individuals together with some Jewish responses" (Pratt, *Christian Engagement with Islam*, 219). Leading Christian figures of different denominations have positively responded to *A Common Word*. As Lejla Demiri helpfully summarizes, the list includes: "Pope Benedict XVI, the late Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexei II, the Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams, the Presiding Bishop of the Lutheran World Federation Bishop Mark Hanson, the President and General Secretary of the World Alliance of Reform Churches, the President of the World Baptist Alliance, the President of World Council of Churches, the Council of Bishops of Methodist Churches, the Head of the World Evangelical Alliance, the Mennonite Church, Quaker leaders and a number of other Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox Patriarchs, Catholic Cardinals, archbishops, heads of national churches, deans of theological seminaries, well-known preachers, professors and leading Christian scholars of Islam" (Demiri, *A Common Word*, x).

> as an honest and gracious invitation to promote peace and social justice in a time of international mistrust and turmoil.[32]

Most of the Christian respondents "have taken issue with Muslim doctrinal or contextual presuppositions which they find to be present and problematic" and have emphasized that the suggested theological common ground is impossible for Christians to accept.[33] The criticisms in the responses have led to several slightly different possibilities of interreligious relation, and in some ways, as I argue, enhanced the significance of the original letter itself. With this in mind, to what does the claim of a dialogue on a common ground lead? What were the responses to the Muslim led claims about the common ground between the religions and how does the interaction contribute to our understanding of interreligious dialogue?

In the responses from Christians to the letter, one can see that *A Common Word* fulfils its purpose to initiate discourse between Muslim and Christian religious leaders. Many responses were positive and appreciative of *A Common Word* for its genuine effort to reach out to Christians. As Horsfjord states, "most church leaders and Christian scholars have accepted that *A Common Word* is meant as a genuine invitation to respectful dialogue between representatives of the two faiths."[34] However, the issue lies on the specific understanding of the common theological ground. The central question is the relationship between the unity of God as understood in the *A Common Word* letter and Christian understanding of the Trinity. *A Common Word* seeks to link the Islamic doctrine of God's unity to love of God. However, the recipients of the letter were concerned that *A Common Word* ignored essential Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, redemption in Jesus Christ, and Christian theological anthropology. However, as *Nostra Aetate* rightfully observes, Muslims "do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet."[35] As a result, *A Common Word* reflects this understanding of Jesus as prophet. The disagreements on the presuppositions contained in the Muslims' letter are behind much of the criticisms emanating from certain Christians.[36] While the shared scriptural understanding described in the

32 Demiri, *The Future of Interfaith Dialogue*, 1–2.

33 Jon Hoover, "A Common Word 'More Positive and Open, yet Mainstream and Orthodox,'" *Theological Review of the Near East School of Theology* 30, no. 1 (2009): 50–77, 76.

34 Horsfjord, "A Common Word," 262.

35 *Nostra Aetate*, 3.

36 A frequently referenced Vatican document *Dialogue and Proclamation* reads: "an open and positive approach to other religious traditions cannot overlook the

letter sets an agenda for how Muslims can relate to Christians, it does not sufficiently consider the areas of division between them. As Sarah Snyder notes, "in this way the letter has been heavily criticised by some for skimming over fundamental differences [...] not least concerning the very nature of God, love and neighbour."[37] What is essential to both Islam and Christianity, in the view of *A Common Word*, is God's unity, love of God, and love of neighbor. There is consensus between Muslims and most Christians that they believe in the same God.[38] However, belief in the unity of God does not entail a same understanding of the concepts of God, love, and neighbor. Christian respondents have emphasized that the role of Jesus Christ as a person of the triune God is at the foreground of what it means to love God and neighbor. Thus, a major objection from Christians is with the common ground suggested by *A Common Word*.[39]

To offer a detailed example of one such objection, Jon Hoover states that the invitation issued to Christians by *A Common Word* "is predicated on accepting a theological 'common ground' that relegates core Christian doctrines to non-essential."[40] He further observes that *A Common Word*

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contradictions which may exist between them and Christian revelation. It must, where necessary, recognize that there is incompatibility between some fundamental elements of the Christian religion and some aspects of such tradition." *Dialogue and Proclamation,* 31.

37 Sarah Snyder, "An Overview of Christian Responses to A Common Word," in *The Future of Interfaith Dialogue: Muslim-Christian Encounters through A Common Word*, edited by Yazid Said and Lejla Demiri (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 124.

38 This is the standard Catholic teaching after the proclamation of *Nostra Aetate*. See *Nostra Aetate*, 3. Furthermore, Miroslav Volf's: *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: Harper One, 2011) is evident of a change of attitude to these questions.

39 Although the suggested theological common ground was not accepted, there remains a possibility for other theological commonality. Daniel Madigan, for instance, suggests a different common ground that could be achieved. If the common ground is the unity of God and the twin commandments, then as mentioned earlier there is a tendency to confirm Muslims in their belief of Jesus as a merely human messenger. The emphasis should rather be on the *Word of God*, as a shared principle of the respective religions. A focus on the *Word of God*, allows for the individuality of both religions, since it is understood in Islam as the Qur'ān the revealed Word to Muhammad and for Christians the living Word in Jesus Christ. See Daniel A. Madigan, "Mutual Theological Hospitality: Doing Theology in the Presence of the 'Other'," in *Muslim and Christian Understanding: Theory and Application of "A Common Word,"* edited by Waleed El-Ansary and David K. Linnan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 62–64.

40 Hoover, "A Common Word: More Positive and Open, yet Mainstream and Orthodox," 76.

"speaks to Christians in a language that they might appreciate… [and] permits a less polemical approach toward Christian Doctrine."[41] He argues that, in articulating such a view, there is still an implicit suggestion of the supremacy of Islam. The point he takes issue with is that, according to *A Common Word,* the essence of "all true religion" is the unity of God and the two love commandments. However, prior to that, *A Common Word* states that "there is no minimising some of their formal differences."[42] Thus, for Hoover, *A Common Word* relegates difference in doctrine "to the domain of formal or non-essential differences." That reading of *A Common Word* asserts that it ignores essential Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, redemption in Jesus Christ, and Christian theological anthropology—all of which are related to the unity of God and the two love commandments as understood by Christians. In order to sustain dialogue, Hoover suggests that Christians and Muslims would do better by acknowledging these differences in doctrine.

It is my aim in this paper to acknowledge the content of these objections over doctrinal differences as important. Notwithstanding, I wish to point out that the existence of differences is not an obstacle to constructive dialogue. Rather, they serve for clarification of authentic knowledge of self in relation to the other. Although the suggested theological common ground is not possible for Christians to accept, I argue that *A Common Word* is helping to nurture an Islamic discourse on theology of religions, one which requires careful consideration of one's own religious commitments in the process. Hoover is responding to Sohail Nakhooda's article in which he argues that *A Common Word* is a "more positive and open, yet mainstream and orthodox" approach to religious pluralism.[43] By modelling an articulation of Islamic teaching and subsequent Muslim identity that not only allows but requires dialogue with Christians, the letter then prompted a related internal inquiry and self-articulation on the part of Christian respondents. I conclude that *A Common Word* addresses the theological connection by building a relationship with Christians that is indeed "more positive and open, yet mainstream and orthodox" and which is consistent with an inclusivist theology of religions and serves the goal of mutual understanding in interreligious dialogue.

The criticisms of *A Common Word* must be read in creative tension with this initiative's purpose: improvement of Christian-Muslim relations through

41 Hoover, "A Common Word: More Positive and Open, yet Mainstream and Orthodox," 52.

42 *A Common Word*, III.

43 Sohail Nakhooda, "The Significance of the Amman Message and the Common Word," *Jordanian Foreign Ministry*, 4th Annual Ambassadors' Forum, Amman, December 30, 2008.

initiation of dialogue between religious leaders. The responses are important for the dialogue process itself because, through these criticisms, *dialogue* between Christian and Muslim leaders in its literal sense took place. The dialogue process, the letter, and the responses *A Common Word* provoked may be read as an example of the interreligious dialogue it hoped to achieve. In that regard, these responses serve as a model of engagement between Muslim and Christians wherein the criticisms—rather than being an obstacle to dialogue—acknowledge the theological self-understanding expressed by the Muslim signatories of the letter and accept that articulation of self while also putting forward a Christian theological self-understanding. This model of exchange answers the basic requirement of dialogue for authentic and mutual expression of self to other. In this exchange, as a result, critiques lead to clarified self-understanding, where Muslims and Christians discover more deeply themselves in dialogue.

It was important to display an understanding of the limitations to the dialogue envisaged by *A Common Word*, as well as the possibilities it opens. In the subsequent dialogue process, and the actual meetings and conferences which followed, many theological issues that divide Muslims and Christians were discussed. In this way, *A Common Word,* together with the emerging dialogue process through the responses and conferences, allowed at once for dialogical engagement and theological differences. For instance, the first Catholic-Muslim forum was held in Rome from November 4–6, 2008, under the theme "Love of God, Love of Neighbour." The meeting was attended by twenty-four Christian and Muslim participants, including some of the signatories as well as the main addressee, the Pope. The meeting was concluded by a final declaration, affirming jointly held views regarding human dignity.[44] Agreement on theological issues such as the proposed common ground might have not been reached. However, *A Common Word* and its reception has helped us to imagine what might be gained if Muslims and Christian sought to reflect on God, love and devotion to God, and love of neighbour in the presence of, and in relation to, each other.

I have reviewed one way *A Common Word* envisioned interreligious dialogue, how the initiative has been received, and what limitations are inherent to the dialogue as envisioned by it. However, there are other ways to interpret the dialogue process and the understanding of dialogue specifically laid out in the letter for future Christian-Muslim engagement. Horsfjord identifies three. In the first reading, which we have already discussed, the

44 Final Declaration, See: HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal, *A Common Word Between Us and You: 5-Year Anniversary Edition* (Amman: RISSC, 2012), 245–48.

letter suggests dialogue based on an already established common ground and invites Christians to enter into dialogue and cooperation on the assumption that agreement exists. The explicit *call* to come to "a common word" suggests that the signatories behind the letter had envisioned this particular kind of dialogue. However, it has been noted earlier that much criticism emanating from Christian quarters was on the suggested common ground itself. In a second interpretation, *A Common Word* could be seen as an invitation to explore *together* God's Oneness, love of God, and love of neighbor.[45] In this view, the recipients of the letter recognize the serious intent of *A Common Word* and accepted its invitation to dialogue on issues of common concern. This form of dialogical engagement was evident in some of the key conferences which followed the initiative.[46] The success of that dialogue process was that Muslims and Christians together could reach recognition of what they hold in common with sufficient integrity to allow them to cooperate. Finally, another reading of *A Common Word* is that the signatories developed a Qur'ānic hermeneutic of interreligious relations to show how Muslims view their involvement in dialogue. Horsfjord suggests this interpretation to be most compatible with its purpose, where *A Common Word* could be seen as an Islamic *Nostra Aetate*. According to this interpretation, *A Common Word* and *Nostra Aetate* function in a similar

45 An example of the reception of *A Common Word* as initiating substantive theological exchange can be seen in a comment from Anglican Bishop of London Richard Chartres, in which he states that "well-articulated response will help stimulate both conversation and cooperation between the two religions" (Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane I. Smith, "The Quest for 'A Common Word': Initial Christian Responses to a Muslim Initiative," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 20, no. 4 [2009]: 377). See also: Richard Chartres, "A global conversation on the love of God," October 11, 2007. Michael Lewis Fitzgerald praises the letter for its attempt of theological exchange and finds the letter refreshing considering some of the other ongoing dialogue initiatives between Christians and Muslims. He says, "theological exchange is impossible if that means that Christians and Muslims to reach full agreement about their respective beliefs. But if by theology we mean 'faith seeking understanding', then surely we can speak theologically to one another. We can help one another to understand the logic of our respective belief systems. We can come to a less dismissive and more respectful attitude to one another. The ACW document is a stimulus to engage in this type of theological dialogue, which is still somewhat uncommon" (Michael Lewis Fitzgerald, "*A Common Word* Leading to Uncommon Dialogue," in *The Future of Interfaith Dialogue: Muslim-Christian Encounters through A Common Word,* eds. Yazid Said and Lejla Demiri [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018], 57).

46 For a list of the major events including conferences such as in Yale, Cambridge and Rome held between July 2008 and October 2008, see: https://www.acommonword.com/major-events/.

way and could be said to belong to the same genre of engagement of one religious community with others.[47] In my view, *A Common Word* is a necessary corollary to *Nostra Aetate*. Sustained religious dialogue is a call and response. *Nostra Aetate* on its own does not constitute interreligious dialogue between Christians and Muslims. But *Nostra Aetate* followed by *A Common Word* together represent the plurality of voices needed to give the word *dialogue* its meaning. I believe that this final reading is the most essential. It is the reading most compatible with my analysis of dialogue in *A Common Word*. This reading has the potential to expand the possibilities for productive relationship building between Christians and Muslims. As Haddad and Smith note, "just as Vatican II changed the way Catholics viewed other religions, so CW clearly indicates that Muslims leaders are committed to fresh thinking about the relationship between Islam and Christianity."[48] It marks a step forward in the official Muslim approach to other people of faith and the reconciliation of traditional Islamic orthodoxy with religious pluralism.

The letter recognizes the tensions to which religious misunderstanding can give rise and seeks to outline that which is common to all religions, especially with Christianity. While the letter aims at greater recognition of commonality with Christianity, nevertheless it maintains Islamic supremacy. Christianity and its essential doctrines of faith are tolerated only in so far as they maintain God's unity without emphasizing the Trinity or Jesus' role as redeemer. In other words, *A Common Word* does insist on a Muslim understanding of the unity of God and builds a relation to Christianity on the premise of the essential doctrine of God's unity as understood by Muslims. It is important to recognize that even though the signatories

47 *A Common Word* is similar to *Nostra Aetate* in that it does not speak about core theological differences. Other noteworthy differences are: *A Common Word* focuses on Christian-Muslim dialogue, while *Nostra Aetate* is primarily concerned with Jewish-Christian relations. It does not address Muhammad or Islam directly but refers to Muslims, whereas the *A Common Word* explicitly engages with Jesus and Christianity. *Nostra Aetate* does not reference Islamic scriptures, while *A Common Word* includes Christian scripture. Moreover, *A Common Word* actively involves Christian scholars and theologians, while *Nostra Aetate* is more a Christian declaration regarding Judaism and Islam. *Nostra Aetate* highlights figures like Mary and Abraham as shared between Christians and Muslims, while *A Common Word* emphasizes principles like "love of God" and "love of neighbor." *Nostra Aetate* shows Christian interaction with Muslims by acknowledging the devotion of many Muslims to Mary, even referencing the pilgrimage site Meryem Ana Evi in Turkey. The signatories of *A Common Word* also engaged with Christians, though their engagement appears to be more textual in nature.

48 Haddad and Smith, "The Quest for 'A Common Word': Initial Christian Responses to a Muslim Initiative," 374.

engage with Christian scripture seriously and generously, they privilege the Qur'ān. This is important because doing so is consistent with the theology of religions present in the letter. That is, that the signatories are self-consciously and explicitly Muslim *and* want to engage Christians, nonetheless. Like *Nostra Aetate*, it does not expect Christians to agree on a Muslim theological understanding of God. Rather, it puts forward how Muslims view their involvement in interreligious dialogue with Christians. Through this interpretation one could say that *A Common Word* established an inclusivist *Islamic* theology of religions and theological relationship to Christianity. Its inclusivist Islamic theology of religions considers the theological borders of interreligious dialogue and the limitations of the proposal of a common ground between Christianity and Islam on the twin commandments. Furthermore, it still emphasizes reciprocal relationship and the value of interreligious dialogue, without which the purpose of the letter could not have been fulfilled. On its own, *A Common Word* expresses a compelling Muslim self-understanding of interreligious dialogue; however, the subsequent dialogue (based on authentic knowledge of self and other) is exactly the kind of encounter religious leaders must build the capacity to engage, repeat, and sustain for the sake of global religious diversity. In this regard, *A Common Word* is a watershed moment in the history of Muslim engagement with Christianity and for Muslim leadership in not only modelling strategies for interreligious engagement suited to the needs of a religious plural world, but also facilitating their performance.

Conclusion

Globally, in 2007, the time of rising tensions in Christian-Muslim relations provided the necessary impulse for the initiative now known as *A Common Word*. The movers behind *A Common Word* attempted to counteract the negative images of Islam, to correct misunderstandings of Islam, and to demonstrate that Islam and Christianity are not fundamentally opposed. Taking the form of a letter, *A Common Word* is not only a document about cooperation (although cooperation is an outcome) or the need for peace. Specifically, it is about sharing a theological commitment to creating a culture of dialogue. What prompts the present essay, written in 2024, is the question of its impact.

Especially at this time in history, when Islam is associated with terrorist acts and religious hostilities seem intractable, it is worth sitting up and paying attention to how Muslims construe their relationship to non-Muslims and a religiously plural global order from a theological point of view. The fact

that *A Common Word* is not talked of or seems to have no impact today feeds a subtle, but persistent, dynamic in which it is assumed that Islam has nothing to say about peace and reconciliation. Moments like these are easily ignored because the effort to engage with the Other and to examine the Self is difficult and not immediately rewarding. However, failing to examine efforts that are foundational for peace, or specifically ignoring Muslim efforts of constructive interreligious engagement, is a problem. Thus, I return to *A Common Word* itself and to the subsequent engagement of that letter to reflect upon what Muslim leadership for mutual religious understanding can look like and to ponder where to go from here.

A Common Word does not consider the differences with Christianity as much as it should. As a result, it bases its description of the unity of God on a specifically Islamic theology. This limits the accuracy of the claim of *A Common Word* that it identifies common ground with Christians. The criticisms are legitimate; but, if *A Common Word* is read as an Islamic *Nostra Aetate,* then it is significant as a specifically Muslim understanding of Muslim involvement in interreligious relations. Just like *Nostra Aetate* III or *Lumen Gentium* XVI—which do not give a full position of the Islamic tradition, including the revelatory status of the Qur'ān and the Prophetic status of Muhammad—*A Common Word* does not claim to make theological statements on the person of Jesus Christ as understood by Christians. Rather, it is derived from an understanding held by Muslims and serves as an outreach to Christians to achieve some commonality and shared language for interreligious dialogue and cooperation. Hence, *A Common Word* is, in effect, an internal theological document for Muslims. However, its significance as an opportunity for greater collaboration between Christians and Muslims must be recognized. *A Common Word* models how theological exchange is a crucial foundation to all other forms of interreligious dialogue (dialogues of life, action, spirituality), to enable deeper mutual understanding, and to greater collaboration. However, this initiative is most effective in pursuing dialogue—not on the premise of the common ground identified in the document itself, but as an act of outreach from Muslims to Christians. Primarily, *A Common Word between Us and You* ought to be recognized for its theologically grounded articulation of Muslim involvement in interreligious dialogue. These features of the initiative make it and its dialogue process a crucial and historic step in Muslim-Christian relations.[49] It is an attempt to represent Islam for what

49 Central features as suggested by Lumbard: (1) grounding in scripture; (2) acceptance of theological difference: it is not seeking to bring Christianity and Islam together at the margins of their historical identity and it does not aim to find common ground by bartering away central tenets; (3) participation of religious

it *is*, but also to present Islam in a language accessible for Christians to understand. Its core achievement is to create a culture of dialogue involving common theological reflection (if not a "common word") between Christians and Muslims. The remaining question is then what kind of dialogue and cooperation between Christians and Muslims will be built in the future.

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leaders of the highest rank. See: Joseph Lumbard, "The Uncommonality of 'A Common Word,'' *Crown Papers* 3 (2009): 32.

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ARTICLE

"The Quest of the Historical Jesus" within the Framework of Interreligious Relations in the Middle East

Najib George Awad

Abstract
This essay explores the use of the "Quest of the Historical Jesus" framework in Arab and Middle Eastern scholarship. It analyzes its rare but significant presence in contemporary theological discourse. While historical criticism is well-established in Western Christological studies, it is largely unwelcomed by Middle Eastern Christian and Muslim theologians; this results in limited engagement with this method in the region. However, some 20th-century Arab Christian and Muslim authors have employed historical criticism to examine Jesus Christ, producing works that remain largely unstudied in Anglophone and Germanic academic circles. This essay offers a comparative and analytical presentation of four such discourses—two by Christian authors and two by Muslims. By contextualizing these works, it provides a cross-religious perspective on how Arabic-speaking, Middle Easterners have engaged with the historical Jesus (*Īsā al-Masīḥ*) through a method not widely accepted in institutional religious scholarship. This study contributes to a non-Euroamerican, interreligious hermeneutical framework, enriching understanding of the historical Jesus within Middle Eastern contexts.

Keywords
historical criticism, Quest of the Historical Jesus, Middle Eastern Christian, Muslim, comparative

In 1951, the American theologian and social ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr wrote his famous monograph, *Christ and Culture*. This text was written within the broader context of reasoning and inquiry on the relation of religious belief and thought with historical reality and the critical, forensic investigation of historicity. In the West, such attention to Jesus's relation to culture as part of the consideration of the historical nature of knowledge—religious knowledge included—culminated in the development and prevalence of the so-called "Historical Quest" and the method of historical criticism. In Christianity, we witnessed the creation of "the Quest of the Historical Jesus" and "the Quest of the Historical Bible." Meanwhile, in Islam we had orientalist scholars who started to apply historical-critical methods of investigation to the Prophet and the Holy Book of Islam: "The Quest of the Historical Muhammad" and "the Quest of the Historical Qur'an." Inquiring about Jesus, therefore, from the perspectives of his relation to history and culture became the birthing womb of the ensuing contextualized reasoning on religiosity, which generated Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*.

Ever since that publication, the majority of Christian Christology scholars have departed in their hermeneutics of Jesus Christ from a serious attention to the conclusions of the "Quest of the Historical Jesus" in order to approach the Jesus of history from a frank conviction that "Gospel and culture are dialectically related."[1] The belief in the dialectic nature of the connectedness between the Gospel and the cultural context came as a sort of natural evolution of the belief in a dialectic between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history—or, dogmatic Christology and historiological hermeneutics—which was philosophically confirmed in "the Quest of the Historical Jesus's" realm of reasoning from the nineteenth century till the end of the twentieth.[2] It is now almost taken for granted that the logical, epistemological, and historiological connectedness between faith and time, Gospel and human reality, is fundamentally dialectical and binary in nature.

It was this attention to the binary between Christ and history, Gospel and culture, and faith and context, that generated, since the last decade of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first, new trends in Christological and theological reasoning alike. We witness

1 Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology*, John Bowden (trans.), (London: SCM Press, 2001), p. 34. See also H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

2 Najib George Awad, "Is a *Perichoresis* between Theological Interpretation and Historical Criticism Possible? Toward A Balanced Hermeneutics of Scriptural Christology," in *Theological Review*, 31 (2010), 152–78.

now the resurgence of new areas of studies called contextual theology/ Christology and the Global South's theologies or Christologies. They are developed outside the Western, Euro-American world and from the non-Western, Latin, African and Asian contexts; yet they are deeply immersed in the "Historical Quest" scholarship that was developed in the Western hemisphere of religious reasoning. There was a time in the history of Christianity when Christian theology and Christology students in Euro-American academic centers unquestionably believed that

> Outside [the study of missions] classes nothing that happened in [the non-Western Christian] world was considered of real significance. Any theology worthy of the name came from Germany, the Netherlands, or Britain, and, now and then, from America. If there was theological reflection taking place in other parts of the world, we know nothing about it.[3]

It has now been noticed that the pendulum has swung and the theological attention to, and appreciation of, global majority's theological and Christological discourses is noticeably growing in extent and impact. Theologians in the Western academy today seriously take on board questions like "has [the global majority] setting significantly affected the way we Christians in the West think about our faith? Have we made the connection between economic and political relations and theological exchange?"[4] There are even Western Christian scholars who went as far as stating that if the theology that matters is the one that is representative of the majority of the Christians, then "theology in the Third World is now the only theology worth caring about," especially if theology is rooted in the actual life-settings of the Christians.[5]

In today's theological and christological libraries, one finds dozens of texts written on theology in general, and on Jesus Christ in particular, from frank locational and non-Western perspectives that are founded on serious adoption of historical criticism and historical quest-like presumptions. Throughout the past three decades, there are found many monographs that represent this genre of theological writing. What, nevertheless,

3 William A. Dyrness, *Learning about Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academic Books/Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 11–12.

4 Dyrness, *Learning about Theology,* 12.

5 Dyrness, *Learning about Theology,* 13. See also Andrew F. Walls, "Towards an Understanding of Africa's Place in Christian History," in *Religion in a Pluralistic Society*, J. S. Pobee, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 180–89 at 182.

caught my attention is the fact that these discourses divide Global South discourses geographically: Christologies (or historical inquiries on Jesus) from Latin America, Christologies from Africa, and Christologies from Asia. Notwithstanding, one hardly finds yet any serious study available in the Anglophone and Germanic academic libraries on Christology—or even on the historical Jesus Christ in general—from indigenous Middle Eastern, Arab authors who build their own reasoning on the reading-games and hermeneutic strategies of the "Quest of the Historical Jesus" scholarship. One can only find some studies composed by western scholar, not on how the historical Jesus is understood in the Middle East, but on the historical Jesus's manifestation in his life and ministry of particular cultural and contextual features rooted in the Middle Eastern *Sitz im Leben*. Among these very rare texts stand the studies of the late American New Testament scholar and Missionary, Kenneth E. Bailey (1930–2016), especially his earlier *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes* (1983), and his latter *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (2008). One, nevertheless, cannot but point out here that Bailey's texts are written by a non-Middle Eastern, First World scholar *about* how Jesus Christ can be understood from the perspective of western author's imagination of how Middle Easterners would think when they read about Jesus's life and teaching in the New Testament.[6] Furthermore, those local, Middle Eastern authors who try to develop studies on Middle Eastern, Arab theology end up either reductively narrowing down their presentations into very localized, generally religious speech on specific contextual cases without developing any Christology or discourse on Jesus Christ from a serious engagement with any historical inquiry in the Jesus of history.[7] Or, they title their books with something like "the Arab Christ;" but upon reading the content, the reader discovers that the text speaks about Arab *Christians* and almost never about Jesus Christ.[8]

The above negligence, shortcomings, and deviation cases do not at all mean that there are no Arab, Middle Eastern texts written on Jesus Christ

6 Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasants and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1983); and K. E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic/InterVarsity Press, 2008).

7 See, for example, chapters 18 and 19 in the recent Mitri Raheb and Mark A. Lamport, eds., *Emerging Theologies from the Global South* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2023), 246–72.

8 See the typical example of Mouchir Basile Aoun, *The Arab Christ: Towards an Arab Christian Theology of Conviviality*, tr. Sarah Patey (London: Gingko, 2022). See also my short critical review of this text in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 76 no. 4 (2023): 394–96.

during the 20th century that actually dared to challenge the mainstream religious thought in that region and adopted frankly the hermeneutic strategies and methods of reasoning one can find in "Quest of the Historical Jesus" scholarship. In this essay, I endeavor to demonstrate that the case is totally otherwise. There are Arab, Middle Eastern authors—not just Christians, but also Muslims—who produced historiological discourses on Jesus Christ during the past century. More intriguing still, these authors developed their discourses from a serious and complete engagement in, and knowledge of, the Quest of the Historical Jesus scholarship that had permeated the Western academic scene during the 19th and 20th centuries. We do not have yet one analytical study of these Arab, Middle Eastern, historical-critical discourses on Jesus Christ. It seems that the Western academic world is not paying sufficient or comparative attention to them, though some Western scholars, especially in the area of Islamic Studies, express awareness of, at least, the Muslim versions of such texts.[9]

This essay, for the first time, offers an interreligious, comparative, and analytical presentation of four Arab Middle Eastern discourses on the historical Jesus: two by Christians and two by Muslims. It aims at comparing these four multi-religious discourses in order to offer the reader the chance to assess these unique attempts cross-religiously and to construct a historical-critical, Global Majority, Christian-Muslim hermeneutic framework on how contemporary Arab Middle Easterners approached the historical and religious messenger of God called *ʿĪsā al-Masīḥ* (Jesus the Messiah/Christ). In the ensuing sections, I present the four texts in a chronological order, starting with a Christian text from the first decade of the 20th century and ending with another Christian text from the last decades of that century, sandwiching between them two texts written by two Muslim authors who composed their discourses on *al-Masīḥ* (Christ) during the 1950s and the 1960s.

This essay is *not* a paper in contextual theology *per se*, though it focuses on four examples taken from one and the same specific geographical framework. Furthermore, it is *not at all* a paper on Middle Eastern intellectual background in the 20th century in general, or on how the Christian and Muslim authors in that region interacted interreligiously with the belief

9 See, for instance, Gabriel Said Reynolds, "The Islamic Christ," in *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, eds., Francesca Aran Murphy and Troy A. Stefano (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 183–98; and Mourad Takawi and Gabriel Said Reynolds, "Muslim Perceptions of Jesus," in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History, Volume 15: Thematic Essays (600–1600)*, eds., Douglas Pratt and Charles L. Tieszen (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2020), 123–51.

in Jesus Christ, or even on how this was shaped by the socio-political and literary conditions of the region during that time. This paper is also *not* on how Muslims and Christians talked about Jesus in Middle Eastern history in general. It is, specifically, about how Arab, Middle Eastern Christian and Muslim authors used the claims, methods of reasoning, hermeneutical strategies, and reading-games that, in the western scholarly world, are associated with "The Quest of the Historical Jesus" scholarship. This is the *main* theoretical framework of the paper. The main goal is to show how four unique, Christian and Muslim authors from the Arab Middle East (and contrary to the overwhelming majority of other Christian and Muslim authors in that region who have written about Jesus) used explicitly the toolkit from the "Quest of the Historical Jesus" scholarship to develop a discourse on Jesus Christ in relation to the Middle Eastern life-setting and out of it. Why these four authors and not others? Because they uniquely challenge the mainstream orientations in the Arab Middle East and use in a frank and explicit manner the methods and the discursive claims of historical criticism and historical-critical inquiry to reinterpret Jesus Christ. Such scholarship is not welcomed generally in the Middle East—neither by the Christians concerning Jesus and the gospels, nor by the Muslims concerning the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an. Therefore, they are ideal examples to show how this particular, historically western scholarship was actually embraced by Arab authors during the 20th century and was used frankly and without further ado in developing discourses on Jesus of Nazareth.

The interreligious importance of the abovementioned theoretical framework is threefold: First, it demonstrates an interreligious binary reading-game played by Christian and Muslim authors, each approaching the same subject from the particular perspective and interest of his own religious belief and background. Second, the subject of Jesus Christ's life and ministry is an old, classical, and everlasting subject in interreligious dialogue, reasoning, and relations—in use ever since Muslims and Christians co-existed in the Middle East. Third, the paper makes a comparative juxtaposition between Christian and Muslim stances—not on Jesus only, but *mainly on a particular scholarly approach to Jesus (*that is, The Quest of the Historical Jesus) that appeared in the Western world during the 20th century, which these Middle Eastern Muslims and Christians encountered, embraced, and decided to use. Each one did this by developing a binary relation between the Jesus of History and his understanding in the religious imagination of their particular faith.

The Syrian Christ, or the Syrians of Christ's Homeland

The first author I consider is Ībrāhīm al-Raḥbānī, a Christian who is an Arab immigrant to the United States of America. Al-Raḥbānī was born in 1869, in a village called Btater in Mount Lebanon. He immigrated to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the whole region was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, and when the countries that represent the region's geopolitical map of today were not created yet. From his homeland, al-Raḥbānī decided to write a book in English, titled, *The Syrian Christ*. That was in 1916, and he composed his book in Boston and New York, wherefrom the book was published as well. In this monograph, al-Raḥbānī endeavors to demonstrate that Jesus in the Bible and the overall biblical content alike mirror genuinely what he called "the Syrian cultural and societal context." Jesus mirrors how the "Oriental" or Syrian people live in their daily life, not just in the past but right in the present as well (at least the present time of the author). One can validly suggest here that al-Raḥbānī wanted to primarily disclose and unpack the spiritual significance of the ordinary life *habitus* of Oriental people.[10]

To display a systematic reading of al-Raḥbānī's thesis in the book, it is important to pause at the foundational ethical motivation that drove the author to compose his book. Below, I quote at full-length al-Raḥbānī's ethical motif in his own terms:

> But "the hour cometh and now is" when the peoples of the earth are beginning to realize that righteousness and truth, kindness and good manners, are the exclusive possessions of no one race. The peoples of the earth are beginning to realize that a mutual sympathetic understanding between the various races is an asset of civilization, and a promoter of the cause of that human commonwealth for which all good men pray and hope. Therefore, as one who owes much to both the East and the West, I deem it my duty to do what I can to promote such a sympathetic understanding, without doing violence to the truth.[11]

10 Throughout I will employ the adjective "Oriental," despite its antiquated use in the English language, because that is the term used by al-Raḥbānī.

11 Ībrāhīm al-Raḥbānī, *The Syrian Christ*, (Georgia, USA: Bridges Publishing/Freiburg: Verlag Hans-Jürgen Maurer, 2008), 164.

The above statement indicates that al-Raḥbānī departs from a principal rejection of racial and cultural discriminations and from his belief in the total equality of all races and civilizations. This is indeed a candor and revolutionary voice in that old American scene, where discrimination and racism were paramount at that time. In addition, his ethical confirmation comes out at a time when Western colonial supremacy and hegemonic condescension, especially in its Orientalist version, could not be more absolutist and could not reach a higher peak. In the midst of this Western, colonial, Christian-centered supremacy and Orientalism, al-Raḥbānī resolved to write a text on the Orient and its people by means of inviting his American co-citizens to pause at the historical characteristics of the most central and referential figure in their Christian and Jewish traditions and socio-anthropological conscience. He invites them to ponder the character of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, in order to realize his genuine Oriental-Syrian identity.

Al-Raḥbānī does this to offer an ethical alternative to the Western colonial discriminative stances on other civilizations. He pursues this by demonstrating through his book's chapters that the core-figure in the imagination of the Western world, Jesus Christ, is central, referential and criterial to the Oriental people as well. By this, al-Raḥbānī wants to flip over the center-margin equation by showing that the cultural center of gravity must be granted to the Orient because the ultimate human figure, Jesus Christ, is himself Oriental (Syrian). Thus, what he represents, namely the culture of Syria or the Orient, must not be relegated to the margin. Otherwise, Jesus himself would lose his centrality and join the Orientals on the margin to which they were cast by the West. Decolonizing the Orient-Occident equation (in a tendency similar to the one Homi Bhabha pursued later in the 1990s) is here fulfilled vis-à-vis highlighting the Syrian/Oriental identity of Jesus and the Bible alike.[12] For al-Raḥbānī, this is not a counter-discrimination or counter-racism tendency. It is, rather, a confrontation of discrimination and racism by means of emphasizing particularity and individuation. The Oriental/Syrian context is unique and one of its kind, and this is what the historical Jesus of Nazareth personally manifests.

Upon reading the title of al-Raḥbānī's book, *The Syrian Christ*, the reader might anticipate encountering a text written on the inquiry about Jesus's

12 See, for example, Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1994); and H. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1990). I study Bhabha's and other postcolonial scholars' projects in my forthcoming monograph, whose tentative title is *From Orientalism into Postcolonialism: Essays from Historical, Epistemological, Methodological and Religious Perspectives*.

historical identity and biography, or even a text developing Christological hermeneutics of Jesus's history in the Bible approached from the angle of his cultural context. As a matter of fact, reading the detailed contents of the book discloses a different case-in-hand. The book's thesis circles around two main purposes. The first is stated explicitly by al-Raḥbānī in the book's preface. There, al-Raḥbānī relates that his text is not one more commentary on Jesus Christ's life and teaching, but "an Oriental guide to afford Occidental readers of the Bible a more intimate view of the original intellectual and social environment of [the] sacred literature." Al-Raḥbānī, then, elaborates on this Bible-centered focus in the following manner:

> The need of the Western readers of the Bible is, in my judgment to enter sympathetically and intelligently into the atmosphere in which the books of the scriptures first took form: To have real intellectual, as well as spiritual, fellowship with those Orientals who sought earnest in their own way to give tangible form to those great spiritual truths, which have been, and ever shall be, humanity's most previous heritage.[13]

The core thesis of al-Raḥbānī's constructed argument for this goal states that, since the central subject of the Bible is a Syrian Oriental figure called Jesus of Nazareth, there is no way for non-Oriental Christians to truly and genuinely understand Jesus's life and ministry, and to apprehend the Gospel message of the Scripture unless they perceived first, even belonged to, the socio-cultural and anthropological nature and constituents of the Oriental/Syrian identity and life. Al-Raḥbānī principally concedes that, in Christianity, Jesus has a theological, ontological identity as "the incarnation of the Spirit of God," thus Jesus "in a higher sense [is] a man without country," and he even is "a prophet and a teacher…[who] belongs to all races and all ages."[14] This theological ontology notwithstanding, al-Raḥbānī adds that the supra-localization of the Gospel must not drive us to forget that "as regards his modes of thought and life and his method of teaching, [Jesus] was a Syrian of the Syrians…Jesus never saw any other country than Palestine." It is interesting that al-Raḥbānī never calls Jesus "Palestinian," but always "Syrian" and "Oriental."[15] Be that as it may, the Biblical attestations on Jesus, which were composed in the same life-context to which Jesus belonged, are also "Syrian of the Syrians." According to al-Raḥbānī, "Gospel truths

13 Al-Raḥbānī, 11–12 (vi-vii).

14 Al-Raḥbānī, 15 (3).

15 Al-Raḥbānī, 15 (4).

should have come down to the succeeding generations—and to the nations of the West—cast in Oriental molds of thought, and intimately intermingled with the simple domestic and social habits of Syria. The gold of the Gospel carries with it the sand and dust of its original home."[16]

The Gospel of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, the Biblical testimonies on the *Heilsgeschichte* have a birthplace, a homeland, and indigenized identity. Only those who were born in the very same homeland, and who hail from the very same realm of indigeneity, states al-Raḥbānī, can have truly "an 'inside view' of the Bible, which by the nature of things, a Westerner cannot have."[17] So, only Syrian-Orientals (like the author himself) can authentically understand and explain the Bible to other non-Orientals and non-Syrians: "as a sojourner in this Western world, whenever I open my Bible it reads like a letter from home…the Bible might all have been written in my primitive village home, on the Western slopes of Mount Lebanon some thirty years ago."[18] Lest the reader accuses him of insinuating racist discriminative implications in his declaration, thus breaching the ethical paradigm he constructed his entire thesis upon (see above), al-Raḥbānī immediately amends his tone and confirms his recognition of the Western world's success in "knowing the mind of Christ" and his belief that denying this fact "would do violent injustice, not only to the Occidental mind, but to the Gospel itself as well, by making it enigma, utterly foreign to the native spirituality of the majority of humankind."[19] This confessional, self-remitting note notwithstanding, al-Raḥbānī proceeds to emphasize: "It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a people to understand fully a literature [here the Bible] which has not sprung from that people's own racial life…as a literature, the Bible is an imported article in the Western world, especially in the home of the Anglo-Saxon race."[20]

Earlier in his ethical principal rule, al-Raḥbānī called for banning the discriminative language of racialism. Here, he personally uses the language of race and alludes in this use to an intellectual and cultural, inescapably discriminative view. Those Anglo-Saxon readers of the Bible, al-Raḥbānī suggests, and because they are not Syrian/Oriental, ends up caged on the level of merely relating to the Biblical content as "only a photographer… deals with externals." He believes this to be the case simply because, as an outsider visitor of a foreign land (the land of the Bible), the Anglo-Saxon can

16 Al-Raḥbānī, 15 (4).
17 Al-Raḥbānī, 16 (5).
18 Al-Raḥbānī, (5–6).
19 Al-Raḥbānī, 16 (6).
20 Al-Raḥbānī, 16 (6–7).

only say what that life in that land means to *him*, but not what life means to "the *people of* that land themselves."[21]

It is this indigenous rootedness in particular homeland and cultural reality that alone enables the Scripture's readers to perceive Jesus the Syrian Oriental. Al-Raḥbānī also never talks about Jesus "the Jew," not even in the religious or theological sense of Jewishness. This, despite the fact that, in 1916, Israel was not yet existent, thus the politico-ideological ramifications of its 1948 establishment in the Arab World were not part of the picture. Be that as it may: "The story of Jesus's birth and kindred Bible records disclose not only the predisposition of the Syrian mind to accept miracles as divine acts without critical examination, but also its attitude towards conception and birth—an attitude which differs fundamentally from that of the Anglo-Saxon mind."[22]

For al-Raḥbānī, such stories of Jesus's birth and nativity and their existence in the Christian Bible are embraced by the Syrians/Orientals with absolute and unquestionable certainty on the basis of utter intuitiveness: They do not need to sift the stories for "there is nothing in the phraseology of such statements which is not in perfect harmony with the common, everyday speech of [the Syrian] people."[23] The same perfectly applies, in al-Raḥbānī's conviction, to the central stories in the Gospels about Jesus's last hours, farewell speech, last supper, and agony in the garden of Gethsemane: "The events of the 'upper room' on Mount Zion, and of Gethsemane, are faithful photographs of striking characteristics of Syrian life."[24] In a hardly missed romanticization of the Orient almost to the extent of fantasized imagination, al-Raḥbānī speaks about Jesus's last supper with his disciples in the following manner:

> The last supper was no isolated event in Near Eastern history. Its fraternal atmosphere, intimate associations, and sentimental intercourse are such as characterize every such gathering of Syrian friends…from the simple 'table manners' up to that touch of sadness and idealism which the Master gave that meal…I find nothing which is not in perfect harmony with what takes place on such occasions in my native land.[25]

21 Al-Raḥbānī, 17 (8).
22 Al-Raḥbānī, 23 (21–22).
23 Al-Raḥbānī, 23 (23).
24 Al-Raḥbānī, 39 (56).
25 Al-Raḥbānī, (56-57).

Jesus's life and personality merely confirm and sanctify the common Syrian life of the Oriental people. Jesus did not invent any new thing. In Jesus, there is nothing new under the sun for the Syrians. His life and especially his, usually theologically central, agony in the garden before the crucifixion are basically valuable due to their expression of "the fundamental traits of the Oriental nature,"[26] Be that as it may, al-Raḥbānī concludes, the accurate and insider understanding of the Syrian Bible must teach us the following: "Before we can fully know our Master as the cosmopolitan Christ, we must first know him as the Syrian Christ."[27]

The above was the logical preconception that manifests the main purpose behind al-Raḥbānī's thesis. In his elaboration on that goal, al-Raḥbānī already furnishes for his belief in the existence of a so-called "Syrian/Oriental mind," on one hand, and "Occidental/Anglo-Saxon mind," on the other. This language-game places us directly within the circle of the second determining purpose of his book: developing a comparative binary hermeneutics of the Oriental-Syrian person and culture and the Western-Occidental one by means of the Biblical attestations. Al-Raḥbānī traces this binary comparativism vis-à-vis taking Jesus as a case-study off the center of the attention and placing therein, instead, the scriptural texts. This time, he travels beyond the gospels and their accounts on Jesus into the other books of the Old and the New Testaments alike. He performs this by treating the textual attestations of both testaments as if theology- and history-free, and using their contents supra-chronometrically as records on the stark difference and particularity of the Oriental character.

According to al-Raḥbānī, whatever the Biblical texts convey in their various literary forms and textual genres, they all want to reveal that, while the Western religious mind is rational and a lover of "reasonable faith," the Oriental religious mind clings tightly to, and expresses itself in, "superstitious forms of worship."[28] The first attitude is presented as totally *definitive* of Occidental Christianity, whereas the latter is absolutely and meta-historically symptomatic of Oriental Christianity. Furthermore, when it comes to living *modus operandi*, the Occidental person is obsessed with "correctness of the technique" of performance and conduct. To the contrary, the Oriental's life is "brimful of sentiment," and this is what the Bible specifically illustrates about the Oriental life of Jesus and other Biblical figures.[29] Contrary to the

26 Al-Raḥbānī, 46 (72).
27 Al-Raḥbānī, 48 (77).
28 Al-Raḥbānī, 22 (19).
29 Al-Raḥbānī, 39 (57).

modern Western and far-Eastern persons, who live their lives in a manner expressive of the *habitus* of "a businessman or and industrial worker,"

> the son of the Near East is more emotional, more intense, and more communicative…his temperament remains somewhat juvenile, and his manner of speech intimate and unreserved… the Oriental's manner of speech has been that of a worshiper…[his] life revolves around a religious center…[which manifests] his intellectual limitations and superstitious fears.[30]

No wonder, al-Raḥbānī gleans from the above, that the Oriental, opposite of the Occidental, "has not achieved much in the world of science, industry and commerce…previous to his very recent contact with the West, he never knew what structural iron and machinery were…He has never been a man of inventions. His faithful repetition of the past has left no gulf between him and his remote ancestors."[31] It is not surprising, al-Raḥbānī opines, that the Syrian's daily language is soaked fully in the linguistic oasis of a religious book (the Bible) from his ancestors' past. The Oriental "has no secular language", because

> The history of the Orient compels [one] to believe that the soil out of which scriptures spring is that whose life is the active sympathy of religion, regardless of the degree of acquired knowledge… an industrial and commercialist atmosphere is not conducive to the production of sacred books. Where the chief interests of life center in external things, religion is bound to become only one and perhaps a minor concern in life.[32]

Al-Raḥbānī takes the reader farther in his comparative binary to touch also upon other life aspects, like the relation to parents (Jesus's relation to his parents become an example), the attitude towards enemies (Jesus's teaching on blessing one's enemies), literal accuracy, manners of speech, the stance on woman (Jesus's attitude towards the sinning female) and the stark contrast between East and West regarding them. Ultimately, al-Raḥbānī proposes that the Bible is the primary interpretation and source of the Syrian Oriental person and culture to the Western readers.

30 Al-Raḥbānī, 51 (81–82).
31 Al-Raḥbānī, 52 (83).
32 Al-Raḥbānī, 53 (85–86).

The reader of al-Raḥbānī's book can certainly realize that the author is not actually representing Jesus Christ to re-understand by means of his life and ministry the historical, indeed Oriental and Jewish, context and era. He is, rather, implementing Jesus's Biblical narrative in the service of al-Raḥbānī's own, premeditated, personal imagination of the Orient. The details of his logic and rationale indicate conspicuously that he relies fully on a dialectic binary as a method of reasoning, something which today's postcolonialism (whether right or wrong) judge to be colonial and hegemonic, a practice once performed by the West over the rest. From this perspective, al-Raḥbānī seems to be a fully assimilated author, who echoes, rather than confronts, the prevalent Orientalist binary tendencies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Western scholarship. He does not truly speak about the "Orient," but bequeaths his own understanding, experience, and imagination of an "Orient" that is totally subordinated to his very own narrow, personal, and privative life-experience. His language and expressions all echo views and stipulations one can read in the texts of Western Orientalists, missionaries, and travelers from that period of time, when a binary comparison is applied to construct an "Occident-versus-Orient" imagination.[33] Al-Raḥbānī promotes this binary by recruiting the Biblical texts and Jesus's life in its service. He seems not interested in pondering the possibility that the scriptural texts may not actually reflect the Oriental background of their original authors. The scriptural language, expressions, and stories might actually have shaped, influenced, and left its marks on the Oriental people. Maybe what we have is not the cultural context imaged in the scriptural language, but the scriptural language embraced by the Bible's readers and their context, something which can happen East and West, North and South, and with any or every reader imaginable.

33 See, for example, Hamilton Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947); H. Gibb, ed., *Whither Islam? A Survey of Modern Movements in the Muslim World* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1932); Gustav Von Grunebaum, *Islam, Essays on the Nature and Growth of a Cultural Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1955); Ignaz Goldziher, *Verlesungen ueber Islam* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitaetsbuchandlung, 1910); and Henry H. Jessup, *Syrian Home-Life*, Isaac Riley (ed.), (New York: Dodd & Mead Publishers, 1974).

III. The Genius of Christ: A Muslim Celebrating His Middle Eastern Fellow

One of the unique and memorable Muslim attempts at relating to Jesus Christ and understanding him historically was made in Egypt during the first half of the 20th century. In 1953, the famous Egyptian writer and scholar, ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād (1889-1964), wrote a book in Arabic on Jesus Christ titled, *ʿAbqariyyat al-Masīḥ* (The Genius of Christ). The book was positively welcomed by the Egyptian readership, Muslim and Christian alike—which led to the production of a second edition of the book in 1958, this time under the title, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ: Fī Tārīkh wa-Kushūf al-ʿAṣr al-Ḥadīth* (The Life of Christ: In the History and Discoveries of the Modern Era). In 1996, a slightly revised third edition of the book was produced. That edition was translated into English in 2001 by Peter Ford, Jr.[34] In the ensuing paragraphs, I present al-ʿAqqād's thesis using the Arabic second version of his text that was re-published in Egypt in 2005.[35]

In the introduction he made for the second edition of his monograph, al-ʿAqqād states the fundamental motivation behind writing on Jesus Christ. He reveals his primary interest in the "history of the religious call" (*tārīkh ad-daʿwah ad-dīniyyah*) in general, after he realized that the phenomenon of "prophetic call" (*daʿwat an-nubūwah*) is exclusively symptomatic of the Semitic nations of the Orient. Al-ʿAqqād relates that, contrary to other places, the Orient witnessed the birth of grand historical prophecies. In a noticeable socio-anthropological sensitivity, al-ʿAqqād further adds that these prophecies originated in the context of what he calls "the caravan city-stations" (*mudun al-qawāfil*), neither in the civilizational urban context, nor in the context of Bedouin societies.[36] The caravans' resting-stations, which are emancipated from the governing law-codes of the urban setting and the rule of power and blood-vengeance of the nomadic world alike, resorted to a middle-ground, referential option between the two by relying on prophetic guidance (*al-hidāyah an-nabawiyyah*). Al-ʿAqqād states that he deduced this conclusion from investigating the history of the prophetic *vitae* of "Abraham, Christ

34 ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād, *The Genius of Christ* (trans. F. Peter Ford, Jr: Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001).

35 ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ: Fī Tārīkh wa-Kushūf al-ʿAṣr al-Ḥadīth* [The Life of Christ: In the History and Discoveries of the Modern Era], (ed. Dāliyā M. Ībrāhīm, rev. ed.: Cairo: Nahḍat Maṣr Press, 2005).

36 Al-ʿAqqād (2005), 3.

and Muhammad, peace be upon them" (*fī sīrat al-khalīl Ībrāhīm, wa sīrat Muḥammad wal-Masīḥ, ʿalayhim as-salām*).[37]

Al-ʿAqqād, then, informs his readers that his study is pursued from the perspective of a historical quest on religions (*Religionsgeschichte*), not from any literary, theological, jurisprudential, or even scriptural perspectives. Later on in his text, he will reveal his deep interest and avid attention to the scholarship of "the Quest of the Historical Jesus," which was avidly popular and paramount in the Western, primarily German, Christian scholarship during his lifetime. What we have, then, in al-ʿAqqād's text is an Arabic, Muslim intellectual attempt at constructing a discourse or a portrait on "the Jesus of history" apart from "the Christ of faith." Such distinction was quite known and frankly preconceived in the Euro-American circles of academic and non-academic reasonings.[38]

Abiding with the rules of investigation implemented in the Quest of the Historical Jesus's arena, al-ʿAqqād discloses that he postponed the publishing of the second edition of his book, *The Genius of Christ*, for five years because he wanted first to acquaint himself with the latest archeological discoveries and published studies on this area of reasoning, especially the ones that became part of the intellectual research activities in the West. Let us notice here that al-ʿAqqād states this at the moment in modern history when the manuscripts of Qumran Valley, near the Dead Sea, eastern Jordan, were unearthed at the beginning of 1947. Al-ʿAqqād expresses his great interest in looking at the scrolls and reading the latest studies and commentaries scholars produced on them.[39] The other sources he also wanted to read before editing his book were the latest English studies on Jesus's historicity that, according to al-ʿAqqād, were written from the philosophy of history (*falsafat at-tārīkh*) perspective.[40] He relates his discovery of two genre of texts written within this circle of reasoning: Contemplative, philosophically oriented and romanticized reflections, and historiological, critical and

37 Al-ʿAqqād (2005), 3.

38 For an exposition of this historical quest phenomenon in Western scholarship in the twentieth century, see, for example, Robert Funk et. al., eds., *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say? The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993); Marcus Borge, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1993); Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, eds., *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (London: SCM Press, 1998); Gregory W. Dawes, *The Historical Jesus Question: The Challenge of History to Religious Authority* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); and James D. G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making: Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), Vol. 1.

39 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 8ff.

40 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 13ff.

forensic comparative religions' texts.[41] He, then, states his enjoyment of reading the first genre and his serious reliance on the second one, because he believes that the second genre engages him into rational discussion with its theories.[42]

Be that as it may, as a serious scholar and researcher, al-ʿAqqād relates that the second edition of his book was re-prepared after consulting the three following sources: Qumran Scrolls (*lafāʾif wādī Qumrān*), the new revised translations into foreign languages of the Old and the New Testaments (*tarājim al-ʿahdayin al-qadīm wal-jadīd al-munaqqaḥah fī al-lughāt al-gharbiyyah*), and the new compositions of religious and non-religious thinkers on Jesus Christ from post-WWII contemporary perspectives (*muʾallafāt al-mufakkirīn ad-dīniyyīn wa-ghayir ad-dīniyyīn ʿan al-sayyid al-masīḥ min jihat an-naẓar al-ʿaṣriyyah baʿd al-ḥarb al-ʿālamiyyah ath-thāniyah*).[43] What al-ʿAqqād concludes from his study of these sources is that neither Qumran Scrolls, nor the revised translations, nor the new studies offer any additional data that might change the thesis on Jesus's historical life, which he developed in the first edition of his book.

By affirming this, al-ʿAqqād is implicitly explaining, and justifying, the arguments in his book not just on Christ's life, but primarily on Christ's *genius* (*ʿabqarriyah*). What supports the emphasis on Christ's genius, in al-ʿAqqād's view, is discovering from the reading of the Dead Sea Scrolls that the pre-Christ texts and teachings did not really pave the way to Christ's message. The Scrolls' content does not provide us with anything we do not already know about Christ's message (*lakinnahā lā-tuḍīf īlā maʿlūmātinā ʿan ḥaqāʾiq al-risālah al-Masīḥiyyah wa-lā tukhrijnā bi-shayʾ jadīd fī amr hadhih al-risālah*).[44] What they merely suggest, according to him, is the uniqueness, intelligent newness, and creativity of the message Christ divulges to emancipate the religious call from dead literalism and intellectual stagnation (*risālah lāzimah tuʿallim an-nās mā-hum bi-ḥājah īlā an yataʿallamuh kullamā ghariqū fī lujjatin rākidah min al-ḥurūf al-mayyitah wal-ashkāl al-mutaḥajjirah*). The genius of Christ lies in his remedying of the religious call that existed before him, and not in his continuation, consummation or completion of that thought: "This is Christ's message to that era that was infested with its stagnation and hypocrisy alike"

41 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 15.

42 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 16. He names, specifically, two texts he personally studied carefully and positively appraised: Rupert Furneaux, *The Other Side of the Story: The Strange Story of Christianity*: *The Dark Spot of History* (London: Cassell and Company, 1953); and Robert Graves and Joshua Podro, *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* (New York: Doubleday, 1954).

43 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 9.

44 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 12.

(*hadhihi hiya risālat al-sayyid al-Masīḥ fī dhalika al-ʿaṣr al-maūbū' bi-jumūdih wa-riyāʾih ʿalā al-sawāʾ*).[45] Be that as it may, al-ʿAqqād stipulates that nothing new in scholarship truly challenges the genius of the historical Christ. "We do not deem these authors to have informed us of a new opinion that is capable of driving us to revise an essential aspect in the picture we clearly have of Christ's message, when we collected our thought and information first to compose this book."[46]

The question now is, what are the fundamental constituents of Christ's genius message, according to al-ʿAqqād? Here, al-ʿAqqād dwells on a particular reading offered by scholars of the Historical Jesus Quest, especially the one that started to dominate the arena of that Quest from the post-WWII era till, at least, the 1990s. This reading was inaugurated by the well-known, German theologian and Biblical scholar, Rudolf Bultmann, and then developed by some of his students, like Günter Bornkam, Ernst Käzmann, Hans Conzelmann, and others, and it is known as "the Second Quest of the Historical Jesus." In this school of thought, scholars quit inquiring about the historical Jesus and moved into investigating historical Christianity: How did Christianity come historically into being? It seems from his book that al-ʿAqqād was one of the—certainly rare—Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim—even rarer—followers of Western research on the Second Historical Quest (something not even Arab, Eastern Christians in that region were caring to read about, let alone attentively study).[47] He reveals his knowledge of one specific theory in the Second Quest, namely the one that suggests that, after Christ's departure, Christianity was created from two branches or religious versions: the first—centered around James, the "Lord's brother"—was based in Jerusalem and focused primarily on conveying Jesus's message to the Jews, whereas the second—circled around Paul the Apostle and his followers—

45 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 12.

46 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 20.

47 If the "First Quest of the Historical Jesus" is usually attributed to Albert Schweitzer's inquiry, the so-called "Second Quest of the Haistorical Jesus" is ascribed to the scholarship of some of the most influential students of Rudolf Bultmann, like Ernst Käsemann and Günter Burnkam, as well as to Käsemann's followers Norman Perrin and Ernst Fuchs. It focuses mainly on pinpointing what is exactly and evidently historical inside the Gospels' texts and what is not. It is more like a historical critical inquiry on the historical attestations to Jesus, rather than investigating Jesus *per se*. See, for example, Colin Brown and Craig Evans, *A History of the Quest for the Historical Jesus*, *Volume 2: From the Post-War Era through Contemporary Debates* (New York: HarperColins Publishers/Zondervan Academic, 2022); and Ernst Käsemann, *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen* (Göttingen: Vandenboeck & Ruprecht Verlag, 1967).

spread outside Palestine and far from the Jewish temple, and was directed solely at the Gentiles.[48]

Against this twofold thesis, al-ʿAqqād emphasizes that Christianity's identity and uniqueness is directly attributed to Christ's genius *per se*, not to any of his disciples or followers (that is, James and Paul). In addition, al-ʿAqqād confirms, Christ's message has never been particularistic or exclusively directed towards the Jews alone. It is not Paul who turned Christ's message into an inclusivist, universal call. The calling of all the nations started with Christ's religious call as such. The disciples did not invent this posterior to Christ. They, rather, learned from him to include the nations in his own call and not to restrict it to the people of Israel (*daʿwat al-umam qad badaʾat fī ʿahd al-sayyid al-Masīḥ, wa-anna at-talāmīdh wal-rusul taʿallamū minhu an yashmulū al-umam bi-daʿwatih wa-lā yaqṣirūhā ākhir al-amr ʿalā banī Īsrāʾīl*). The historical data tell us, al-ʿAqqād relates, that Christ had no other choice but to redirect his call to the other nations after some Jews rejected his message in his lifetime. Universalizing the message, al-ʿAqqād concludes, was the most plausible option for avoiding the only remaining result of giving up on this message altogether.[49] Denying the universal and inclusivist call of Christ not only ignores his genius, it also twists and misuses the available historical data and abuses it in the service of the author's privative fecundity and imagination (*min waḥī al-qarīḥah auw min waḥī al-khayāl*).[50]

It is intriguing that al-ʿAqqād does not think that the salvific, or redemption-centered, aspect in Christ's message is one of the constituents of Jesus's genius religious faith. Belief in salvation and in the appearance of a saving messenger (*al-īmān bil-khalāṣ wa-ẓuhūr al-rasūl al-mukhalliṣ*) at an anticipated time is a common idea among religions, as the science of comparative religions reveals.[51] To the contrary, al-ʿAqqād adds, the idea of the appearance of a divine messenger called "the Messiah" (*al-Masīḥ*) is unique and unprecedented, as it has not been known in this formula before the Torah and its commentaries (*qabl kutub at-Taūrāt wa-tafsīrātihā auw at-taʿlīqāt ʿalayhā*).[52] However, the available historical evidence demonstrates that Jesus did not image *verbatim* the character of the Messiah as it was depicted in Jewish religion. Jesus hailed from Galilee, which was degraded in the eyes

48 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 17–18.

49 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 19.

50 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 20.

51 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 22. One can find it, al-ʿAqqād asserts, in the belief of the native Americans, in the history of the Egyptians and Babylonians, and in the teachings of the Zoroastrians.

52 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 22ff.

of the people of Judea, who never believed that any good thing or a prophet can come from it. Furthermore, Jesus was born historically in 5–6 B.C. This means that he started his ministry at the age of twenty-three or twenty-four. For al-ʿAqqād, this is another indicator of Christ's uniqueness and genius different from the Jewish tradition of the Levite priests, who did not start their service until they become thirty years of age, and of the Scribes and the Rabbis, who were not deemed qualified for their positions until they became fifty years of age.[53]

In addition to his date of birth, place of origin, and ministry at young age, Christ's message, that founded the Christian faith, is incomparable with any other message, and it does not represent any historical evolution of messages and trends of thought preceding it. All Christ's teachings and ideas reflect one point of view that had never had any existence except in the life and ministry of the person called Jesus Christ:

> The Christ-like sayings criticize the Pharisees, though they do not represent the views of the Sadducees or the Samarians…They also criticize the fanatic Essenes, though they do not follow the views of the philosophers, the Epicureans, or the Stoics…they also refer to the sayings of Moses, Abraham, and the prophets, yet they do not abide unreservedly or fully with everything they say or mimic them or slavishly abide with them.[54]

The message conveyed by Christ was unique and unprecedented, though it was divulged as a response to the needs of its historical era (*jāʾat fī ībānihā wifāqan li-maṭālib zamānihā*).[55] Being a response to its era's needs does not negate or deny Christ message's unique genius, because Christ's call was staunchly resisted and antagonized by the people of that era.[56] Had it been just one call similar to others, it would have not been a source of threat and danger for the messenger's life. Jesus's message was a call for "changing the direction" and an inauguration of a new destination that can never reconcile with the other directions and destinations (*taghiyir wijhah wa-īftitāḥ qublah, wa-lā sabīl īlā al-jamʿ bayn al-wijhatayin wa-lā īlā at-taraddud īlā al-qiblatayin*).[57] The new destination is grounded in Christ's call for obeying "the law of love"

53 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 69.
54 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 78.
55 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 86.
56 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 89.
57 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 90.

(*sharīʿat al-ḥubb*) and the word of conscience (*kalimat aḍ-ḍamīr*).[58] It is a law that deconstructs every known tradition or convention, and it blows away every figural reality (*sharīʿah tahdum kulla ʿurfin qāʾim wa-taʿṣufu bi-kulli shaklin ẓāhir*).[59] All this and many other things, al-ʿAqqād concludes, disclose the genius of Christianity in contemporary terms, understood now as one-of-a-kind and very rare supreme genius that has no equal in all ages (*jalāʾ al-ʿabqariyyah al-masīḥiyyah fī ṣūrah ʿaṣriyyah…wa qad qalla fīhā naẓīr hadhihi al-ʿabqariyyah al-ʿāliyah fī tawārīkh al-azmān qāṭibah*).[60]

In al-ʿAqqād's book, *The Genius of Christ*, we encounter a unique, almost rare, Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim scholar. We have a Muslim versed deeply in the scholarship of the Quest of the Historical Jesus as it was conducted and as it evolved in the Western academic world. This scholarship, and not just in al-ʿAqqād's time but also today, has never been truly welcomed, studied, or even seriously or openly conversed with by any known Christian Arab theologian in any of the Oriental Christian denominations that were, and still are, predominantly leaning more frankly towards religious orthodoxy, conservatism, and piety. One might presume that a Muslim scholar like al-ʿAqqād resorts to the historical-critical school in order to demonstrate the falsehood and historical incredibility and inauthenticity of Christian faith. Quite the contrary, he uses the historical-critical method to demonstrate the uniqueness and genius of the messenger and prophet of Christianity. Yes, al-ʿAqqād also uses a binary and dialectical comparative method of reasoning. Yet, he does not implement it in constructing a binary between Christianity and Islam. He points, rather, to a binary between the message of Christ and every other religious or philosophical view existing before him, contemporaneous to him, or existing today. One does not, basically, find in al-ʿAqqād an attempt to create a binary between the Muslim Orient and the Christian Occident by means of historically investigating Christ. He is, thus, different from his Syrian compatriot Ībrāhīm Raḥbānī. For him, the binary is not between cultural historical contexts viewed from the perspective of the religious belief of these contexts' inhabitants. The binary lies, instead, between religious, supra-cultural, supra-spatial discourses: The one of Jesus Christ and the remaining religious ones that existed before him. If Raḥbānī relies on the Western, comparative, Orientalist method to confirm the discriminative conclusions, which the Western mind held in his era on the Orient, al-ʿAqqād uses a Western, historical-critical method in a forensic manner not to defend his

58 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 108.

59 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 110.

60 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīḥ*, 159.

own faith and Oriental religiosity, but to praise and present the uniqueness of the different other.

A Muslim Walking with the Christ of the Gospels

Close to a decade after *The Genius of Christ*'s publication, another Egyptian Muslim author, inspired by al-ʿAqqād, also produced a monograph on the historical Jesus and the gospels. In 1961, the renowned Islamist scholar and author, Muḥammad Fatḥī ʿUthmān (1928–2010), composed a text touching upon the Quest of the Historical Jesus and aspiring at presenting a balanced and positive presenation of the Jesus of history to Egyptian Muslims and Christians. ʿUthmān's book was titled, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ fī al-Anājīl al-Arbaʿah* (With Christ in the Four Gospels). Considerably versed in the main scholarly literature and discourses of the First Quest of the Historical Jesus, ʿUthmān decides to gainsay this Quest's skeptical and negating claims about Jesus's historicity, and he constructs an alternative discourse centered around the attestations on Christ in the Christian gospels. "I only want," ʿUthmān declares, "to be acquainted peacefully and sincerely with Christ and Christianity in the gospels that are acknowledged today by the Christians, and to offer this attempt to people within these boundaries alone."[61] ʿUthmān knows that his choice would cause a controversy among the Muslim readers, since the conventional Islamic view considers the Christian gospels forgery, falsifications, and an abrogation of the true and authentic *Injīl* of Jesus the Son of Mary (*ʿĪsā b. Maryam*). To this anticipated criticism, ʿUthmān preemptively states:

> I am not someone who denies the significance of doctrine and dogmatic discrepancies' role in constructing any religious belief. Nor am I someone who negates the main difference between Christianity and Islam. This notwithstanding, I say that Christianity is not merely about the crucifixion and trinitarianism. The circulated gospels beam with stories, parables, and commandments, which are sources of a humanist ethical literature from which every religion, [every] ethical and rational person can derive and learn. Yet, all this slips away in the throng of limited doctrinal conflicts.[62]

61 Fatḥī ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ fī al-Anājīl al-Arbaʿah* [With Christ in the Four Gospels] (2d ed,: Cairo: al-Dār al-Qaūmiyyah lil-Ṭibāʿah wal-Nashr, 1966), 8.

62 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 17.

For ʿUthmān, when one casts aside the doctrinal discrepancies, one would concur with his realization that, in Christian teachings, there are many lessons which other religions similarly embrace and can benefit from in general.[63] Be that as it may, ʿUthmān opts for presenting a study of the Christ of the gospels in order to persuade Muslims that the circulated New Testament does not merely contain what they reject. It also demonstrates that what the Muslims refute needs to be reconsidered, reexamined, and reassessed, so that if they happen to reject something in Christianity, their stance would be founded on reliable knowledge.[64] ʿUthmān immediately points out, nevertheless, that his endeavor to develop a positive rationale based on scientific comparative study of religions does not at all endorse a trivial, shallow, and artificial concurrence and harmony between Christianity and Islam. ʿUthmān concedes the impossibility of reconciling the Qur'ān's faith with what he calls "the Pauline faith" (the Christian belief discourse that was allegedly conjured by Paul the Apostle), which is rooted in a belief in the Trinity, crucifixion, and atonement (*al-diyānah al-Būlusiyyah al-mabniyyah ʿalā anna al-thālūth wāḥid ḥaqīqah wa-ʿalā ʿaqīdat al-ṣalb wal-fidāʾ*).[65] The comparison he endorses is one that maintains the distinction between Islam and Christianity and discerns their differences as much as their commonalities. ʿUthmān believes that he can successfully achieve the comparative task by means of distinguishing the gospels' attestations from the extra-biblical, philosophical interpretations and hermeneutics (*al-shurūḥ wal-taʾwīlāt al-falsafiyyah*) as well as the churchly traditions (*al-taqālīd al-kanasiyyah*).[66]

According to ʿUthmān, the threat with which the modernist rationalist reasoning challenged Christianity in his time stemmed from the school of "Higher Criticism" (*al-naqd al-aʿlā*), i.e., historical criticism, and its deconstructive skepticism towards the Christian Bible. This criticism damaged the authenticity of the Scripture by fiercely attacking the Biblical story's truth and historicity. For ʿUthmān, the best method for studying Christianity without becoming a victim of the difficulties and dangers of Higher Criticism is to cling to the circulated gospels and to rely on studying their content.[67] This is what ʿUthmān himself strictly abides by in his speech on Christ and Christianity. He clings to this option, as he states, because he wants to speak about Christianity in its followers' terms (*ʾurīd an ataḥaddath*

63 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 18.
64 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 20.
65 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 21.
66 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 22.
67 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 24.

ʿan al-Masīḥiyyah min wijhat naẓar ahlihā), and he wants to demonstrate to the Muslims and the Christians alike that the discrepancies are too narrow to prevent the followers of one faith from relating to the followers of the other and that the gospels take both communities towards common ethical ground far beyond the limited dogmatic controversies.[68]

ʿUthmān's study of the gospels and the history of Jesus's life inform him that Christ was born in Palestine, and he addressed his mission to the people of Israel (*īlā hadhā al-shaʿb kānat risālat al-Masīḥ*).[69] Yet, ʿUthmān realized that Christ's message was not embraced by the religious sects of his people: All the Jewish sects conspired against Christ and his teachings (*wa-qad taʾāmarat aṭ-ṭawāʾif al-yahūdiyyah jamīʿahā ḍid al-Masīḥ wa-taʿālīmih*).[70] Their leaders have endeavored to arouse the suspicions of the Roman authorities against him; this consequently drove the Roman governor and his military force to conduct a tribunal and exert punishment on Jesus.[71] Despite ʿUthmān's commitment to the Islamic negation of Christ's crucifixion, he still pauses at the gospel's stories on the crucifixion of Christ, something his Egyptian compatriot, al-ʿAqqād, principally evades and passes over silently, as we saw earlier. ʿUthmān looks at the different gospel narratives on the trial, torture, and crucifixion itself, and he concludes that, historically speaking, this incident *did take place*. He, nevertheless, relates that the event seems to have been treated as merely an internal, local affair that caught no Roman ruler's attention outside Jerusalem. Thus, Pontius Pilate treated it instantaneously without consulting the authorities in Rome, relying solely on the judgment of Jesus' Jewish accusers.[72] For ʿUthmān, the gospels invite the reader to appreciate the Roman juridical and tribunal procedures that granted the convict fair trial, blaming, eventually, Jews for Christ's fate and holding them accountable for his death. Ultimately, then, while ʿUthmān concedes that the crucifixion is a factual historical event, he still confirms that it has no doctrinal, theological implications expressive of the Christian doctrine of atonement or salvation.

What ʿUthmān gleans essentially from the gospels' attestations is that the historical Jesus, prescinding from the issue of his divinity and humanity, was a unique religious messenger. This is how he is also seen in Islam: The Messiah is a messenger God sent to convey a specific message (*al-Masīḥ*

68 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 26–27.
69 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 59.
70 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 73.
71 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 76–77.
72 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 77.

rasūl…arsalahu Allah li-yuballigh risālah biʿaynīhā).[73] ʿUthmān here discloses his impressive learnedness about the major Western scholarly studies of the First Quest of the Historical Jesus's claims and theses. He expresses, for instance, his familiarity with the literature of Herman Reimarus, Johann Gottfried Herder, Heinrich Paulus, David Strauss, Ferdinand Christian Bour, J. M. Robertson, and others.[74] According to ʿUthmān, such scholarship is serious and hardly ignorable. However, he personally leans towards other approaches that rely on ancient historians, like Josephus, Plinius, Suetonius, Julius Africanus, and others. He deems the attestations of these ancient authors as equally reliable and convenient to testify to the plausibility of the gospels' accounts.[75] After all, ʿUthmān states, Jesus's genius and individuation lie not in *what* he said or did, but basically in *why* did he say and do it (*laysa fī madhā, wa-lakin fī limādhā*).[76] This "why-ness" foundation drives us to conclude, ʿUthmān suggests, that Christ existed historically and had a unique personality, which establishes the posterior continuation of his message after his ascension (*risālatahu qad istamarrat baʿda rafʿih*).[77]

Now, by pointing to the continuity of Jesus's message in the ensuing centuries, ʿUthmān implies that the gospels were not the products of Christ's pen and that they were written after his departure: "Christ conversed and did not record. The first Christians preferred listening over reading. Yet, the believers scattered all over, and the Greek and others who affiliated to the new religion did not understand Aramaic. Thus, recording became inevitable…and the four gospels originated from this."[78] The gospels, therefore, are just a "collection of memoirs, events, and conversations that were stored in the minds of the first disciples. They were not arranged after specific chronological order. Furthermore, the earliest Christians did not own any written biography that chronologically narrates the event of Christ's *vitae*."[79] This notwithstanding, ʿUthmān vouches for the gospels' authenticity by relating that the discrepancies among the gospels' texts are merely minor in extent and particularities. The three synoptic gospels incredibly concur and display harmonious depictions of Christ (*tattafiq ītifāqan ʿajīban wa-taʿruḍ fī majmūʿihā ṣūrah munassaqah lil-Masīḥ*).[80]

73 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 99.
74 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 100–101.
75 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 101ff.
76 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 103.
77 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 107.
78 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 110–111.
79 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 114.
80 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 120.

Eventually, ʿUthmān concedes that the gospels can validly be treated as "objective signs with great importance for disclosing the personality of the Lord Jesus Christ." The credibility of these signs ultimately lies in the fact that they respond to the expectations and requirements of their historical context: Christ is a true historical figure because he uniquely related to his era in accordance with its expectations and understanding.[81] This is sufficient to demonstrate the uniqueness and authenticity of Jesus's historical reality without any necessary need for miracles and wonders to verify this truth. Jesus's prophetic authenticity does not require miraculous evidence to espouse for it. And, if such miracles existed, they are just means for testifying to the more fundamental fact of the prophet's credibility. They should not become an end by themselves.[82]

Be all the above as it may, the Christ of the gospels is the same one whom the Muslims deem a prophet and the Qur'ān calls *ʿĪsā b. Maryam*. This means he is an extraordinary person scented with "whiffs from God's Spirit" (*nafaḥāt min rūḥ Allah*). This is the very same Jesus the Muslims read about in their Qur'ān as God's "*kalimah wa rūḥ minhu*," thus, whenever Jesus is mentioned, they always praise him and pray for God's peace to be upon him. Muslims, therefore, are more approximate in kinship to the Christians than those skeptics—Christians and non-Christians—who question, even deny, the historical reality of Christ and who cast doubts on the historical reliability of the gospels.[83] Even if Muslims argue that Christianity was falsified and twisted by foreign ideas imposed on it after Jesus's time, they do not do this to attack Christ's, the gospels', or Christianity's historicity. They just echo what other major Christian philosophers said once before them.[84] Christians themselves concede that the doctrinal versions of Christianity are the synthetic outcome of the intermarriage of Jewish dogma and Greek philosophy, which culminated in the creation of the doctrine of the Trinity, according to ʿUthmān.[85] Finally, ʿUthmān acknowledges that, opposite to Muslims' veneration of Christ as one of God's prophets, Christians cannot tender a similar veneration to the Prophet Muhammad. This notwithstanding, such shortcoming, he confirms, must never warrant any intellectual, psychological, or social binary between Muslims and

81 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 143.

82 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 205.

83 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 417.

84 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 419ff. ʿUthmān pauses here at the English philosopher, Bertrand Russell.

85 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 423.

Christians.[86] Both communities must concede that the discrepancies about prophets and the meticulous examination of their personalities and messages are always incumbent.[87]

In ʿUthmān's book, we have another Muslim scholar approaching the historical Jesus from a perspective orbiting around binary and dialectical connectedness. Yet, instead of building upon this binary (like Raḥbānī) or re-directing its track (like al-ʿAqqād), ʿUthmān endeavors to demonstrate the possible overcoming of such binary in relation to Jesus Christ. Christ's historical reality proves, instead, that any presumed dialectical binary between Christianity and Islam on the basis of Jesus's reality is pre-conceived and pre-imposed, rather than deduced or demonstrated.

Who Was Jesus? Or, Mixing Scholarship with Conspiracy

When Ībrāhīm Raḥbānī paused to consider the historical Jesus and the gospels' narratives, the Arab Middle East in general, and Palestine in particular, had not yet experienced the creation of the Arab States or the State of Israel. When ʿAbbās al-ʿAqqād and Fatḥī ʿUthmān did likewise, conflict between the Arab States and the newly established State of Israel (1948) had not yet produced what is known among Arabs as *Naksat 67* (the Failure of 1967) and among Israelis as "the Six Days War"—wherein Israel defeated the armies of Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. Hence, none of these three Arab authors composed his book on Jesus and Christianity influenced or driven by any attempt at implementing the discourse on Christ in the service of any evident exposition of political conspiracy or a defense of any ideological or pan-nationalist agenda. They approached Jesus Christ's life and ministry and the notional, critical, and historical inquiries about him from genuine scholarly, intellectual, and culture-oriented perspectives. They did not try to insert political and ideological connotations into their reading of Jesus's Jewish background or into his background as a Jew from Palestine.

For the fourth and final monograph on Jesus that I present in this essay, the situation was different. It was written at a time and in a political context when Arabs were deeply torn apart by their historical defeats by Israel. They had to find a way to explain the presence of the Israeli State in the holy land of Jesus, Palestine, and the catastrophic life-conditions the Palestinians were facing due to this establishment. Jesus' Jewish identity and the relatedness

86 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 440.

87 ʿUthmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ,* 441.

of Judaism to the land of Palestine became sources of disturbance and embarrassment for the Christians in the Arab Middle East. It was in such a background that the fourth text of this study was produced.

The fourth author whose book on Jesus I want to bring to the reader's attention is the late Lebanese historian, Kamāl Ṣalībī (1929–2011). This Lebanese Protestant scholar wrote various books related to the historical origin of Lebanon, Palestine, and Arabia, and also the Bible, Judaism, and Christianity. Haunted by a staunch pan-Arabist ideological stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Ṣalībī tried resiliently to prove that the Torah, the Gospel, the people of Israel, Jesus of Nazareth, and earliest Christianity all historically hailed from the geographical context of the northeastern territories of the Arab Peninsula (*Ḥijāz*, *Najrān*, and *ʿAsīr*), and they have never truly originated from the historical land of Palestine. This was Ṣalībī's methodological strategy for withstanding and countering the existence of the State of Israel in Palestine and the Jews' claim of it as a land promised to them by God. He wanted to deconstruct the foundations of this State and its theological, Biblical, and religious premises, especially the idea of "the promised land" and the Biblical messianic and covenantal promises. Ṣalībī's strife for demolishing these foundations centered on the thesis that Palestine is not the promised land for the Jews because Judaism and its Biblical history and belief are all rooted locationally in Arabia and never in the historical land called Palestine. The Jews of today's Israel are European and non-Semitic in origin, so they are not the descendants of the Biblical Jews who actually came from the Arab Peninsula.[88]

In 1988, Ṣalībī produced a book titled, *Conspiracy in Jerusalem: The Hidden Origin of Jesus*. This book appeared in a reprint in 1998, this time with the title *Who Was Jesus? A Conspiracy in Jerusalem*. The change in the preconceptual orientations of the author manifests in the development one spots in titling the book: from an early title delineating an inquiry on Jesus's identity into one that presumes head-on this identity's hiddenness. At any rate, both titles equally reveal the author's frankly predetermined conviction that Jesus's

88 I have studied Ṣalībī's thesis and unpacked its ideological background elsewhere. See Najib George Awad, "Is Christianity from Arabia? Examining Two Contemporary Arabic Proposals on Christianity in the Pre-Islamic Period," in *Orientalische Christen und Europa: Kulturbegegnung Zwischen Interferenz, Partizipation und Antizipation* (ed. Marin Tamcke: Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2012), 33–58. For Ṣalībī's thesis, see Kamal Salibi, *The Torah Came from Arabia* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985); and K. Salibi, *Al-Baḥth ʿan Yasūʿ: Qirāʾah Jadīdah fī al-Anājīl* [In Search for Jesus: A New Reading in the Gospels], (Amman: Dār al-Shurūq, 1999). And, for a criticism of Ṣalībī's thesis, see Frederic Gangloff, "Did the Bible Come from Arabia? A Review Article," in *Theological Review* 29, no. 2 (1998): 134– 59.

historical identity and origin are victims of serious historical conspiracy. The implicit political and ideological connotations of Ṣalībī's promotion of a conspiracy theory regarding Christ is hard to be missed by the careful reader of his claims, whether in this book or in his other writings. So much so that, in this text, as we will see, Jesus's personhood, life, and Gospel message are fully shrouded with plot-centered mystery and fully soaked in deliberate fabrications.

In his book, *Who Was Jesus?,* Ṣalībī states clearly the goal behind his decision to pursue historical-critical inquiry on Jesus. He initially acknowledges the scholarly efforts that have already been made by the scholars of the Quest of the Historical Jesus towards achieving the same purpose. Yet, he notices (wrongly, in fact) that the search for the historical Jesus mistakenly restricts its investigation to the canonical, churchly scriptural sources: "The search for the historical Jesus has so far been dependent almost entirely on the canonical Gospels—none of which is an eye-witness account—and on the occasional references made by Paul."[89] According to Ṣalībī, the Biblical testimonies of the Gospels and the Pauline literature merely demonstrate that Jesus did historically exist and that Paul has personally altercated with his biological brother, James, and his companion Peter in Jerusalem, shortly after Jesus's death. Beyond that, the Bible does not offer any data that pertain to answering the following, outstandingly problematic inquiries: "Who was the historical Jesus? Where did he come from? What was the actual nature of his public career? What made his followers accept him as the Messiah, or Christ, whose coming was prophesied in the Israelite scriptures?"[90] Ṣalībī adds to these basic historiological inquiries other questions that reflect no other than his own, pre-tailored conspiratorial reading of Jesus's life and ministry, which is the reading Ṣalībī actually offers as his book's main thesis:

89 Kamal Salibi, *Who Was Jesus? A Conspiracy in Jerusalem*, (London & New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998), 10. Those who are learned in the scholarship of the First, Second and Third Quests of the Historical Jesus would instantly recognize the falsehood of Ṣalībī's claim. The scholarship on this Quest does not depend almost entirely on the Biblical texts. It rather methodologically and historiographically criticizes the total, sole reliance on these canonical textual attestations, and it calls for consulting and searching for extra-Biblical and extra-textual data.

90 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?,* 13–14. All these inquiries are classical inquiries in the realm of the Quest of the Historical Jesus scholarship, and scholars seek extra-Biblical data and sources to answer them. (See literature I mentioned in an earlier footnote above.) Ṣalībī is either ignorant of this scholarship, or he deliberately demeans it in order to ascribe originality and presidency to himself.

> Was the historical Jesus no mere religious preacher, but a man of political ambitions, claiming a hereditary right to the last throne of David? Did his brother James in Jerusalem consider himself, in some way, to be his dynastic successor? Did Paul oppose James and slur over the details of the historical career of Jesus, playing down the question of his Davidic descent and emphasizing his transcendental Christhood instead, because of an inherited Benjaminite distaste for what may have been the dynastic pretensions of the two men as scions of the royal house of Judah?[91]

Although Ṣalībī jots down these points in an inquiry-like style, his text bluntly reveals that his stance on them is not interrogative or examinational at all. Ṣalībī never treats them as questions for which he searches objectively for answers. He, rather, takes them as axiomatic, self-evident preconceptions. He subjectively departs from them as preconceived truths; then he constructs an entire conspiracy-centered binary upon them.

Ṣalībī's prefabricated narrative of the historical Jesus circles around the following prejudicial conviction: In history, we had the real Jesus who was born in Arabia and who became the ancestral king of the Israeli inhabitants of the Arab Peninsula. At one point, this Jesus and his followers moved up to Jerusalem to claim his Jewish monarchical status, and he ended up crucified there. Furthermore, we have Christ's personality which was invented by a man called Paul (from Damascus), who conjured around the Jesus of Arabia a story of a metaphysical savior (not an earthly ruler) coming for the gentiles (not for the Jews), whose identity is shaped after Hellenic, not Arabian-Semitic, cultural imagination. The early history of Christianity, according to Ṣalībī, is nothing but a saga of a ferocious strife between Paul and Christ's story, on one hand, and James, the brother of the Arabian Jesus, and Peter, who tried to continue Jesus's legacy and be his heirs in rulership over the Israelite followers, on the other. Based on this prolegomenon, Ṣalībī argues that the more authentic method for understanding the Arabian Jesus and his Israelite followers is to compare their lives and group dynamics with ones that are known and practiced in their original homeland, Arabia, and by means of looking at the Arabian Muslim societies and how the Muslims live to this day.[92]

91 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?,* 19.

92 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?,* 20. He writes: "At the time when the followers of Jesus first emerged as an Israelite sect under the Jerusalem apostles, it appears that the Israelites had their own sharifs and sayyids, as the Muslims do to this day" (20).

For Ṣalībī, it is evident (how so, one wonders!) that those who met Jesus and his followers in Jerusalem upon their arrival from Arabia acknowledged him as the king of Israel, as the "Son of David." Therefore, upon his death, they searched for continuing his mission by circling around the second royal figure in the "Son of David" dynasty, Jesus's brother James.[93] According to Ṣalībī, this was a scenario the Damascene Paul never endorsed, as he went to create his own discourse on Jesus, not as the royal descendent of David who is promised to rule the Israelites, but as a universal, transcendental, and theologized Christ, who is now holding a cosmic, salvific, spiritual message to the gentiles. What we have then is a conflictual binary between James', Jewish-centered call for following the Jesus of Arabia, the king of Israel, over and against Paul's, gentile-focused call for following Christ the Hellenic, the savior of the world.

Ṣalībī knows very well that all the serious scholars in the Quest of the Historical Jesus's arena confirm plainly that "not much is actually known about the identity of the historical Jesus and the nature of his mission," and he personally inescapably confesses as much. However, instead of taking this conviction on board, he casts it out of the scene altogether, resorting frankly to an attempt to construct knowledge based on lack of certainty. Based on such uncertainty, he proposes a conspiracy conjured by Paul the apostle and his plan to forge his own private *curriculum vitae* of Jesus as the Christ. This conspiracy starts with Paul's decision to travel to Arabia, not to go to Jerusalem. Now, of course, for Ṣalībī, Paul did not sojourn to the Bedouin territories of *Bilād ash-Shām* (one of the nomenclatures of Syria), which used to also be called "Arabia" (*al-ʿArabiyyah*).[94] He went, instead, to the Arab Peninsula to chase after the story of the true Jesus and his Israelite followers. As can one expect, Ṣalībī uses the story of Paul's journey to this "Arabia" in the service of his tailored conspiracy:

> Why did Paul, having experienced his revelation of Jesus as the Son of God, decide to go *at once* to Arabia instead of Jerusalem, although he was fully aware that the apostles who had known Jesus were in Jerusalem? Second, why did the book of Acts omit all reference to

93 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?*, 20–21.

94 On Paul's mentioned journey and to which "Arabia," see N. G. Awad, "Is Christianity from Arabia?", 34–37; J. Murphy-O'Connor, "Paul in Arabia," in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (1993): 732–37; N. T. Wright, "Paul, Arabia and Elijah (Galatians 1: 17)," in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115, no. 4 (1996): 683–92; and E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 BC–AD 135)*, Vol. 1, G Vermes and F. Miller, trans. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), 574–86.

> Paul's Arabian visit, although Paul himself appears to have regarded it as highly important, since he decided to go immediately after his conversion? Third, why does Paul nowhere explain exactly why he went to Arabia – at least nowhere in his available writings?[95]

Paul, according to Ṣalībī, certainly ended up in a territory beyond "Roman Arabia," going down either to *Ḥijāz* or even to Yemen in the Peninsula.[96] He went there searching for "the special Israelite theology or cult which was preached in Arabia, and from which the mission of Jesus and the apostles derived."[97] By chasing after this secretive source, Paul wanted to bring back with him to Jerusalem tools "to silence Peter, who was an influential apostle, and so withdraw him from the ranks of the open opposition to his own preaching."[98]

In the ensuing chapters of his book, Ṣalībī adds extra details to his scenario by unfolding a full-scale conspiracy about Jesus's history. He eisegetically looks at, and employs, New Testamental and extra-Biblical textual attestations related to Jesus, like the accounts of Eusebius of Caesarea and Hegesipus. From such accounts, Ṣalībī concludes that the career of Jesus had a political, not primarily a religious, nature.[99] He does not even suffice with unreservedly treating these texts as sheer historical, political materials on the existence of a man called "Jeshua," who was the son of a Roman soldier called "Pantera/Pandera."[100] He even goes so far as to use the Muslim Qur'ānic materials as *historical* documentation coming from Jesus's homeland, and recruit them as evidence that Jesus hailed from the Peninsula: "It is therefore far more reasonable to assume that the Qur'ān spoke of Jesus as *ʿĪsā*, not as Jeshuah, because there was actually a 'Jesus' revered in Arabia, certainly until the seventh century AD."[101]

Ṣalībī then proceeds to argue that, despite the fact that the Qur'ān does not divulge the place and date of *ʿĪsā's* mission, it, nevertheless, "gives the general impression that, as a latter-day prophet to Israel, he was active in the same environment where Islam was born, i.e., in Western Arabia," before Ṣalībī afterwards adds that there are indications "that Christianity… originated in Arabia rather than Palestine…that Christianity should have

95 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?,* 27.
96 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?,* 28.
97 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?,* 29–30.
98 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?,* 31.
99 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?,* 41.
100 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?,* 42.
101 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?,* 49.

originated in Arabia before making a fresh start and assuming a new form in Palestine is not implausible."[102]

Ṣalībī does not make any effort to explain to us why such scenario is "more reasonable" than others. His justification or advocation of such claimed reasonability stands merely on his sheer personal, subjective, and totally anticipated presumption that such a scenario is "not implausible." Ṣalībī simply constructs, and adamantly imposes, a circular argument, namely that the Arabian origin of Jesus and Christianity is authentic because, according to him, it is not fabricated and it is an internally consistent postulation.[103] What does this allegedly "authentic" and "consistent" scenario relate? According to Ṣalībī, it states the following:

> Apparently, there was a Christianity in Arabia…which was several centuries older than the one which relates to the historical Jesus of the gospels; a primordial Christianity which survived on its original home ground certainly until the coming of Islam. The Qur'ān assumes it to be the true Christianity, and asserts that its founder, *Īsā b. Maryam*, was the true Jesus who did not die on the cross. Furthermore, the Qur'ān implicitly recognizes the existence of another brand of Christianity—allegedly a false one—whose followers, in grave error, worshiped the same "Jesus" as a god, maintaining that he was actually crucified. This claim is roundly dismissed in the Qur'ān as a delusion.[104]

Ṣalībī affirms that his (rather highly questionable) reading of the Qur'ānic attestations, let alone his treatment of religious texts, is "safe" epistemologically. Yet, he cannot care less to offer us any objectively scientific evidence or foundation for such claimed safety other than his personal, subjective appraisal, simply confirming that the real historical Jesus is the Arabian *Īsā b. Maryam* of the Qur'ān and no other, and Christians are the Arabian Israelite followers of this *Īsā*, whom the Qur'ān calls "Nazarenes." (Ṣalībī ignores the fact that, in the Arabic of the Qur'ān, the term used for Christians is "*Naṣāra*" and not "Nāṣiriyyūn." The latter might be translated into "Nazarenes." Etymologically, the former does not.)

What Ṣalībī's scheme represents is another Arab Middle Eastern scholar relying on a dialectical binary method of reasoning to recreate a discourse

102 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?,* 53.

103 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?,* 58.

104 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?,* 58.

on Jesus and Christianity in the service of a particular scheme shaped after a premeditated *Weltanschuung*. For Ṣalībī, Jesus and Christianity are Arab Peninsulan realities and nothing else, placed in a long historical clash with a false Hellenic story on Jesus the savior that was conjured upon a conspiracy orchestrated by a man from Damascus called Paul. Why should this scenario be the case and how can one prove it to be so historically? Ṣalībī's only answer to this question is simply stipulating without any further ado that "there is certainly no proof to the contrary."[105] He merely states this conclusion without paying any attention to the fact that there is equally no proof that this is the true case either.

Some Concluding Insights

In his analysis of identity formation in a German essay on "Systems Theory" in 1990, Niklas Luhmann relates that "operating with dualities or with 'binary codes' appears as a 'method of recognition; or as a 'condition of self-identification', and it thus appears as a means of protecting identity… Dualities would be important only for the question of how a society, or part of one, can observe and describe itself."[106] Referring to Luhmann's view, the theologian Gerhard Sauter comments that such binary thinking makes any identity-formation process "irrelevant for the knowledge of truth."[107] In today's postcolonial studies, this epistemologically criticized binary is classically deemed one of the unforgivable sins of colonial reasoning and discourses, and more crucially one of the constitutive characteristics of conventional Euro-American Orientalism. The Orientalists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were believed to have also invested to an excessive extent in all sorts of "binary codes" and used them as dualist "methods of recognition" to create stark, almost unbridgeable contrast between the "Orient" and the "Occident," let alone using this binary (at least as postcolonialism argues) to hegemonize and colonize the Orient intellectually.

105 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?,* 90.

106 Niklas Luhmann, "Identität—Was und Wie?" in *L'argomento Ontologico*, Marco M. Olivetti, ed., *Archivio di Filosofia* 58, nos. 1–3 (1990): 579–96, 585, 591–93.

107 Gerhard Sauter, "Argue Theologically with One Another: Karl Barth's Argument with Emil Brunner," in *Theology as Conversation: The Significance of Dialogue in Historical and Contemporary Theology; A Festschverift for Daniel Migliore* (ed. Bruce L. McCormack and Kimlyn J. Bender: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 30–47 at 43.

We actually have lesser studies on the fact that such a binary methodology was not something that just the so-called "colonizers" instrumentalized; nor did they alone have a stance on such instrumentalization. There is also almost equal implementation of, and a stance on, binary methods one can detect among the deemed "colonized" as well. This paper showed that examples of this can be found among authors from the context of the Arab Middle East. It pursued this by visiting four particular Arab Middle Eastern, Muslim and Christian authors who developed discourses on the historical Jesus that are reflective of stances on binary, historical-criticism in relation to the cultural, anthropological, and sociological perspectives of the Oriental context. We found two Christian and two Muslim authors writing on Jesus Christ's history and historicity from the angle of an interest in developing a discourse on the religious and interreligious situations of the Orient that is rooted in an epistemological binary.

In the Arab intellectual sphere, there is a general skepticism towards, if not total rejection of, the conclusions, hermeneutic strategies, and reading-games of the historical-critical inquiry on the historical truth of religious belief and its constitutive components (the reality of the human founder and the reality of the founding text). As a scholar hailing from the Arab Middle East, I had always thought that the Middle East would not witness the birth of an Arab Christian author who is Albert Schweitzer-like[108] or an Arab Muslim Tor Andrae-like.[109] Yet, the four authors I presented in this essay prove me wrong. The four of them courageously develop a discourse on Jesus from a "Quest of the Historical Jesus" perspectives that are similar in orientation, hermeneutical leanings, and methodological trends to what one reads in the classical texts of Schweitzer and Andre. Noticeable, of course, is the fact that the four authors pursue this historical inquiry in relation to Jesus Christ, but not in relation to the Prophet Muhammad. It would be interesting to investigate whether one can find, in the modern Arab intellectual context, Muslim authors who might like to compose discourses on the Prophet Muhammad from a frank attention to the "Quest of the Historical Muhammad" scholarship. Such a niche would definitely merit a separate, fully-fledged study by itself.

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108 Albert Schweitzer, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, (Tübingen: Verlag von J. B. Mohr [Siebeck], 1906). In English, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, W. Montgomery, trans. (Cambridge: Adam Charles and Black, 1911).

109 Tor Andrae, *Mohammad: The Man and His Faith*, Theophil Menzel, trans. (New York: Harper Torchbooks/Harper & Row Publishers, 1960).

To come back to this essay, in their implementation of the "Quest of the Historical Jesus" scholarship, each one of these four authors reflects a particular stance on binary thinking that is distinguished from the others. The earliest author we looked at is the Christian, Syrian Ībrāhīm Raḥbānī. In his text, we saw that he constructs a binary in terms of *degree* between the Oriental and Occidental cultures. He seems to have adopted fully the comparativist essentializing mentality of Western Orientalism, despite his insistence that he departs from a moral principle grounded in equality. Jesus's and the Biblical cultural background are used to demonstrate that the Orient's cultural identity is not just totally different from the one of the Occident, but also of lesser quality.

The second author we looked at is the Muslim Egyptian, ʿAbbās al-ʿAqqād. He also invests in binary dialectical logic in his arguments on the historical Jesus. Yet, different from al-Raḥbānī, he does not use Jesus's example to argue for any degree of difference between Jesus and other prophets or between Christianity and Islam, for instance. Far from this, he reflects a binary in terms of *uniqueness*. He uses it to demonstrate that Jesus is distinguished in his genius from other prophets and messengers who came before him. The binary is not a criterion of essentialization or hierarchical comparison; it is rather an expression of individuation and particularity.

The third author we visited was also a Muslim from Egypt, called Fatḥī ʿUthmān. In his text on the historical Jesus, we see someone trying to *overcome* any possible presumption of a binary between Christianity and Islam. Jesus's historical identity and story become evidence of his proximity, even affinity, to the understanding of prophecy and religious calls in other faiths, especially Islam. We have here a discourse against making a binary a tool in the service of imposing dialectical contrariety with the different other. Jesus's historical personality is a case-in-hand against a binary and its essentializing and leveling consequences.

Finally, we visited the text of the Lebanese Protestant Kamāl Ṣalībī on the historical Jesus. In this text, we encounter an Arab Middle Eastern author who wholeheartedly adopts a dialectic binary and binary codes in the service of a premeditated conspiracy based on a frank belief in antagonism and contrariety. He promotes a from-within binary between the Historical Jesus of Israel who came from Arabia and the Hellenic Christ of Paul who is said to come from Palestine. Here, the binary is neither merely used in terms of degree, nor in terms of uniqueness, nor still meant to be overcome. The binary is here *confirmed* and *preconceived* as the foundation of a thesis grounded in conspiracy.

What these four examples reveal before us is that, contrary to what might be conventionally imagined, there have been Arab Middle Eastern authors who courageously embraced the historical-criticism school of reasoning and invested in it in writing about the historical Jesus. Their discourses merit attention by the scholars who are keen on studying and understanding non-Euroamerican Christology and interreligious reading-games in the Arab Middle Eastern context. We have here cases of Christian and Muslim takes on Jesus Christ that tackle him and his story from an explicit implementation of binary codes as methods of recognition in historical-critical hermeneutics. What is interestingly noteworthy is that while the two Christian authors seem to be using the historical quest on Jesus Christ in the service of their premeditated perception of reality and their privative binary agendas, the two Muslim authors seem to be seriously trying to emancipate the historical inquiry on Jesus's story from any premeditated antagonistic binary perception of reality and prejudicial dialectical preconceptions. In this sense, the Muslims manifest sincere and genuinely interreligious and dialogical stances on Jesus, in contradistinction to their two Christian compatriots. The Muslim authors seem to be more charitable, objective, and unbiased in their stance on Jesus than the Christians; something the Arab Middle East of today can learn profoundly valuable lessons from for overcoming binary approaches and codes in the context of Christian-Muslim, Jewish-Muslim, and Muslim-Muslim co-existence.

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ARTICLE

The Logic of Religion? A Critique of Hans Küng's Philosophy of the Dialogue of Religions

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Abstract
This essay offers a critique of the theoretical framework used by Hans Küng for extrapolating the essence of the Abrahamic faiths. It then presents an alternative approach which allows for an inductive examination of what might be described as the inner logic of a religious tradition. Grounded in an Aristotelean philosophical principle, "epistemic fit," it presupposes that religious traditions possess an intrinsic logic which can be brought to the surface in order to exhibit parallels between them. Thus, following a critique of Küng, the paper probes how this Aristotelean principle might be applied to the dialogue of religions, illustrating the value of this approach by contrasting it with the conceptual apparatus utilized by Küng in his search for a global ethic.

Keywords
Hans Küng, philosophy of religion, interreligious dialogue, epistemic fit, William Abraham

The Logic of Religion?

The very idea that religions possess an inner logic is highly contested. Indeed, in what might be described as a postmodern trend in religious

studies, the very category of religion has been called into question.[1] This renders Hans Küng's attempt to isolate a common "essence" within the various religions hugely problematic. Moreover, his conflation of divergent philosophical apparatus, a curious mixture of Georg Hegel and Thomas Kuhn (renowned for his postmodern challenge to the master narrative of modern science), makes his project unworkable.[2] Nevertheless, the question of interreligious dialogue was a major concern for Küng during his lifetime. In fact, his pivotal role in the formation of the Global Ethic foundation was grounded in his desire to foster world peace by uniting the globe around principles on which all people can agree, work that continues up to this day in *Projekt Weltethos*.[3] However, while Küng struggled to locate an essence within Christianity and various other religions, contemporary religious studies is averse to essentialism.[4]

A paradigmatic example of this trend in religious studies is Timothy Fitzgerald, for whom the very category of religion, let alone the attempt to locate the essence of a religious tradition, is misguided:

> The discipline of religious studies has been historically constructed around a highly unstable and contested category "religion"…

1 Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3–4; Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago, IL: University Press, 2005); Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993); Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982). For further discussion see: Johannes Wolfart, "Postmodernism," in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. R. McCutcheon and W. Braun (London: Continuum, 2009), 380–96.

2 See Thomas Nickles, *Thomas Kuhn* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003), 4–5.

3 Identifying themes, such as the "Golden Rule of Reciprocity," the objective of *Projekt Weltethos* is captured in the following extract from their website: "For a better world we need a common ground. Common values on which we agree. Only then can we enter into constructive dialogue and shape the world together. The good news is that this already exists. Across all religions, cultures and philosophies, there are principles that recur time and again…In 1990, the internationally renowned theologian Hans Küng derived basic values from the discovery of this greatest common denominator and collectively referred to them as a *Weltethos* or Global Ethic. They are a common basis for dialogue and sustainable development, both in smaller groups and in relation to the global community." For further discussion see: "About Weltethos" https://projektweltethos.de/en/about-weltethos/.

4 For further discussion see Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: University Press, 2000).

> researched and described as though it is a transparent notion, based on commonsense observable reality, universally applicable, a word and an idea which unproblematically translates into any language of any culture at any time in human history.[5]

A similar criticism of this category is made by Tomoko Masuzawa, whose work, *The Invention of World Religions,* discusses the manufactured nature of world religious traditions by European intellectuals so as to preserve Christian hegemony.[6] The approach taken by these writers resonates considerably with what has been termed postmodernism.[7] For example, Fitzgerald's attack on "all-encompassing" terminology such as "religion" resembles Jean-Francois Lyotard aversion to metanarratives.[8] Essentially Lyotard argued that, rather than fantasizing about universal forms, if we have rejected metanarratives then what we have fallen back upon are smaller narratives.[9] These little narratives (micronarratives) are limited contexts where "language games" form clear, if not clearly defined, rules for understanding and behavior.[10]

At first glance, Küng's attempt to locate a common foundation for religious belief might be interpreted as being more in line with the spirit of nineteenth-century writers like Ludwig Andreas von Feuerbach (1804–1872) than with postmodern approaches to the study of religion.[11] While Küng's conceptual framework will be dissected below, it is important to stress at the outset that a postmodern epistemological orientation does not prohibit an

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5 Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity,* 3–4.

6 Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 18.

7 Wolfart, "Postmodernism," 391.

8 Shaped considerably by Ludwig Wittgenstein's critique of the idea that there is a correspondence between human language and notions of objective truth these writers argue that different groups in a society regulate their behaviour through rules (grammar) of linguistic conduct. For further discussion see: Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* tr. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Manchester: University Press, 1984), 8, 37; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* tr. G. E. M. Anscombe, et al. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953); Paul Hedges, "Discourse on the Invention of Discourses: Why We Still Need the Terminology of 'Religion' and 'Religions'," *Journal of Religious History* 38, no. 1 (2014): 132–48 at 135.

9 Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 41.

10 Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 10.

11 Ludwig Andreas von Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, tr. M. Evans (New York: Calvin Blanchard, 1855). For further discussion see: Donald Wiebe, "Modernism," in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. R. McCutcheon and W. Braun (London: Continuum, 2009), 351–65.

analysis of the coherence of traditions (religious or otherwise).[12] As Hedges illustrates,[13] while religious traditions may be cultural linguistic constructs, terms like religion may still be used to refer to particular religious traditions or groups who identify as religious:

> We are therefore not faced with the stark dichotomy of either employing an essentialist and *sui generis* concept of "religion" as a Platonic ideal that exists in some generic form across all cultures, or rejecting the very term as an "illusion" of ideological power structures and "a philosophical cul-de-sac." Indeed, if Fitzgerald is right that scholarship has come to a point that shows us that our older usage of "religion" is problematic, one response is that we need to simply improve our definition or definitions of "religion" rather than abandon it altogether.[14]

Hence, it is perfectly possible to accept the critique made by these writers while at the same time allowing for a study of what might be described as the various "grammars" of the plethora of groups identifying as religious.[15] This resonates with what Lyotard refers to as micro narratives—groups within a society who regulate their behavior through different rules of linguistic conduct.[16] These groups might be as small as a Christian house fellowship and as large as a denomination (such as the Methodist church of Great Britain).[17] Nevertheless, charting the contours of a group identifying as religious (large or small) does not require us to adopt a naïve (exclusively

12 For further discussion see: Willard Van Orman Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 20–47; Daniel Pratt Morris-Chapman, *Nonfoundationalism Considered as a Handmaid to Theology* (Burbage: William Wathes and Sons, 2007).

13 Fitzgerald, *The Ideology*, 24; Hedges, "Discourse on the Invention of Discourses," 134.

14 Hedges, "Discourse on the Invention of Discourses," 139.

15 Even Masuzawa acknowledges that the contemporary "reality of world religions" is not solely "of the European academy's making" (Masuzawa, *The Invention of Religion*, xiv). For further discussion, see Hedges, "Discourse on the Invention of Discourses, 132–48; Anna King and Paul Hedges, "Is the Study of Religion Religious? How to Study Religion, and Who Studies Religion?" in Paul Hedges, ed. *Controversies in Contemporary Religion* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014), 31–56.

16 Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 8, 37.

17 However, while accepting the postmodern point that all traditions are shaped by language and culture, the present essay is shaped by a different epistemological orientation.

textual) conception of religion as a "corpus of symbols and meanings."[18] Neither does it require us to ignore the power relations that exist within these groups.[19]

In short, one can accept all these points and explore the particular practices, behaviors, opinions, and rules that constitute a group identifying as religious. One can give assent (should one so choose) to the dogmas of Postmodernism and tranquilly probe the contours of a group identifying as religious even if that group (1) is shaped/constructed by people (western and non-western), (2) has explicit and implicit power relations, (3) is behavioral, oral, or textual in nature, (4) has contested boundaries, and so on.[20] That being said, it must be acknowledged that a postmodern epistemological orientation entails the view that the diverse "grammars" (written and unwritten) upheld by the different groups identifying as religious are necessarily incommensurate.[21] Therefore, rather than assuming the postmodern paradigm as an objective fact, the present paper explores an alternative conceptual framework through which it is possible to compare these groups, denominations, traditions (and so on) and to bring them into dialogue. In this vein, Küng's attempt to compare different religions (using a curious mixture of postmodern and modern epistemologies) offers a useful foil for exploring whether an alternative conceptual approach (epistemic fit) allows for an inductive examination of what might be described as the inner logic of groups identifying as religious.

Therefore, in what follows, this essay critiques the conceptual apparatus used by Küng to excavate what he deems to be the essence of religion before offering an alternative conceptual framework for comparing different groups identifying as religious. Beginning with a general overview of his writings, the essay proceeds to an analysis of the nonfoundational (postmodern) theoretical framework employed by Küng to uncover the "foundation" of the Abrahamic religions. Following a critique of Küng's use of this conceptual apparatus, it concludes with an alternative model by exploring how analytic

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18 James Clifford, "Introduction" in J. Clifford and G. Marcus, eds. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (London: University of California Press, 1986), 18–19

19 Malory Nye, "Religion, Post-Religionism, and Religioning: Religious Studies and Contemporary Cultural Debates." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 12, no. 1–4 (2000): 447–76.

20 For further discussion see: Nye, "Religion, Post-Religionism, and Religioning," 447–76.

21 For further discussion see: Willard Van Orman Quine, Word and Object (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1960).

philosophy, particularly recent work in the epistemology of theology, might be brought to bear on Küng's proposals for interreligious dialogue.

An Introduction to Hans Küng

Küng and the Foundation of Christian Unity

During his lifetime, Hans Küng was driven by a passion to unite different traditions together by excavating what he believed to be their essential components. In his various writings he always attempted to isolate a common understanding which might unite Christians and even those of other religious traditions. The central objective being that of resolving tensions between them. Thus, in his first major work on Christian teachings regarding justification, Küng attempted to show that, essentially, Catholics and Protestants have the same understanding of this doctrine.[22] During Vatican II, Küng continued in this vein, writing a series of publications on the possibility and challenges to Christian unity. In *The Council and Reunion* (1960), he argued that for unity to be achieved the Catholic Church must model itself on Christ.[23] Two years later, in his work *That the World May Believe* (1962), his desire for unity was manifest in his contention that inessential aspects of the Church's teaching should be reformed wherever these act as a barrier to full organic unity.[24] In that same year his *Structures of the Church* (1962) outlined the principle on which these reforms should proceed contending that Christ, who called the Church into being, must be the standard for Christian unity.[25] A similar argument is made in the *Living Church* (1962), wherein he argued that the Ecumenical Council could only make progress if it fulfilled the justified demands of Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans, and Free Churchmen in the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (1963).[26] Throughout the Council, Küng also wrote a number of shorter

22 Karl Barth, "A Letter to the Author," in Hans Küng, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection*, fourth edition, tr. T. Collins, E. Tolk, D. Granskou (London: Burns & Oates, [1957] 1981), xxxix.

23 Hans Küng, *The Council and Reunion*, tr. Cecily Hastings (London: Sheed & Ward, [1960] 1962).

24 Hans Küng, *That the World May Believe* (London: Sheed & Ward, [1962] 1963), 25.

25 Hans Küng, *Structures of the Church*, tr. S. Attanasio (London: Burns & Oates, [1962] 1965), 148.

26 Hans Küng, *The Living Church: Reflections on the Second Vatican Council*, tr. C. Hastings (London: Sheed & Ward, 1963).

works challenging aspects of Catholicism (authoritarianism, clericalism, censorship, and so on) that he felt acted as barriers to unity. [27]

These earlier works got the attention of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF, now the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith), however, it was his publication on *The Church* (1967) that led him into explicit conflict with the Church's hierarchy.[28] Here Küng identified ways in which unity could be achieved following the Council. This work, dedicated to the Archbishop of Canterbury, argued that the Church of England could be in communion with Rome if it recognized a version of the pastoral primacy of Peter.[29] At its heart this work offered an ecumenical doctrine of the Church and placed the Gospel of Jesus Christ "taken as a whole as the 'standard for unity.'" Following this publication, he received a letter from the CDF questioning whether he believed "the Church of Christ…consists of all the churches and ecclesial communities."[30] While under investigation Küng challenged the Church's "institutionalism in his *Truthfulness the Future of the Church* (1968).[31] Küng also began a wide-ranging examination of Papal infallibility, under the title *Infallible? An Inquiry* (1970), following Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Human Vitae* (1968) which prohibited all forms of artificial contraception.[32] This, a most radical work, led to a withdrawal by the Church of his permission to teach. Furthermore, it meant that Küng was no longer viewed as a Catholic writer by many within his Church. This is true even of figures like Karl Rahner (1904–1984), who described Küng as a "protestant."[33]

27 These include reflections on Thomas Moore, entitled *Freedom in the World* (1964); on intellectual freedom, in *The Theologian and the Church* (1964) and *The Church and Freedom* (1964); and on the importance of religious freedom, in *Christian Revelation and World Religions* (1965).

28 United States Catholic Conference, *The Küng Dialogue: A documentation of the efforts of The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and of The Conference of German Bishops to achieve an appropriate clarification of the controversial views of Dr. Hans Küng* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1980), 45.

29 Hans Küng, *The Church*, tr. R. Ockenden (New York: Image Books, [1967] 1976).

30 Hans Küng, *The Church*, 377.

31 In this work, Küng argues that the Church must shed its "institutionalism" and evolve according to the Gospel. Hans Küng, *Truthfulness the Future of the Church*, tr. R. Ockenden (London: Sheed & Ward, 1968), 138.

32 Hans Küng, *Infallible? An Enquiry*, tr. E. Mosbacher (London: Collins, 1971). Pope Paul VI (1897–1978) reigned 1963–1978.

33 Karl Rahner, "A Critique of Hans Küng: Concerning the Infallibility of Theological Propositions," in *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (1971), 10–26 at 13, 20.

Küng and the Foundation of Interreligious Unity

The publication of *Infallible* marks the end of a period of intense focus on reform within the Catholic Church. In these earlier writings, Küng argued that all Catholic reform must occur in accordance with "the same norm, which is the gospel of Jesus Christ."[34] For example, in the *Church,* Küng argued that the Church should be governed by, and have as its criterion, "the Gospel of Jesus Christ."[35] The same principle is operative in Küng's later works. However, while his earlier publications argued for Christian unity around the person of Christ, his later work focused upon interreligious unity, a program which he later styled "The Religious Situation of Our Time" and "No Peace without Religious Peace."[36] This project, sponsored by the Bosch Jubilee foundation, has led to a variety of publications and to the creation of the Global Ethic Foundation (1995).[37] Essentially, in these later works, Küng is writing to help the different religious traditions "engage in dialogue" and attempting to offer a "synthesis of [the] historical and systematic dimensions" of these religions to facilitate greater understanding between the them.[38] His *Paradigm Change in Theology* (1989), *Global Responsibility* (1990), *Judaism: Essence, History and Future* (1991), *Christianity: Essence, History and Future* (1994), and *Islam: Essence, History and Future* (2004) illustrate this overarching desire for the so-called major world religions to find common ground. Hence his trilogy on the three Abrahamic religions has the explicit goal of "reshaping international relations," a "contribution that [he] as a theologian and philosopher engaged in religious dialogue hope[d] to make."[39] This project is grounded in the presupposition that if peace can be achieved between the different religions it will lead to peace among the nations. This is evident in his description of the program in Küng's preface to all the volumes in this trilogy: "No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundations of the religions."[40]

34 Hans Küng, *The Council and Reunion*, 84.

35 Hans Küng, *The Church*, 13.

36 Hans Küng, *Judaism: Essence, History and Future*, tr. J. Bowden (London: Continuum, [1991] 1992), vii.

37 For information on Projekt Weltethos, see: https://projektweltethos.de.

38 Hans Küng, *Islam: Past, Present and Future*, tr. J Bowden (London: Continuum, [2004] 2007), xxvi–xxviii.

39 Küng, *Islam: Past, Present and Future*, xxvi

40 Küng, *Judaism: Essence, History and Future*, vii

In all these works, Küng analyses the history of the Abrahamic religions in the hope that it will enable him to distinguish between the essential and inessential elements of these very different religious traditions.[41] Hence, the analysis of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam divides the history of these religions into "paradigms" and attempts "to give a systematic historical diagnosis" of these great traditions and "offer perspectives on the different options for the future and with them practical and ecumenical approaches towards a resolution of problems."[42] For example, he divides three thousand years of Judaism into the following: (I) Tribal, (II) Kingdom, (III) Theocracy, (IV) Medieval, (V) Modern, and (VI) Postmodern Paradigms.[43] However, what is interesting for our present purposes is not so much the conclusions reached by Küng but the theoretical framework utilized to "investigate the foundations" of these religions.

Küng's Reception of Kuhn's Paradigm Analysis

Küng's use of Thomas Kuhn is intriguing given that the latter became famous for what might be described as a postmodern critique of the grand narrative of modern science.[44] In his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Kuhn analyzed the way in which one scientific theory (paradigm) succeeded another and argued that there can be no objective standards for adjudicating between different paradigms.[45] Kuhn's work resonates considerably with the work of Willard Van Orman Quine's (1908–2000), who argued that there is no foundation for knowledge—that alternative conceptual frameworks may equally well account for the data of experience.[46] The following extract from his "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (1951) is helpful for illustrating the underlying principle operative in these writers:

> The conceptual scheme of science [is] a tool…Physical objects are conceptually imported into the situation as convenient

41 Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (New York: Crossroad) 1991), 2, 123.

42 Küng, *Islam,* xxix

43 Küng, *Judaism,* iv.

44 Nickles, *Thomas Kuhn*, 4–5.

45 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1962] 1975).

46 Quine lectured at Harvard while Kuhn studied there. For further discussion, see: J. Conant and J. Haugeland, eds., *The Road Since Structure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 253–324, at 279.

> intermediaries…as irreducible posits comparable, epistemologically, to the gods of Homer…[I] believe in physical objects and not in Homer's gods…But in point of epistemological footing the physical objects and the gods differ only in degree and not in kind. Both sorts of entities enter our conception only as cultural posits. The myth of physical objects is epistemologically superior…as a device for working a manageable structure into the flux of experience.[47]

The point that Quine is making in the extract above is that, because scientific theories have no objective foundation, no description of reality is more objectively legitimate than any another. Kuhn maintains that a historical study of paradigm change in science reveals very similar characteristics to the choice between "incompatible modes of community life."[48] Like Quine, Kuhn argues that when two conflicting scientific theories are on offer it is not possible to decide between the theories using a neutral objective standard or foundation. He argues that a debate between competing scientific theories cannot appeal to the "facts" because facts themselves are defined differently by different theories. Furthermore, the prevailing science cannot be used because its procedures "depend in part on a particular paradigm and that paradigm is at issue."[49] How then does one decide between two conflicting scientific theories? Kuhn believes that the decision to replace the prevailing scientific paradigm with a newer one (a paradigm shift) is not based upon an objective neutral standard but upon "persuasion," and even "faith."[50]

Incommensurability

Central to Kuhn's thesis is the idea that different paradigms lack an objective common measure. To be precise, he identifies three types of incommensurability.[51] First, he highlights the "incommensurability of standards," given that different scientific theories contain different methods and principles.[52] Thus, he argues that there is no universal abiding standard

47 Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," 44.

48 Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 94.

49 Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 96.

50 Kuhn argues that the person who embraces a new scientific paradigm must do so in "faith that the new paradigm will succeed." Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 158.

51 For further discussion on this point see Alexander Bird, *Thomas Kuhn* (Chesham: Acumen, 2000).

52 Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 149.

for evaluating the validity of a theory.[53] Second, there is what he describes as an "observational incommensurability," resulting from differences in perception.[54] Finally, he emphasizes that it is impossible to semantically commensurate alternative theories because "languages cut up the world in different ways" and "we have no access to a neutral sublinguistic means of reporting."[55] Here Kuhn acknowledges Quine's thesis regarding the difficulties of translation from one language to another.[56] Kuhn thus argues that when the problem of translation is applied to the commensuration of competing theories it results in conceptual incommensurability.[57] Thus, while the words used in different scientific theories might be identical, their physical references are not.[58] In summary, it is clear that for Kuhn a scientific paradigm shift is a change in the language used to describe data. Furthermore, it involves a "reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals, a reconstruction that changes some of the field's most elementary theoretical generalizations…methods and applications."[59] Different paradigms clearly entail different views of the world.[60]

Küng's employment of Kuhn's theoretical framework

At this juncture, it is helpful to illustrate precisely how Küng (mis) applies paradigm theory to religious history. Philosophically, Kuhn is a nonfoundationalist: he does not believe different paradigms are commensurate and rejects the idea that there is a common foundation or essence at the heart of each one. This makes Küng's use of Kuhn problematic, given that, in each of the different volumes in his trilogy on the

53 Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 148–49.

54 Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 150.

55 Thomas Kuhn, "Reflections on my Critics," in *The Road Since Structure,* 123–75, at p.164.

56 Quine discusses an "indeterminacy" when translation occurs and argues that "rival systems of analytical hypotheses can conform to all speech dispositions within each of the languages concerned and yet dictate, in countless cases, utterly disparate translations; not mere mutual paraphrases, but translations each of which would be excluded by the other system of translation. Two such translations might even be patently contrary in truth value" (Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* [Cambridge, MA.: Technology Press of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1960], 72–73)

57 Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* 149.

58 Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 102

59 Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 85.

60 Bruce Kuklick, *The History of Philosophy in America* 1720–2000 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 271.

Abrahamic faiths, he attempts to discern the "essence" or "foundations" of these religions. Thus, in *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future*, Küng states that the paradigm model will enable a rediscovery of the "essence" of Christianity. To this end, he divides Christian history into five paradigms: the early Christian apocalyptic, the Hellenistic Byzantine, the Roman Catholic, the Reformation Protestant, and the Enlightenment Modern. Küng argues that while these paradigms are different, they all have a common "essence."[61] Küng argues that the essence of Christianity is Jesus Christ. He writes:

> Despite all the failure and reluctance of Christian people right from the beginning, and all the developments and confusions of the history of Christianity, [Jesus] will nevertheless remain the basic conception of Christian religion, which is never abandoned…here alone is the foundation of Christianity's originality from earliest times, continuity in its long history down the centuries, identity despite all the difference of languages, culture and nations.[62]

Küng maintains that Christ is "the abidingly valid, constantly obligatory, and simply indispensable element of Christianity."[63] Thus Küng attempts to use Jesus as a "foundation," a standard by which to adjudicate the essential and inessential elements of the different Christian paradigms: "For how else are we to be able to define the abiding element in what takes shape?...How else could we have a criterion, a norm, for defining the legitimate element in any particular empirical manifestation of Christianity?"[64] Küng believes that Jesus Christ acts as a "criterion" and common measure across the successive paradigms of Christianity, enabling him to determine what is authentic and what is not. This is fascinating, given that Kuhn believes successive paradigms to be incommensurable with one other.[65]

Küng's Conception of Jesus

Küng's conception of Christ further complicates his use of this theoretical framework. In *Christianity*, Küng contends that he developed his conception

61 Küng, *Christianity*, xxii, 7–8.

62 Küng, *Christianity*, 59

63 Küng, *Christianity*, 26

64 Küng, *Christianity*, 8

65 Incommensurability is a term taken from mathematics which means "lack of common measure." James Ladyman, *Understanding Philosophy of Science* (London: Routledge, 2002), 115.

of Jesus "in the context of my book *On Being a Christian*."[66] Here Christ is extrapolated from the New Testament's proclamation of Him by using the historical-critical method. Küng believes that it is the historical Jesus who "holds the rifts and breaks, the contrasts and inconsistencies in tradition and in the history of Christendom" together.[67] However, if Küng accepts Kuhn's theory of paradigm change, he has to explain how the Jesus of the gospels acts as a common standard for Christians if there is an incommensurability between the theological methods used in different Christian paradigms. Even in the same paradigm, different groups of Christians will use different theological methods.

Küng's method of reading the gospel is influenced considerably by the principles and presuppositions governing historical criticism.[68] He believes some aspects of the New Testament are more accurate than others; however, he also believes that the "historical proximity" that New Testament writings have to Jesus affects their accuracy. While this view leads to difficulties regarding which aspects of the New Testament proclaim Jesus correctly, Küng states, in *On Being a Christian*, that "because of the work of so many generations of exegetes and the results of the historical-critical method, we are able today to know better than perhaps any former generations of Christians—except the first—the true original Jesus of history."[69]

The above makes clear that Küng believes the historical-critical method enables one to determine which Christ is the true Christ—which aspects of Scripture proclaim the historical Jesus.[70] The problem for Küng is that

66 Küng, *Christianity*, 51.

67 Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, tr. E. Quinn (London: Collins, [1974] 1977), 121.

68 In his *Structures of the Church*, he argues that he does not believe that the New Testament's conception of Christ is completely accurate: "The New Testament is, after all, not a kind of symposium of essays of equal rank…The New Testament carries the message of Jesus Christ, of which all later testimonies can be, and aim to be, nothing more than interpretations. Hence, much as the derived testimonies of the New Testament are to be taken seriously, they are to be taken seriously as derivative and not as original attestations. Here not only the temporal proximity to the message of Jesus but also the inner objective proximity are important considerations" (Hans Küng, *Structures of the Church*, 148).

69 Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, tr. E. Quinn (London: Collins, [1974] 1977), 160–161.

70 In his work on Hegel's Christology (1970) Küng further illustrates the considerations governing his theological method: "The only way for an historically based Christology … is by drawing inferences from the highly diverse proclamation of the New Testament witnesses…the text of the New Testament as we have it abounds in contradictions of nuance and directions…the varying and in part contradictory character of the Jesus tradition frankly forbids the cozy assumption

his conception of Christ is the result of a theological method peculiar to what he describes as the "Paradigm of Modernity, Orientated on Reason and Progress."[71] Earlier paradigms utilized different theological and hermeneutical standards for establishing their conception of Christ from Scripture. While Küng, like Luther, contends that the epistles which preach Christ's message clearly are the most accurate, Küng's reception of the New Testament Jesus is influenced considerably by modern historical criticism whereas Luther's is not.[72] The Christ extrapolated using Küng's methods is not the same as the one extrapolated by Luther, whose methods were characterized by what Küng describes as "The Protestant Evangelical Paradigm of the Reformation." Thus, while the gospel of Jesus Christ might continue to act as a primary source of information, methods for investigating the Jesus of the gospels change in different paradigms. Scripture is open to a plethora of interpretations. Historical criticism only serves to expand the interpretations available; it does not lessen them. This incommensurability of standards makes clear that to apply one theological method as a criterion for judging all the other paradigms is quite inconsistent with Kuhn's theory of paradigm change.

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that Jesus himself took pains to ensure an exact transmission of his words…The state of the sources makes it impossible to advocate the historical reliability of the Jesus tradition as a whole…Despite all the difficulties, however, it remains true that inference from the kerygma is possible, justified and necessary" (Hans Küng, *The Incarnation of God: An Introduction to Hegel's Theological Thought as Prolegomena to a Future Christology,* trans. J. R. Stephenson [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, (1970) 1987], 490–91).

71 Küng, *The Incarnation of God*, 650–791.

72 "The epistle to the Romans may also be regarded as corresponding more closely to Jesus' message than, for instance, the epistle of St James. The further a testimony is removed from the original message the more will exegetes as well as dogmatists have to pay attention to the manner with which the testimony treats of the event of salvation in Jesus Christ. One will have to ascertain what kind of considerations play a part in the particular situation in which the Gospel was proclaimed; how the interpretation of the message was influenced by the personality of the preacher; how these secondary factors promoted, restricted, strengthened, weakened, exaggerated, or minimized the essential quality of the message. Thus every testimony in the whole of the New Testament must be understood in the terms of the message of Jesus its original dominant issues" (Hans Küng, *Structures of the Church*, 148–49). For Luther's thought, see Martin Luther, *Luther's Works,* eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann, 55 Vols. (St Louis, MO: Concordia Press, 1955).

Küng's Hegelian Reading of Kuhn

While Küng's use of paradigm theory is curious, given that his real desire is to locate a conceptual apparatus that that will enable him to identify some kind of intrinsic logic within the histories of the various religious traditions, it is all too easy to underestimate the influence of Georg Hegel on his reception of Kuhn's proposals.[73] The announcement of Vatican II delayed the publication of Küng's *The Incarnation of God: An Introduction to Hegel's Theological Thought as Prolegomena to a Future Christology* (1970) by more than a decade; an English translation was not available until the late 1980s—by which time Küng had become enamored by Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.[74] However, while Küng's later work uses the language of "paradigm change," it seems his reading of Kuhn is shaped considerably by Hegel's "primordial confidence" in reason. His admiration for this aspect of Hegel's thought is reflected in the following extract:

> Should we examine the various warring systems and successive systems in purely historical terms, there would be no alternative to ascertaining a chaos of opinions and succumbing to skepticism. Hegel's primordial confidence in reason voices itself when he opposes such a view, insisting that there is but *one* truth…We should not conclude from this that the other philosophies are false; rather we should see the wood in the trees, the one body in the many members! In the speculative vision it can be made clear that all of these philosophies are philosophy: various forms of appearance of the *single* truth. This truth may be multi-coloured, it may be prone in its necessary stages and moments to contradict itself or to get entangled in itself, but in its increasingly wonderful blossoming it is nevertheless *one* truth.[75]

73 This postponement may account for why Hegel's influence on Küng's thought is frequently overlooked: C. and S. Simut, *A Critical Study of Hans Kung's Ecclesiology: From Traditionalism to Modernism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Mark E Powell, *Papal Infallibility* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2009). An exception to this rule is Manuel Rebeiro, *The Church as the Community of the Believers: Hans Küng's Concept of the Church as a Proposal for an Ecumenical Ecclesiology* (New Delhi: Intercultural Publications, 2001).

74 Hans Küng, *The Incarnation of God: An Introduction to Hegel's Theological Thought as Prolegomena to a Future Christology*, trans. J R Stephenson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, [1970] 1987), xv.

75 Küng, *The Incarnation of God,* 376.

Given the above, it might be argued that Küng's attempt to commensurate the historical paradigms of Christianity in Christ is far more Hegelian than Kuhnian. Indeed, Küng repeatedly applauds Hegel's attempt to "reconcile systems which succeed one another," so as to identify the logic governing the history of philosophy as the development of a single "essence of absolute Spirit."[76] He writes:

> Notwithstanding all the contradictions which constantly emerge and the resolve themselves, the history of philosophy is consequently unqualifiedly logical. We may go further to say that the history of philosophy is nothing other than the concrete development of supra-temporal, eternal logic in time. The whole development is dominated by the strict coherence of the subject matter in movement: the necessity of the Concept, the divine Logos, the absolute Spirit. No element in this history is purely and simply false…But every element is onesidedness, though to a diminishing degree and therefore, increasingly, intelligible. If we do not come to a standstill at the stage of onesidedness—and history does not come to a standstill—then everything will be rectified *en passant*, in contradiction and change, so that the history of philosophy is certainly not a disavowal of philosophy, but rather portrays its lofty ratification and verification.[77]

While this is an extract from his work on Hegel, and while Hegel's approach is fundamentally different from that of Kuhn, it seems Küng wants to use paradigm analysis to achieve a similar objective:

> The rifts, jumps and breaks, contrasts and contradictions in Church tradition and in the history of Christianity generally cannot be disputed…What really holds together the twenty centuries of Christian history and tradition, which are so tremendously contradictory? The answer, here too an elementary one, can only be: it is the name of that Jesus.[78]

Thus, Küng employs paradigm theory in the hope that it will enable him to locate a common *essence* within the various contradictions of "twenty

76 Küng, *The Incarnation of God*, 377.
77 Küng, *The Incarnation of God*, 376–77.
78 Küng, *Christianity*, 24–25.

centuries of Christian history."[79] Nevertheless, while continuity with Christ is important for Küng, his application of the theory of paradigm change to the history of Christianity, in order to establish its essence, leads him to underplay Kuhn's emphasis on the incommensurability of different paradigms. From this it seems that what Küng's proposal requires is an alternative theoretical framework which will allow him to explore the intrinsic logic of the different religious traditions. What it seems is necessary at this juncture is an alternative conceptual apparatus that can enable Küng to achieve this goal.

Epistemic Fit

In his Nicomachean ethics, Aristotle famously illustrates how different areas of knowledge have different levels of precision. This principle has had a variety of applications. For example, the epistemology of theology, ecclesiology, and even missiology have been explored in relation to this principle.[80] The recent publication of the *Oxford Handbook on the Epistemology of Theology* illustrates this principle well:

> It has been commonplace in epistemology...to explore in detail the epistemology of particular academic disciplines. The epistemology of science, for example, has received the lion's share of interest; but attention has also been given to mathematics, history, aesthetics, and ethics. The crucial warrant for these later developments goes back to Aristotle's insistence…[that] we should fit our epistemic evaluations in an appropriate way to the subject matter under investigation.[81]

Applying this principle to a wide variety of subjects, these writers examine what might constitute appropriate epistemological evaluation in a variety of areas, including: "Knowledge of God,"[82] "Revelation,"[83] "Scepticism,"[84] and

79 Küng, *Christianity,* 24–25.

80 For further discussion see my essays on: "Newman Wesley and the Logic of Unity" (2023) and the "Logic of Mission" (2024)

81 "Introduction," in William J. Abraham and Frederick D. Aquino, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology* (Oxford: University Press, 2017) 1.

82 John Greco, "Knowledge of God," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology*, 9–29

83 Sandra Menssen and Thomas Sullivan, "Revelation and Scripture," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology*, 30–45.

84 William Dunaway and John Hawthorne, "Scepticism," in *The Oxford Handbook of the*

so on. The guiding principle operative here is clearly articulated by William J. Abraham in his work, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation*: "With Aristotle I have insisted that we should accept the principle of appropriate epistemic fit. We should let the subject matter in hand shape what kinds of considerations should be brought to bear on the rationality of the issue under review."[85]

While Abraham does not apply the principle of epistemic fit to the question of interreligious dialogue, his application of this principle to ecclesiology is relevant at this juncture:

> What constitutes the essence of the church. This is exactly what we find in ecclesiology and in ecumenical work…Outsiders often dismiss the whole debate as empty of cognitive content; after all, there is no universal or stable agreement on the criteria of appraisal in play. This disposition betrays a narrowness of conceptual sensibility. What is, in fact, at issue is how best to capture the complexity and beauty of the life of the church.[86]

Here—and in his magnum opus, *Canon and Criterion*—Abraham indicates that the key to unlocking the differences between alternative versions of theism is to explore the kind of intellectual entity before us by examining its essential features.[87] This leads, in turn, to an exploration of the relevant considerations pertinent to the assessment of its rationality.[88] The above dovetails with Küng's attempt to locate an "essence" within the Abrahamic religions which will help foster dialogue and peace. While we have critiqued Küng's use of Kuhn's conceptual apparatus, it would appear that if his work were reconfigured around the principle of epistemic fit, it would coherently enable him to explore the essence of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This is apparent given that in each of these works Küng moves inductively, immersing himself in the extensive histories of these great traditions so as to

Epistemology of Theology, 290–308

85 William J. Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006) 29.

86 William J. Abraham, "Church," in Charles Taliaferro & Chad Meister, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: University Press, 2010), 174.

87 William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

88 Abraham stresses that all "forms of serious and living theism" are "constituted by a network of interrelated propositions that need to be taken as a whole" (Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 43–45).

unmask what he deems to be their intrinsic logic. This leads him to affirm that, despite their enormous differences, each of these world religions share a number of parallels which can be brought into dialogue.

Applying Epistemic Fit to Interreligious Dialogue?

There are of course numerous studies exploring the similarities between religious traditions.[89] Nevertheless, to my knowledge, the principle of epistemic fit has yet to be utilized as a theoretical framework for these comparisons. However, Johan Buitendag, citing the application of this principle to ecumenical dialogue, suggests that this Aristotelian principle could be fruitfully applied "to diverse religions."[90] The question is, what precisely would the principle of epistemic fit add to the field of interreligious dialogue? Over the centuries, scholars have positively noted themes common to the different religions without this principle. What particularly does epistemic fit add to the field? While my objective here is more modest, in that I want to resolve the conceptual difficulties in Küng's proposals, I consider that his particular case is illustrative of the epistemological contribution that this principle adds to the discussion.

89 In relation to Islam, these range widely from general historical discussions, explorations of Jewish-Christian influence on the Qur'an, investigations as to whether this early Christian movement shaped the latter's system of beliefs and so on. For further discussions, see Guy Stroumsa, "Jewish Christianity and Islamic Origins," in *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts*, (Leiden: Brill, 2014) 72–96; José Costa, "Early Islam as a Messianic Movement: a non-issue," in Carlos A. Segovia, ed., *Remapping Emergent Islam: Texts, Social Settings, and Ideological Trajectories* (Amsterdam University Press, 2020): 45–83; Murtiza Sazjini, Rahman Ushriyyih, and Muhammad Ali Rizaei Isfihani, "A Comparative Study of Ebionism and Koran: A Response to The Question of Adaptation," *Religious Research* 7, no. 14 (2020): 8–33; Patricia Crone, "Jewish Christianity and the Qur'ān (Part One)." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 74, no. 2 (2015): 225–53; Sidney H. Griffith, "Late Antiquity and the Religious Milieu of the Qur'an's Origins," in *The Routledge Companion to the Qur'an* (New York Routledge, 2021), 3–12; Timurlenk Chekovikj and Elena Trencevska Chekovikj, "Jesus and Monotheism, The Similarity and Relations Between Early Judeo-Christian Credence and Islam," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 2 (2020): 45–53; Sidney H. Griffiths, "Late Antique Christology in Qur'ānic Perspective," *Die Koranhermeneutik von Günter Lüling*, ed. Georges Tamer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 33–68.

90 Johan Buitendag, "Integral ecology: Response of an emeritus professor to the contributions of his septuagenarian Festschrift," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 9, no. 1 (2023), 1–20, 15. http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2023.v9n1.a8a

Essentially, the principle of epistemic fit not only enables us to resolve Küng's epistemological eclecticism, but it also illustrates how we might transcend the dialectic between modern and postmodernisms. Unlike modernism, the principle of epistemic fit resists the one-size-fits-all approach, which seeks to commensurate all knowledge under a uniform system. Nevertheless, upholding this principle does not entail the skepticism intrinsic to postmodernism. In this regard, both modern and postmodern thinkers represent two sides of the same coin. The former considers an objective theory of knowledge to be possible and tries to bluntly commensurate all knowledge claims under its auspices. The latter denies this possibility and, as a result, renders claims to knowledge suspicious and incommensurate. The principle of epistemic fit allows us to depart from this merry-go-round.[91]

The principle of epistemic fit offers an alternative epistemological orientation. In contrast to the first principle operative in modernism and postmodernism, which holds that real knowledge may only be attained (or not attained) by adhering to a kind of universally applicable epistemic process, let us assume instead that the different religious traditions already contain knowledge. Rather than beginning with a theory of knowledge, let us begin by attending to the claims to knowledge already present within the respective tradition. This reverses the standard epistemological procedure operative above by recognizing (from the beginning) the knowledge claims advanced by the different traditions at the outset.[92] This differs sharply from modernism, which assumes that objective knowledge is the result of a solid epistemological process. It also differs considerably from postmodernism, which assumes objective knowledge to be impossible because no solid epistemological process exists.[93] On the contrary, this principle is grounded in the idea that knowledge is already present. Its evaluation is retrospective and is undertaken in a manner appropriate (fitting) to the knowledge claims already in our possession.

All this allows us to look for common themes and ideas without breaching the sensibilities of postmodernism. In sum, it allows us to transcend the incommensurability implicit within postmodern renditions of reality and constructively bring the claims of diverse traditions into dialogue. To illustrate how this might work, in the remainder of this essay I illustrate

91 Kevin Hector, "Friedrich Schleiermacher," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology*, 484.

92 For further discussion see: William Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold,* 13.

93 For further discussion see: Roderick Chisholm, *The Problem of the Criterion* (Milwaukee, WI.: Marquette University Press, 1973).

how the principle of epistemic fit offers a coherent theoretical framework for Küng's work.

Epistemic Fit, Monotheism, and Interreligious Dialogue

A helpful example of how Küng's research can be reconfigured theoretically using the principle of epistemic fit is his discussion of their belief in one God. Given the scope of our enquiry and the vast array of possibilities, framing the discussion carefully is key here, as Küng himself acknowledges:

> Driven by the conviction that an original truth manifests itself in many forms of language. For the Christian faith this original truth has its basis in the historical Jesus of Nazareth; to understand him as the Christ of the one God with all its practical consequences, theologians must have the right to take up christological options which were pushed to the side and covered up but are nevertheless completely legitimate, indeed original. These are the options from which the disciples of Jesus and the oldest Jewish–Christian community also began. And theologians should do this in the hope that here, possibly, are categories that will make this Jesus more understandable as the revelation of God to Jews and Muslims.[94]

Here Küng's epistemological eclecticism is clearly manifest in his conflation of epistemological foundationalism (in the search for the historical Jesus) and his use of Kuhn's nonfoundational theoretical framework to locate the essence within a pluriverse of diverse religious paradigms. Nevertheless, applying the principle of epistemic fit, it would indeed be possible to explore the contours of early Jewish-Christian thought in order to ascertain whether these early conceptions of the trinity might be more intelligible to Muslims and Jews.

At the outset, Küng rightly highlights the monotheism in each of these traditions. While acknowledging that the "Ecumenical Hellenistic Paradigm of Christian antiquity" led to the use of Hellenistic formulations in theological discourse, his extensive historical analysis bears fruit at this juncture in that it enables him to explore whether earlier Jewish-Christian understandings of the trinity might be more intelligible to Muslims. Küng emphasizes that, while Islam has no roots in Hellenistic Christianity, he finds resonances between what he describes as the "Ebionite," the "Jewish

94 Küng, *Islam*, 516–17.

Apocalyptic Paradigm of Earliest Christianity," and Islam.[95] Following an extensive discussion, Küng asserts that the Qur'an has "Jewish-Christian influences" and contends that the marginalization of Jewish Christians in Palestine led some communities to migrate to the Arabian peninsula.[96] Küng maintains that these Jewish-Christians remained in the region until the late seventeenth century and argues that the analogies between "the Qur'anic picture of Jesus and Christology with a Jewish Christian stamp" present a useful point of departure for inter-religious dialogue.[97] He writes:

> My proposal is that if the dialogue—or, with the inclusion of Jews, the "trialogue"—about Jesus is to be fruitful, it must begin with the Jesus of the Jewish Christians…Which historical references in the Qur'an point with what intensity to what specific Christian group must possibly be left open but there can be no disputing the decisive point that the analogies in content between the Qur'anic picture of Jesus and a christology with a Jewish-Christian stamp are indisputable. The parallels remain perplexing and open up surprising possibilities for conversation between Christians, Jews and Muslims. [98]

Küng's proposal to mine the intellectual resources of the early Jewish-Christian tradition in order to gather concepts for inter-religious dialogue is promising. It has the potential to offer a connection point between these three traditions. This is particularly insightful in relation to the monotheism shared by the Abrahamic faiths.

95 Küng, *Christianity*, 61–110. The term Ebionite was used by the Church fathers. For example, Irenaeus was highly critical of this group: "But those who are called Ebionites agree indeed that the world was made by God but … the only Gospel they use is that according to Matthew and they reject the Apostle Paul calling him an Apostate from the Law." For further discussion see: Irenaeus Bishop of Lyons, *Five Books of S. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons: Against Heresies*: trans. J Keble (London: John Henry Parker, 1872), p.77 [26.2]; 4 Hans Schoeps, *Jewish Christianity: Factional Disputes in the Early Church*, tr. D Hare (Philadelphia, PA.: Fortress Press, 1969), 134.

96 He writes: "The Jewish–Christian communities with their theology—despite all the vilification, syncretism and extermination—must have developed an influence which was to be of historic importance in Arabia in particular, through the Prophet Muhammad. Underground links between Jewish Christianity and the message of the Qur'an have long been discussed by Christian scholars" (Küng, *Islam,* 37–42).

97 Küng, *Islam*, 44.

98 Küng, *Islam*, 501–502.

Reflecting on the scriptures, Küng highlights that, in Christianity, monotheism has always been present. However, he proposes that Christians recover a Jewish-Christian conception of the trinity in which the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is understood as a "revelation event" rather than what God ontologically is in Himself.[99] He stresses that this original New Testament perspective coheres with Catholic liturgy which traditionally addressed prayers not to the Trinity but to the "One God and Father, through the Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit."[100] He believes this to be how God has revealed Himself in the economy of salvation and considers this conception to be more intelligible for the Abrahamic faiths. He writes:

> The Father is the one and only God of Abraham, beside whom there are no other Gods and who to us (as we must say in present-day metaphorical language) is both "Father" and "Mother." Belief in one God must not be put in question indirectly either: there is no third way between monotheism and polytheism. The Son is none other than the historical person Jesus of Nazareth, who personally reveals the word and will of this one God: in him the one true God is really manifest, present and effective The Spirit is the holy emanation, might and power of God and Jesus Christ who is exalted to him, which is effective in the believer and in the community of faith and which makes all human beings the sons and daughters of God. Thus, the Spirit is not a third party between God and human beings but is none other than God himself, God's powerful spiritual presence and reality.[101]

Küng believes this conception of the Trinity, the essence of the New Testament, offers a real dialogue point for Christians, Muslims, and Jews. He believes this shift of accent away from Greek and Latin, authentically, represents the heart of the New Testament. Here "God the Father" remains above Jesus, His "Son," and our "brother" remains alongside us. Finally, "God's power," the Holy Spirit, is within us. This, he believes, is a formulation which can form the basis of dialogue between the Abrahamic faiths.[102]

99 Küng, *Islam*, 79–80.

100 Küng, *Islam*, 510–512.

101 Küng, *Islam*, 512, 515.

102 Küng makes clear that he does not believe Christians must "begin again unhistorically at zero." He does not for a moment believe contemporary Christians should become "Ebionites." Nevertheless, while he acknowledges that "the great councils and their doctrinal statements will always be important" he rejects the

This approach coheres with the principle of epistemic fit because it represents an attempt to extrapolate an underlying idea of God which can be commensurate throughout the many centuries of Christian history, and moreover, intelligible to Jewish and Islamic conceptions of God. This is neither to suggest that Küng rejects the truth of the great ecumenical councils, nor to imply that the various Christian traditions should jettison their theological or doctrinal heritage. It simply represents an attempt to extrapolate what he believes to be the essence of Christian thought in order for this to be brought into dialogue with other religious traditions as an intelligible point of reference.

Conclusion

In the above, I have illustrated how Küng's valuable proposals for understanding both Christian unity and interreligious dialogue might be made more coherent using the principle of Aristotelean epistemic fit. Having raised doubts concerning the suitability of Kuhn's theoretical framework for the realization of Küng's objectives, I have explored whether or not his proposals might be reconfigured using this Aristotelian principle, offering an example of how this principle coheres with his discussion of monotheism in relation to the Abrahamic faiths. The above suggests that this model has much to offer to the dialogue of religions and may fruitfully be applied to a whole host of different examples.

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idea that "the Greek and Latin" paradigm should be the "sole criterion" for interreligious dialogue, given that Islam emerged at a time when "Hellenistic culture" was in decline (Küng, *Islam*, 516–517).

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ARTICLE

Material Memories: Narratives of the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict

Madelyn Starr

Abstract
Since 1948, the state of pervasive tension and mutual distrust that characterizes Israel/Palestine has produced both structural violence and resistance to occupation. This article analyzes people's everyday experiences of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict as well as their "material memories" to examine how historical memory and recurring interactions with objects and images inform the widespread tension, structural violence, and resistance of ordinary Israelis and Palestinians. Drawing on more than thirty interviews and hundreds of hours of participant-observation in Jerusalem and the West Bank, I suggest that divergent memories of brutal conflict, structural violence, and dehumanization shape the perceptions of Israelis and Palestinians and fuel everyday tension and mutual distrust. I also argue that individuals in Israel/Palestine employ objects and images as "material memories" to construct and recollect the near and distant past that both perpetuate and resist prevailing violence.

Keywords
Israel/Palestine, conflict, material memories, violence, resistance, tension

During my first week conducting fieldwork in Jerusalem in the summer of 2022,[1] my research assistant and I stopped to speak with three Palestinian men in the Muslim quarter of the Old City. Jerusalem Day had just passed, and one of the men was eager to share his experience. He said, "When the flag march happened, there were many problems here in the city. The settlers [Israeli nationalists] went inside many Palestinian homes in the Old City, and they entered my house, too. My wife and kids were in the kitchen. […] They drew the Israeli flag on the house door, and they wrote 'death for Arabs,' and they also had guns. Thank God my kids threw rocks at them from the roof. That's when they left."

My ethnographic research quickly taught me that even during times of supposed "peace" in Israel/Palestine, experiences of violent conflict never truly abate. The harassment this man and his family faced is not uncommon for Palestinians living in Jerusalem, although they are not the only ones who encounter unjust violence. Israeli civilians are also victims of the ongoing conflict. One Jewish American man recounted an experience walking through the Jewish Quarter with his friend when a Palestinian man approached them, visibly unsettled, holding a knife. Although the man did not attack the two Jewish men, the threat of violence left a mark: one of trauma, tension, and distrust. The Hamas-led attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the ongoing Israeli offensive have only further exacerbated trauma and tension in Israel/Palestine. Although this study is based on fieldwork I carried out in June and July 2022, I will briefly comment on the post-October 7 implications of my research in the conclusion of this article. Building on a month of participant-observation and more than thirty interviews conducted in Jerusalem and the West Bank, I argue that Israelis' and Palestinians' incommensurable memories of ancestry and past violence shape the two parties' perceptions of one another and fuel a pervasive sense

1 I want to extend my sincerest gratitude to Dr. Amy Allocco for her mentorship and encouragement throughout this two-and-a-half-year research project. I am especially grateful for Elon University's Ward Family Excellence in Mentoring Award, which allowed Dr. Allocco to join me in Jerusalem and the West Bank for an intensive fieldwork methods workshop. I am also indebted to Dr. Geoffrey Claussen, Dr. Sandy Marshall, and Dr. Brian Pennington for their support, guidance, and collective expertise. I want to extend a special thanks to Alissar Haddad and Rony Ohad for dedicating more than a month of their summers to provide critical assistance and contextual background for my fieldwork. This research would not have been possible without the generous support of Elon University's Multifaith Scholars and Elon College Fellows programs, as well as grants from the Summer Undergraduate Research Experience (SURE), Center for Research on Global Engagement (CRGE), and Rawls endowment at Elon University.

of tension and mutual distrust. As we shall see, while these perceptions and feelings have emboldened many Israelis to participate in systems of structural violence, there is also evidence of many Palestinians resisting Israeli occupation through both violent and nonviolent means. Drawing on personal narratives and storytelling related to objects and images, I emphasize less-told accounts of everyday life and experiences of the conflict in Israel/Palestine.

Diana Allan and co-contributors of *Voices of the Nakba* argue that tensions between Jews and Palestinians stem from British colonialism and the advancement of Zionist ideologies in the early twentieth century.[2] Prior Jewish-Arab relations were not free from violence, however. The 1834 massacres in Safed and Hebron, for example, are evidence that tensions erupted into violence on at least some occasions.[3] The Jewish, Christian, and Muslim residents of Ottoman-controlled Palestine primarily distanced themselves from politics, and these acts of violence were sporadic throughout the nineteenth century.[4] In the twentieth century, however, leaders and followers of the Zionist movement incorporated themes of chosenness, redemption, and messianism as represented in the Hebrew Bible in their beliefs that Jews constitute a national community,[5] not just a religious or ethnic one, and that the establishment of a Jewish state was the only possible antidote to antisemitism.[6] Since the founding of the modern nation-state

2 Diana Allan, ed., *Voices of the Nakba: A Living History of Palestine* (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

3 Egyptian leaders assumed control over Palestine in the 1830s, imposing heavy taxes, requiring military conscription, and attempting to disarm the indigenous population. When predominantly Muslim peasants revolted against the Egyptian authorities on June 15, 1834, the uprising spread throughout Palestine. The uprising in Safed turned into violent rioting against the Jewish population, lasting 33 days, and Egyptian troops trying to contain the revolt in Hebron failed to distinguish between perpetrators and victims and attacked the Jewish community as well as the Muslims. Martin Sicker, *Reshaping Palestine: From Muhammad Ali to the British Mandate, 1831–1922* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1999), 12–13.

4 Ilan Pappe, *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*, Second Edition (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 20.

5 While Zionism is often considered to be a secular movement, it is important to explore the relationship between messianism and nationalism in the Israeli context. Ammon Raz-Krakotzkin, "Religion and Nationalism in the Jewish and Zionist Context," in *When Politics Are Sacralized: Comparative Perspectives on Religious Claims and Nationalism*, ed. Nadim N. Rouhana and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 35.

6 Joel Beinin and Lisa Hajjar, "Palestine, Israel, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Primer," (Washington, DC: Middle East Research and Information Project, 2014),

of Israel in 1948, Palestinians have struggled to maintain their rights and identity, and many now exist outside the boundaries of law and citizenship because of their status and ethnicity.[7] Histories of ancestry in Israel/Palestine and memories of wars in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries dominate the way Israelis and Palestinians perceive themselves and one other. These mismatched histories and memories ultimately produce incommensurable positions: both Israelis and Palestinians regard themselves as the rightful inhabitants of Israel/Palestine and the other as perpetrators of violence bent on wrongfully exercising authority over the land. As such, a state of enduring tension and distrust has prevailed in Israel/Palestine since 1948.

In an effort to move beyond the metanarratives that dominate media coverage of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, I centered my research on alternative micro-narratives that find less representation in popular and political sources. Inspired by the stories of displaced Syrians recorded by Wendy Pearlman,[8] I sought to learn from ordinary human beings whose

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2; Raz-Krakotzkin, "Religion and Nationalism in the Jewish and Zionist Context," 35.

7 Palestinians in refugee camps, the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel face varying degrees of discrimination under Israeli law as byproducts of their distinct geographic and political circumstances. Refugee camp residents displaced from Israel's 1948 borders currently face severe mobility and economic restrictions. Two of my interlocutors from the Balata refugee camp in Nablus, for example, characterized Balata as an "open-air prison" under Israeli and United Nations military control. My Palestinian interlocutors in the West Bank describe experiencing military law, limited autonomy, and restrictions of their ability to enter Israeli territory. The West Bank is divided into Areas A, B, and C, each marked by various levels or extents of Israeli control. Several of my interlocutors from Area A, which is supposed to be governed by the Palestinian Authority, note that they are still under the dominance of the Israeli military, which conducts raids every night. While my 2022 fieldwork was not conducted in Gaza and conditions there are therefore outside the scope of this article, Pearlman notes that many Palestinians in Gaza have little access to basic facilities for survival and are treated as less than human, with no rights under Israeli military siege. Palestinians who reside in Israel enjoy greater mobility, education, and economic opportunities but remain second-class citizens, facing racism, limited freedom of speech and assembly, and identification that marks them as non-Israeli. Nadera Shalhouh-Kevorkian, "Sacralized Politics: The Case of Occupied East Jerusalem." In *When Politics Are Sacralized: Comparative Perspectives on Religious Claims and Nationalism*, ed. Nadim N. Rouhana and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 141; Wendy Pearlman, *Occupied Voices: Stories of Everyday Life from the Second Intifada* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2003).

8 Wendy Pearlman, *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled* (New York: Custom House,

everyday lives are shaped by the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. An ethnographic approach enabled me, in the words of anthropologist of religion Alyssa Maldonado-Estrada, to "study humans who always talk back, who are always multidimensional, who can never simply fit the easily indictable or stock character of patriarch or villain."[9] Informed as it is by the countervailing narratives and material memories shared by dozens of Israelis and Palestinians, the complex portrait of Israel/Palestine that emerges here defies neat categorization.

Building on the work of Matthew Engelke, Arjun Appadurai, and Laura Levitt, I also analyze the material dimension of people's memories and experiences of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.[10] Engelke asserts that tangible objects are given importance by people and groups with competing interests and arguments.[11] I explore how Israelis and Palestinians accord value to various objects, aligning with their incommensurable experiences of violence in Israel/Palestine. Appadurai explains that "things have not been so divorced from the capacity of persons to act and the power of words to communicate,"[12] while Levitt demonstrates that profane objects "are transformed into talismans, offering a different form of doing justice and living on."[13] In the context of Israel/Palestine, objects and images provide an alternative mode of communication, offering what S. Brent Plate has called "visible, tangible, political, and personal clues that speak silently about who we are and to whom we belong."[14] Much as Kobi Peled suggests that objects can portray the past as embodiments of present desires, I propose that objects and images engaged by Israelis and Palestinians represent their ancestries in Israel/Palestine and their present desire to inhabit or re-inhabit the entire territory today.[15]

2017).

9 Alyssa Maldonado-Estrada, *Lifeblood of the Parish: Men and Catholic Devotion in Williamsburg, Brooklyn* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 18.

10 See Matthew Engelke, "Material Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert Orsi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 209–29; Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63; Laura Levitt, *The Objects That Remain* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2020).

11 Engelke, "Material Religion," 219.

12 Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," 4.

13 Levitt, *The Objects That Remain,* 33.

14 S. Brent Plate, *A History of Religion in 5 1/2 Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to Its Senses* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2014), 164.

15 See Kobi Peled, "Things That Matter: Nostalgic Objects in Palestinian Arab

Historical and Material Memories in Israel/Palestine

In this section, I outline how my interlocutors interact with historical and material memories in their everyday lives. Historical memory refers to "the ways in which groups, collectivities, and nations construct and identify with particular narratives about historical periods or events."[16] Historical memory is not, therefore, an objective historical record of a period or event but rather something that restructures the past, creating "its own version of historical time as it elaborates, condenses, omits, or conflates historical events."[17] Israelis and Palestinians hold contrasting historical memories regarding past events, and these memories shape their present perceptions of themselves and the other. On the one hand, the Israeli historical memory tends to focus on ancestral claims to the land of Israel and violent wars with their Arab neighbors. On the other, the Palestinian historical memory is shaped by their exile from Palestine in 1948 and the ongoing violence and dehumanization they face. As I heard and observed daily in Jerusalem, Israelis and Palestinians each perceive themselves as the victims of violence and war and the other as the perpetrators of conflict.

Yael Zerubavel contends that Zionists evaluate the past based on "the bond between the Jewish people and their ancient land."[18] This position was confirmed by Simon, an Israeli man who lives in the Eli settlement in the West Bank.[19] He described how children in Eli not only study the Torah and the Tanakh and read about figures like Joseph, but are also able to look outside their windows to see exactly where Joseph walked to check on his brothers. This perceived bond between the Jewish Israelis and their ancient land is further reinforced in their national identity. Zionist national consciousness is an interpretation of the fulfillment of the Jews' return to the land they know as Zion after years of exile and longing.[20] Laila, a French woman who has lived in Jerusalem for more than four decades, asserts that *Eretz Yisrael*, or the land of Israel, belongs to the Jewish people, and that while the Arabs who inhabited Israel/Palestine during the 2,000 years of

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Homes in Israel," *Middle Eastern Studies* 53, no. 2 (2017): 233.

16 Katherine Hite, "Historical Memory," in *International Encyclopedia of Political Science* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2011), 2.

17 Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 9.

18 Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 15.

19 Per my IRB protocol, all names are pseudonyms.

20 Raz-Krakotzkin, "Religion and Nationalism in the Jewish and Zionist Context," 38.

Jewish exile cared for the land, it is not theirs. Where Laila's position that Arabs were merely tenants of the land is more extreme than that of many other Israelis, the premise that Israel/Palestine is the ancestral homeland for the Jewish people is the common assumption shared by many of my interlocutors. The invocation of the historical memory of Eretz Yisrael as the Jewish people's homeland advances the rationalization that Israeli Jews have the exclusive right to inhabit Israel/Palestine.

Many Israelis also draw on objects and images to support the historical memory of Eretz Yisrael and justify their claim to the land. For instance, one of my participants discussed a bottle of sand that his rabbi took after the Israeli government evicted Jewish settlers from Gush Katif, a Jewish settlement in the Gaza Strip, due to intensifying violence by Palestinians in Gaza and efforts to make peace by Israel. This bottle of sand represents a past life now lost due to the ongoing conflict, and this "material memory" fuels his conviction to remain in and fight for the state of Israel. Likewise, Israel's abundant museum displays from archaeological projects—including remnants of temples, jewelry, clothes, and weapons from centuries-old civilizations—reinforce these memories and claims. Consistent with Engelke, these objects serve as vehicles for Israelis to communicate their past and present connection to the land of Israel.[21] By strategically deploying the materiality of the past, Israelis seek to demonstrate both the historical presence of Jews in, and their contemporary right to, this land.

Also rooted in Israeli historical memory are past violent events. Older generations of Jewish Israelis can recount their experiences of historical wars and conflicts, such as the war of independence in 1948, the Six-Day War in 1963, the Yom Kippur War in 1973, and the Intifadas; even younger Israelis describe hearing about and witnessing violence during the Gaza wars of 2008–2009, 2012, and 2014. In 1929, well before the establishment of the State of Israel, riots ensued across mandate Palestine; this was because of a combination of increasing Jewish immigration (which many Palestinians supported, before understanding that many Zionists wanted to transform Palestine into a Jewish state) and the murders of several Jews and Palestinians (as a result of tension between the Jewish settlers and Arab inhabitants). In his account of the 1929 riots, Hillel Cohen notes that these violent events shaped Zionists' perspectives of Arabs as savage people who thirst for Jewish blood.[22] Such memories of violence have remained with Israelis, and for many, it is all they know of their Arab neighbors. Thus, many Israelis view

21 Matthew Engelke, "Material Religion."

22 Hillel Cohen, *Year Zero of the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1929*, The Schusterman Series in Israel Studies (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2015), xii.

Arabs as enemies who want to kill them, and the idea that Israel is under constant threat of attack is a leitmotif of Israeli national consciousness.

In remembering the histories of war and violence, many Israelis possess patriotic objects that signify their loyalty to the state and their power and control over Israel/Palestine. The Israeli flag, which is present everywhere in Jerusalem, is one such material signifier. The Israeli flags that line the street from the Damascus Gate to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, for instance, serve as provocative visual assertions that this is Israeli territory. Additionally, many Israelis retain objects from their time in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), in which all Israelis are required to serve. Asher, a left-leaning Israeli who opposes the Israeli occupation, shared that he keeps the pin from the IDF brigade in which we served even though his ideas and opinions of the Israeli government and military have shifted measurably over time. Echoing the work of Appadurai, such objects become charged by their association with warfare and plunder, containing a certain intensity and hostility.[23] These charged mementos from past military experiences, like Asher's pin, serve as reminders of the violence endured during military service and may be transformed into the desire to defend and protect the state of Israel. Nationalistic objects like the Israeli flag and mementos from military service contribute to the loyalty to and pride in the Israeli state and may be invoked to display individual intentions to remain there and protect the state at all costs.

Similar to how Israelis employ historic claims to the land to justify their existence in Israel/Palestine, at the heart of the Palestinian experience are memories of centuries of habitation and successive expulsions by Israelis that generate feelings of dehumanization, threat, and trauma. Many Palestinians predicate their right to live in Israel/Palestine on the fact that their families have resided there for centuries. Omar, a Palestinian Bedouin living in East Jerusalem, emphasized that many of the present-day Israelis were not born in Israel/Palestine and instead trace their lineages to Europe, the United States, and elsewhere. However, Palestinians can trace generations of descendants to historic Palestine. Their connection to this ancestral homeland is a hallmark of the Palestinian experience, as one of Pearlman's interlocutors expresses in *Occupied Voices*: "There's not a single Palestinian that doesn't know where he's from."[24]

Intertwined with genealogical histories is the memory of the *Nakba*, or catastrophe. The Nakba refers to the displacement and death of hundreds

23 Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value."

24 Pearlman, *Occupied Voices: Stories of Everyday Life from the Second Intifada*, 88.

of thousands of Palestinians from historic Palestine in 1948 when the state of Israel was established. In *Voices of the Nakba*, Allan describes the Nakba as a continuing tragedy rather than a discrete historical event.[25] Rather than simply occurring once in 1948, many Palestinians view the Nakba as a violent reality that continues to unfold and shape everyday life. This idea of the Nakba as a sustained reality resonated with many of my Palestinian participants, who linked displacement and violence with the realities of the daily harassment and dehumanization they experience via checkpoints, interactions with the police, employment constraints, and so on. Considering these realities, many concur with Allan that the Nakba never truly ended. Indeed, the Nakba's ongoing legacy is manifested in Palestinians' continued displacement, the complex restrictions they face, and the prevailing culture of dehumanization.

Like Israelis, many Palestinians possess objects and images from their previous residence in and subsequent exile from Israel/Palestine. Of the material memories I encountered, some of the most powerful were the keys of Palestinians' former homes. During the Nakba in 1948, many Palestinians took their keys with them when they were evicted from their homes, never imagining they would not be able to return. These keys have been passed down through generations of Palestinian families even though their former dwellings are now either destroyed or inhabited by Israelis. My guide in Bethlehem explained that the key represents the right to return, *ḥaqq al-ʿauda*, and Palestinians throughout Israel/Palestine and the diaspora continue to cling to the image of the key as a symbol of their hopeful return more than seventy years later. The key is a representation of how objects, especially those that are traces of past harms, "bridge time and space, connecting past to present, before to after" for Palestinians who continue to experience the Nakba as an everyday reality.[26] Many Palestinians also possess maps of historic Palestine, including what is now Israel proper, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank. These maps testify to the existence of the Palestinian state and represent present desires to (re)inhabit the entire territory. Additionally, many Palestinians own coins from the British Mandate period that corroborate the existence of an organized Palestinian community and represent the Palestinian cause. These objects and images are material memories that allow Palestinians to both nostalgically engage their past and epitomize their desired future.

25 Allan, *Voices of the Nakba,* 3.

26 Levitt, *The Objects That Remain,* 15.

Both Israelis and Palestinians acknowledge the two sides' asymmetrical military capabilities. In addition, most Palestinians consider the conflict an occupation rather than a war. In fact, Mustafa, a Palestinian student from East Jerusalem, stated, "When you look at it, we can't even call it a war. One side has all the technology, and the other is a weak group that has nothing: This is a one-sided attack."[27] Although many Palestinians attempt to resist Israeli occupation and the violent, humiliating, and traumatic conditions to which they are subjected, their ability to do so is severely constrained, and even small-scale resistance gets them cast as violent extremists or terrorists. Therefore, the clash between Israel's advanced capabilities and systemic violence and Palestinians' resistance to occupation produces an atmosphere of constant tension and mutual distrust.

Constant Tension and Mutual Distrust

While the historical and material memories of Israelis and Palestinians are inharmonious, what they do share is the view of themselves as the rightful inhabitants of Israel/Palestine and the other as the violent occupiers. There is always a threat of increasing violence, and Israelis and Palestinians each act in relation to their perceptions of imminent danger. Following Johan Galtung, here I highlight two categories of violence: structural violence, which is "built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances," and physical violence, which is characterized by harm being done to a physical body, sometimes to the point of killing.[28] In the cases of Israelis and Palestinians, their exercise of structural and physical violence is by nature unequal and uneven, and this asymmetry contributes to tension and mutual distrust.

One way that Israel attempts to protect its citizens is through a strong and disciplined military and police force. One of my Israeli interlocutors explained that "a very specific narrative about the Holocaust that the world is trying to destroy us […] and we'd never fit in" is used to incite young men and women to enlist in the military. The goal is to persuade them to, in his

27 Mustafa, and many other of my Palestinian interlocutors, are referring to the Palestinian Authority's and civilians' lack of capacity when they discuss asymmetrical military capabilities. The military capacity of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other militant organizations were not discussed by my Palestinian interlocutors in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

28 Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 170–71.

words, "protect the country because the country's fragile, and it can happen again." The Israeli government also displays military authority in other ways, such as through the presence of the border police in the Old City. Although these heavily armed officers are supposed to protect all citizens, many understand the border police as only interested in protecting Israelis. Jamal, a Palestinian shopkeeper in the Christian quarter, explained that if he were attacked, the police would respond slowly, if at all, while if an Israeli were attacked, the police would swiftly wreak havoc on the entire street. Many Israelis are ultimately taught to see themselves as the victims and encouraged to serve in the IDF to proactively protect their country, and it is through the actions of the military and border police that Israelis display their distrust and fear of attack.

Borders and checkpoints surfaced frequently in narratives I recorded from Palestinians. Many described being consistently pulled aside for extra questioning and security at the Ben Gurion Airport when entering Israel, while others recounted facing scrutiny at the checkpoints between Israel proper and the West Bank. One older woman shared the terrifying experience of being repeatedly searched at the Qalandia checkpoint by Israeli soldiers who falsely accused her of carrying a knife. She vowed to never venture through that crossing again. Many Israelis perceive Palestinians as a threat and thus remain constantly apprehensive about the possibility of a "terrorist attack."[29] For instance, one Israeli couple I met in Jerusalem described looking around public buses to ensure no one was acting suspiciously, and the woman said that she would not ride Jerusalem's light rail for months because her father declared it a "hotbed for terrorists." Given that many Israelis are fearful of Palestinians, they enlist a variety of militaristic measures to neutralize the Palestinian "threat" so that they can achieve relative safety in what they believe is their promised homeland.

In her account of post-Intifada experiences in the Palestinian territories, Pearlman notes that beyond the literal checkpoints, Israel exercises "checkpoints" over every aspect of Palestinians' lives.[30] Many

29 It cannot be disputed that some Palestinians have committed violent acts against Israeli civilians, although many Palestinians view these acts as the only recourse to defend their country. The Israeli government has, of course, also committed many violent acts against Palestinian citizens, but those are not categorized as "terrorism" because Israel is a state and Palestine technically is not. Many Israelis consider Palestinian militants to be terrorists, but I place "terrorist attack" in quotes here to indicate that this is an Israeli perspective that is not universally shared, particularly by Palestinians.

30 Pearlman, *Occupied Voices,* 207.

of the Palestinians with whom I tried to engage refused to speak to me because they feared surveillance, harassment, and even arrest by the Israeli police. Similar to Michel Foucault's idea of panopticism, Israel's looming presence renders Palestinians anxious to speak and unable to move freely.[31] Economic supremacy and is another kind of checkpoint that Israel uses to assert and enforce control over Palestinians. My interlocutors shared that throughout the Intifadas and the ongoing night raids by Israeli soldiers, the Israeli government continuously denies Palestinians the opportunity to economically sustain themselves. Intentional economic embargoes targeting the historic quarters of both Hebron and Bethlehem mean that today empty alleys and closed shop doors are the norm in areas that used to bustle with activity, while it is only a few years since shops have reopened in the Old City of Nablus. Given the dearth of economic opportunities, many Palestinian women turn to selling vegetables and other goods on roadsides while other Palestinians work for Israelis both in Israel proper and the occupied territories. Ahmad, a Muslim man who considers himself fortunate to work in his family's shop, observed that Palestinians provide cheap labor to build Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Even those who are lucky enough to own their own shops depend on income from Israeli customers since many Palestinians cannot afford to visit their stores. While working for the very people who perceive them as dangerous and threatening is not ideal, most Palestinians rely on Israelis for their economic survival.

Like Pearlman's interlocutor, Ibrahim, who describes feeling like he is treated like a bird in a cage, many of my participants framed their experiences of the occupation in animalistic terms.[32] Jamal, for example, observed that Israelis tend to treat Palestinians like cockroaches. According to him, Israelis do not care when they kill a cockroach for it means nothing to them, and there is no value in even remarking on it. Even when they kill a "big cockroach," like Shireen Abu Akleh (the Palestinian-American journalist who was assassinated by Israeli gunfire in 2022 while covering

31 In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault discusses the Panopticon prison structure. A large watchtower stands at the center of a cylindrical arrangement of cells. It is understood that the guards in the watchtower can see the prisoners, but the prisoners can never see the guards, thus instilling fear and self-policing among the prisoners. Like the Panopticon, the power and influence of the Israeli government is omnipresent in Israel/Palestine, existing and operating even at the microlevels of social relations. An awareness of its power exists, and the fear of the repercussions of surveillance shapes the actions, beliefs, and emotions of many Palestinians and even some Israelis. Michel Foucault, "Panopticism," in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 195–230.

32 Pearlman, *Occupied Voices*, 13.

the news in Jenin), a news story will cover it, and Israelis will talk about it briefly; but then the story dies and so does the memory of that cockroach. While the cockroach metaphor was unique to Jamal, others described being treated like animals and shared how this dehumanization contributes to a climate of distrust and discontent. Thus, even when it is not a time of overt violence, there exists profound tension between Palestinians and their Israeli neighbors.

The trauma that many Palestinians face due to Israeli violence adds to the atmosphere of hostility and suspicion that prevails throughout Israel/ Palestine. About a week before the eighth anniversary of Mohammed Abu Khdeir's murder, my research assistant and I visited his family in East Jerusalem.[33] Mohammad was sixteen years old when he was kidnapped and murdered by three Israeli nationalists at Deir Yasin, the site of a brutal massacre of Palestinians in 1948. When I asked about the aftermath of Mohammed's death, his mother replied tearfully, "I don't trust Jewish people. I don't trust any kids with them after everything that has happened. All of us suffered mentally, many of my kids suffered from trauma of being kidnapped, we still take medications." Although the brutality of her son's murder meant that her story was one that gained global media attention, similarly tragic events in many other Palestinian families do not. One Palestinian man in the Old City began recounting the death of his son before turning away to wipe his eyes, unable to continue. Another Afro-Palestinian man stopped midway through the story of his imprisonment and abruptly changed the topic. Despite their deep-rooted trauma, many Palestinians refuse to leave, choosing instead to resist Israeli occupation by throwing rocks and exhibiting nationalistic objects and images.

Palestinians are restricted in how they can resist Israeli occupation, so objects and images serve as a "quiet, whispered dialogue" that seek to include their narratives and realities in the conflict's discursive space.[34] According to several of my interlocutors and my research assistant, Palestinians are prohibited from displaying their flag or gathering in large groups for any sort of event or protest. While walking through the Old City, I noticed intriguing stencils on the walls in Muslim neighborhoods. While none of them overtly portrayed the Palestinian flag, many depicted significant sites in Jerusalem like the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock in Palestinian colors: green, red, white, and black. More explicitly, I saw a stenciled painting on a sculpture in West Jerusalem stating "Save

33 I do not use a pseudonym for Mohammed Abu Khdeir because he is a public figure whose story received worldwide attention following his murder in 2014.

34 Peled, "Things That Matter," 238.

Masafer Yatta," a reference to the collection of rural, West Bank villages facing Israeli settler occupation. According to Levitt, objects and images share stories, offering a form of doing justice and resisting cycles of ongoing violence.[35] I understand these stencils as a visual strategy employed by Palestinians who wish to circumvent Israeli restrictions, resist the occupation, and assert their presence in Israel/Palestine. Whether stencils, keys, or coins, Palestinians deploy objects and images as material representations of their struggle against Israeli occupation, serving as a medium for resistance within a community that gives them little opportunity to express themselves.

Conclusion

On my final day in Jerusalem, I met my Israeli research assistant at Mount Herzl, a national cemetery for notable Jewish leaders such as Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism. After walking through the cemetery and museum, we made our way to the National Hall for Israel's Fallen, a memorial for soldiers who died defending the state of Israel, and walked up and down the spiral staircase, gazing at the thousands of dead soldiers' names engraved on the bricks. These bricks attest to the history of past violence and injustices targeting Jews in Israel/Palestine, serving as material memories that highlight the need to protect Israel from its enemies at all costs. These historical memories, engrained in Israeli national consciousness, contribute to the pervasive sense of tension and mutual distrust by emphasizing the defense of the state of Israel, and therefore, Israel's military authority over the entire people in the land of Israel/Palestine.

After my visit to Mount Herzl, I took a bus to the Jaffa Gate to interview a Palestinian man at the New Imperial Hotel. As he described how his family founded the hotel to house Palestinian refugees in 1948 as they were expelled from their homes, my gaze became fixed on the key displayed among the objects and images covering his office walls. Much as it does for other Palestinians, this key holds the memory of a long-lost, yet deeply desired, Palestine he yearns to return to. Just as the New Imperial Hotel defies the advances of Israeli nationalists who are attempting to seize it, Palestinians clutch their material memories close, resisting occupation and asserting their presence in Israel/Palestine. Mount Herzl and the New Imperial Hotel

35 Laura Levitt, "Objects, Trauma, Violence, and Loss: Telling Stories, Doing Justice," The Imminent Frame: Secularism, religion, and the public sphere, *Ruinations: Violence in These Times* (blog), August 14, 2024, https://tif.ssrc.org/2024/08/14/objects-trauma-violence-and-loss-telling-stories-doing-justice/.

are striking embodiments of contrasting historical memories of the events of 1948 and the continuing struggles over Israel/Palestine. While Israelis believe that they fought justly to preserve the Jewish homeland that they argue has been constantly threatened for thousands of years, Palestinians understand their actions as defending their own right to their ancestral homeland from which they are experiencing successive and ongoing waves of expulsion. These divergent memories are exceedingly relevant today as we attempt to comprehend the contradictory perceptions and narratives swirling around the ongoing (as of the publication of this article) war in Gaza post-October 7. While I hardly anticipated that the pervasive tension and mutual distrust that characterized Israel/Palestine at the close of my fieldwork period would erupt into such catastrophic violence, my conclusions are perhaps even more pertinent and significant today. Amid Israelis' and Palestinians' discordant perceptions and claims prior to and in the wake of October 7, personal narratives and material memories help us recognize how the trauma and tension in Israel/Palestine exploded in the brutal war in Gaza and how they can potentially be harnessed to make sense of Israeli/Palestinian relations in a post-October 7 world.

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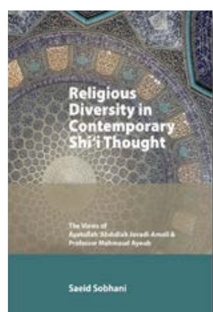
BOOK REVIEW

Religious Diversity in Contemporary Shi'i Thought: The Views of Ayatollah 'Abdullah Javadi-Amoli and Professor Mahmoud Ayoub. By Saeid Sobhani. London: ICAS Press, 2022. 375 pages. £20.00 (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-907905-55-1.



In summary, this book is absolutely essential for anyone working on the issue of religious pluralism in contemporary Twelver-Shīʿī Islam. Saeid Sobhani has done a great service to the global community by rooting our understanding of how Shīʿī Muslims deal with religious diversity through explicating with clarity the views of two influential Shīʿī intellectuals of an older generation. Professor Mahmoud Ayoub (1935–2021; *raḥmat Allāh 'alayh*) was well-known to Euro-American academia through his many academic publications and long career teaching mostly in the USA and Canada, as well as his active involvement in Christian-Muslim engagement. Ayatollah 'Abdullah Javadi-Amoli (born 1933) is less well-known in Euro-America, but one of the most revered scholars of the last forty years in the *ḥawza*, the global seminary system that forms the basis of Twelver-Shīʿī religious authority. It should be noted that Sobhani straddles both worlds, being trained in the Iranian *ḥawza* and the son of another senior Ayatollah of great renown, Jaʿfar Subḥānī (born 1929), as well as the possessor of a Ph.D. in Philosophy of Religion from the University of Edinburgh.

Sobhani writes as an "insider" who aspires to be an "impartial observer" (337). He lays out the perspectives of Ayoub and Javadi-Amoli with precision and erudition and shies away from making his own judgements in the process. In this regard, even though he has ample theological training, he demonstrates fidelity to the intellectual history approach dominant in secular Euro-American Islamic Studies. Indeed, even though one might expect him to show a marked preference for Javadi-Amoli's views over Ayoub, that does not come through in his presentation. Sobhani models fairness and accuracy in representing the views of his fellow believers (*mu'minūn*), which is a valuable methodological intervention in its own right. At the same time,

Sobhani does not shy away from contextualizing the views of his subjects, as one would expect from an intellectual historical approach. He notes that Javadi-Amoli's "exclusivist" and Ayoub's "pluralist" tendencies can be understood partly from their different experiences in the formative years of their lives. Ayoub was born in Lebanon, and not only regularly interacted with Christians, but was educated by them. He then went on to get his graduate training in American universities created by and staffed primarily by Christians. Javadi-Amoli, however, was raised in almost exclusively Muslim environments in Iran and trained within Muslim institutions of higher learning where he still teaches. Yet, at the same time, Sobhani is sensitive enough to the internal nuances of Iranian higher education that he highlights how Javadi-Amoli's concerns were also shaped by the reasseration of the importance of philosophy in the twentieth-century *ḥawza* (237–43).

The text is structured in such a way that one can easily find what one is looking for, if one wants to focus in on a specific issue. For example, much ink has been spilled on the meaning of Qur'an 2:62: "Truly those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans—whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve" (*The Study Quran* translation). A researcher interested in that issue could jump to Chapter Seven, entitled "A Comparative Analysis of Javadi's and Ayoub's Qur'anic Approaches to Religious Diversity." But at the same time, there is logical flow to the text, such that if one wants to read it from beginning to end, one is taken step by step to think through the issues at hand. The views of Ayoub and Javadi-Amoli are explicated in their own right, compared with each other, and also compared with other thinkers. For example, Chapter Two introduces some perspectives on religious diversity articulated by past authoritative figures in the Twelver-Shīʿī Islamic tradition, in particular al-Ṭūsī (d. 1274), Mulla Ṣadra (d. 1641) and al-Anṣārī (d. 1864). At different points in the text, other scholars are also included in the presentation. For example, Sobhani provides a corrective to Ayoub's portrayal of the Lebanese scholar Muḥammad Jawād al-Mughniyyah (d. 1979), arguing that al-Mughniyyah's exegesis of the Qur'an in Arabic is not as pluralist as Ayoub's references to him in English would have the reader believe (219–220). This is an example of one of the subtle challenges of this study, which is to disentangle Ayoub the intellectual historian from Ayoub the theologian. Anyone who is familiar with Ayoub's oeuvre notices this constant slippage. Trained in the academic study of Islam, but also wanting to represent Islam as a practicing Muslim, Ayoub represents the challenging balancing act that many Muslims face in the Euro-American academy. Without checking all the references that Sobhani marshals to demonstrate Ayoub's views, the reader

just has to assume that Sobhani is aware of the issue and makes defensible choices in representing Ayoub the theologian.

Sobhani very self-consciously chose to study two distinctively different thinkers and explains why (15). In doing so, he opens the door to respectful engagement between the world of the *ḥawza* and the world of Euro-American academia, as well as a historically rooted contemporary articulation of Shīʿī perspectives on pluralism. A Catholic theologian of religions who does not know Hans Küng, whether or not they agree with him, would not be taken seriously by their peers. Similarly, after the publication of Sobhani's book, we feel that Ayoub and Javadi-Amoli need to be considered in the emerging discipline of a Twelver-Shīʿī theology of religions, along with other important works cited by Sobhani such *Islam and Religious Pluralism* (1999) by Muhammad Legenhausen. But Sobhani is also engaging with Sunni thinkers such as Mahmut Aydin from Turkey and Muhammad Hassan Khalil in the USA, as well as prominent Christian theologians of pluralism such as John Hick and Paul Knitter.

Given his erudition, one might want to know exactly what Sobhani himself thinks of the issues raised by Ayoub and Javadi-Amoli, but he keeps his perspective close to his chest. That being said, on one critical issue, it seems he lays his cards on the table. He demonstrates quite convincingly that neither Ayoub nor Javadi-Amoli have much knowledge of the religious history of humanity outside an Abrahamic framework and Near Eastern origin. He mentions that, on the one hand, Ayoub's understanding of Christianity in particular was solid enough to receive recognition from Christian scholars, and that such study of another tradition on its own terms is a valuable enterprise (106). On the other hand, Ayoub admits that dealing with Indian, Chinese, or other traditions is "far more complex" (203). Therefore, in the conclusion, when Sobhani states that, "Islamic research suffers from lack of understanding of the wisdom-centered religions (as they have been called) in China and India and the native religions of the Americas and Africa," it is a clarion call for the Twelver-Shīʿī educational world to continue the process of engaging with the diversity of humanity in all of its forms (342). Remarkably, Sobhani even wonders if there is some sort of "external criterion…independent from the Islamic perspective to adjudicate the validity and truth claims" (344). These are two very different intellectual endeavors. In the first, one needs to model the "impartial observer" ideal that Sobhani has demonstrated with regard to his subject. For example, in my own work on the Hindu tradition, I need to understand Hindus on their own terms first before I can begin to think about how to respond from within my Islamic worldview. In the second, the search for

criteria of adjudication forces the scholar to make choices based on their existential condition and placed within the stream of human history. In this regard, the reader appreciates how Sobhani acknowledges that his own study has raised important questions for the future of Muslim scholarship regarding the diversity and pluralism inherent in twenty-first century global life. I would contend that his observations are as relevant for Sunnis as they are for Shi'is, although Sobhani does not attempt to make that claim.

Lastly, it should be noted that this book is published by the publishing arm of the seminary in London where Sobhani currently teaches, the Islamic College of Advanced Studies. So this text also represents the new historical reality that the Twelver-Shīʿī *ḥawza* is now also a Western phenomenon, and needs to be included in the nexus of Religious Studies departments, Christian seminaries, and other institutions in which the nature of religion is discussed in predominantly English-speaking polities (UK, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and so on). However, there are challenges to its inclusion, which is one of the reasons for this book review. Even though this text is fully adherent to all academic standards, it is not available on Amazon in the USA, and can only be purchased from online Shīʿī booksellers such as al-Buraq or directly through the link on the publisher's website (https://islamic-college.ac.uk/shop/religious-diversity-in-contemporary-shii-thought/). The author specifically told me that he wants to make his work known to a wider audience outside of English-speaking Shīʿī communities; hence, I am also including the author's personal website (https://saeidsobhani.com/) so that he himself may be known to a wider audience in the English-speaking world. Books such as this remind us that not only is each religious tradition on its own unique trajectory to making sense of twenty-first-century global diversity, but also that Interreligious Studies has a long way to go to truly represent that diversity within its discourse.

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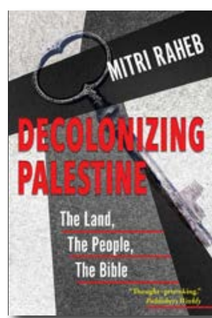
BOOK REVIEW

***Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, the People, the Bible*.** By Mitri Raheb. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023. 184 pages. $18.72 (paper). ISBN 1626985499.



Mitri Raheb's timely new book, *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, the People, the Bible*, confronts the existential crisis facing Palestinians in general and Palestinian Christians in particular, whose ongoing dispossession is justified, in part, by their own holy scripture. While the so-called Israeli-Palestinian conflict is often popularly perceived as a religious conflict, political analysis often foregrounds issues of geopolitics, borders, territory, and nationalism. Taking what he refers to as a "theopolitical" perspective, Rahab's book examines the intertwining of religion and politics in service of Western-backed Israeli settler colonialism in Palestine.

Raheb's book operates within a tradition of interpreting the Bible prophetically, i.e., from the perspective of the oppressed resisting their subjugation. Rejecting terms like conflict, war, and even occupation in favor of a settler-colonial framework, Raheb brings together settler-colonial theory and Palestinian liberation theology to develop a decolonial theology grounded in the historical, geopolitical, and geographic context of Palestine. Raheb centers Palestine as lived and experienced by Palestinians themselves, not the Palestine found on maps of the holy land printed in the front pages of bibles. For Raheb, his hometown of Bethlehem is not just a quaint nativity scene or the setting of a peaceful Christmas carol, but a land beset by walls and encroached upon by aggressive Israeli settlement expansion. By bringing together settler colonial theory and Palestinian theology, Raheb thus demystifies the orientalist geographic imaginary of Palestine. His is a geographically "grounded theology," situated in everyday material realities and broader geopolitical contexts.

Decolonizing Palestine is a book in two-parts. Part One focuses on the biblically-backed colonization of Palestine; Part Two confronts the

"theological software" of colonization. The first chapter provides historical context for understanding the displacement of Palestinians by an ongoing process of settler-colonialism. To do so, Raheb draws upon scholars of settler colonialism in the Americas and Australia and recent extensions of this work to the Palestinian context. In doing so, the author challenges myths of Israeli and American exceptionalism by pointing out the ways in which narratives of promised lands, chosen peoples, and divine destiny were used to justify European colonization of the Americas and elsewhere. Raheb's insights here shed light on the White supremacy underlying Christian Zionism and Israeli religious nationalism. The exclusivity of divine rights to the descendants of Isaac through Jacob (Jews and Christians), relies on seeing Arabs as undeserving, inferior others, as the descendants of Ishmael, Abraham's son with Hagar, a slave from Africa.

Diving deeper into the theology of Zionism, Chapter 2 confronts the notion that Christian Zionists are merely a fringe group of End Times-obsessed evangelicals (30). Raheb argues that Christian Zionism is a much broader umbrella that includes a broad spectrum of supporters of Israeli-Jewish colonization of Palestine. One of the most crucial contributions Raheb makes here is his critique of liberal Christian Zionism of the post-war period. He argues that the Holocaust has been the "hermeneutical key" for European and American theology (and, I would argue, a moral touchstone for secular ethics as well). This theology emphasizes the historical uniqueness of the Holocaust and the establishment of Israel as the redemption of the Jewish people, a fulfillment of God's promise which opens the door to redemption of all humanity. In this rendering, Palestinians are merely latter-day Canaanites standing in the way of God's promise to the chosen people. As Raheb explains in chapter 4, after the Holocaust, Christians opened their theological tent to include Jews within a "Judeo-Christian tradition" to atone for their sins of antisemitism and the Holocaust, sacrificing the rights of Palestinian Muslims and Christians in the process.

Today, broad-based support for the modern nation-state of Israel among many Western Christians is not founded upon a robust and reasoned reading of scripture, but rather upon an emotional attachment to Israel and the equation of modern-day Israel with the Israelites of the Bible. The irony here is that the Holocaust created a regime of international human rights law, but also, for Christian Zionists, placed the modern nation-state of Israel *above* that law, operating under biblical injunction to conquer and control the land and subdue or expel its inhabitants at all costs. The American Christian right embraces this "restoration" of Israeli-Jewish dominance in the Holy Land, and, crucially, views this mission as an extension of what Raheb calls

"glocal considerations," namely "restoring" conservative Christian values to the center of American society and politics.

Impatient readers can be forgiven for feeling like the book offers more of a description of colonialism than tools for decolonization. However, the patient reader will get the reward in Chapters 3 and 4, where the analytical rubber meets the road. Recognizing the power of place names, Chapter 3 provides a grounded reading of key terms associated with the land of Palestine, typically viewed as an ancient land frozen in time and stripped of its sociopolitical context. For example, Raheb demonstrates how using the term "Temple Mount" to refer to the Haram ash-Sharif complex privileges a biblical perspective of ancient Jerusalem and not the lived reality of Palestinians (the second temple was destroyed nearly 2000 years ago, whereas the Dome of the Rock has been standing for over 1300 years).

Further, Raheb makes the case for the use of the term "Palestine" to refer to the land, as the name most consistently used to identify this area throughout history. Palestine, he argues, is a geographic term that is inclusive of diverse linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and religious identities, and is not exclusive to one religious perspective. Further, he cautions his reader not to wrongly identify Palestinians as the Canaanites or Philistines of the Bible, but also not to deny that the Canaanites, Philistines, and even ancient Israelite are not part of Palestinian cultural and hereditary ancestry. Similarly, he urges his reader to distinguish between Israel as an ancient polity, a people, and a modern nation-state, which itself needs to be distinguished from all Jewish people, a broad and diverse population who are not synonymous with the Judeans or Israelites of the Bible.

Recognizing that biblical interpretation, like place naming, is also an exercise of power, Chapter 4 focuses on "biblical reception history," i.e., how the Bible has been received and interpreted in different contexts toward different ends over time. It is here that decolonial theology is brought to bear on the concept of "chosenness," which, Raheb argues, must be interpreted within the contemporary context of political nationalism.

Drawing upon earlier Palestinian theological interpretations of chosenness, Raheb argues against a particularist, nationalist reading of election, and advocates for a view of chosenness as singular in its specific instantiation in the Bible, but universal in its application to other historical contexts. The notion of being chosen, he argues, is a promise that gives hope and comfort to the oppressed, that their suffering is redemptive and exemplary, not meaningless. It is the same promise that the bible gives to

the meek and oppressed, that it is they who shall inherit the land, usually translated as "the earth."

Driving home the preceding points, the Epilogue provides a helpful overview of several critical and contested issues, including imperialism, antisemitism, the failed promises of the two-state solution peace process, apartheid, and western Churches' complicity. Overall, the book offers a concise and critical interpretation of these key issues. As such, the book should appeal to a broad audience of laypeople, activists, and scholars, including those in religious studies, settler-colonial studies, Israel/Palestine studies, and peace and conflict studies.

Although the book is concise and readable, this is sometimes at the expense of unpacking key terms or concepts in theology that may be less familiar to lay audiences. Although the book assumes a level of biblical literacy, readers looking for a digestible overview of critical moments and key concepts in the history of the Palestinian struggle will find it here. What readers will not find, however, is a map of the region. This is unfortunate given the geographical richness of this text and its efforts to provide a counter-narrative to the Christian Zionist geographical imaginary. A timeline may have helped as well, especially to remedy any confusion caused by the somewhat inconsistent uses of different dating systems (e.g., BC, BCE). The book is also repetitive in places. Although it makes frequent reference to other colonial contexts such as the Americas, Africa, and Australia, it would be helpful to the reader to offer a few concrete examples of the use of religious rhetoric related to land promises or divine election in these contexts, with reference to the growing body of comparative settler-colonial studies.

The book's one significant shortcoming is not one that can be addressed by the author. It makes an admirable plea to reject the narrow "linear salvation history" implied by the Judeo-Christian construct, arguing instead for a wider Abrahamic understanding of the Prophetic family tree, that extends salvation through the line of Ismael and Muhammad. The book also makes occasional reference to Islamic theological understandings of the issue of chosenness, and some reference to Jewish theology. One hopes that this first attempt at decolonizing dominant Biblical narratives from a Palestinian Christian perspective will be further fleshed out by decolonial and anti-Zionist Jewish theology and insights from Muslim perspectives. An intra-Abrahamic dialogue aimed at mutual aid, justice, and liberation, rather than

mere tolerance and understanding, would produce a uniquely Palestinian approach to interfaith engagement.

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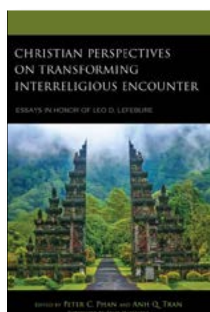
BOOK REVIEW

Christian Perspectives on Transforming Interreligious Encounter: Essays in Honor of Leo D. Lefebure. Edited by Peter C. Phan and Anh Q. Tran. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2024. xxviii + 350 pp. $130.00 (hardback). ISBN: 978-1-66695-998-7.



A *Festschrift*, "designed as a textbook" intended for college courses "on the sacred writings of various religions and how Christian beliefs can be expressed anew as a result from learning from them" (xxi), is a fitting and brilliant tribute to Leo Lefebure. Lefebure, a professor and Matteo Ricci, S.J., Chair of Theology at Georgetown University, has spent his successful career as an impactful writer, teacher, global speaker, and priest transforming how Christians can learn and grow through engaging and partnering with non-Christians. His oeuvre testifies to why such interfaith encounters and engagements are both necessary and cathartic. His expertise in specific interfaith dialogues (Buddhist-Christian and Jewish-Christian, in particular), interdisciplinary and wide-ranging theological acumen, and scholarly and spiritual focus on the gifts and role of the Holy Spirit within and beyond the Catholic Church, render his legacy and work of tremendous benefit to those beginning their theological journey and those of us further along on the life-learning gradient.

To their credit, editors Peter C. Phan and Anh Q. Tran have organized and structured this *Festschrift*/textbook across diverse theological fields, including comparative theology, interreligious studies, interreligious dialogue, moral theology, biblical theology, and systematics. After a Foreword by Archbishop Felix Machado, a poem by Leo's brother Stephen Lefebure, and a comprehensive introduction by Phan and Tran, the work proceeds in three parts. Part I, "Ways of Encountering the Religious Other," consists of nine chapters, principally focusing on a Christian's textual and personal encounters with other faith traditions and practitioners, including Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism, and Hinduism. Building on these insights,

Part II comprises seven chapters that seek to outline or establish how "key Christian doctrines have been or should be reformulated" after these interreligious encounters (xxiv). Part III includes Phan's moving tribute to his friend and Georgetown colleague and Lefebure's words of appreciation for the book's contributors. In this review I focus on several chapters I found particularly inviting and powerful.

In Jewish-Christian dialogue and Christian readings of Jewish Scriptures, essays by stalwarts John T. Pawlikowki (which opens Part I) and Mary C. Boys (chapter 4) expertly and concisely present the historical, present, and future trajectory of post-*Nostra Aetate* Catholic understanding and dialogue with Judaism. Regarding present advances and insights from Jewish-Christian dialogue and research, Boys' warning that there "is a serious gap between scholars and church leaders, especially clergy" (91), should be heeded.

In chapter 2, Kristin Johnston Largen presents a helpful overview and commentary of the great Hindu text, the *Bhagavad Gita,* for a Christian reader. If she had more space, I would have liked to hear more about the ethical problems regarding the literal violence espoused for Arjuna in the *Gita* and the problem of divorcing intentions and results when it comes to others. In chapter 3, James L. Fredericks compares the role and purpose of loneliness in Dorothy Day's *The Long Loneliness* with the story of Paṭacārā, a Buddhist nun. Day's and Paṭacārā's stories are both inspiring—inspiring in Day's case for her utter devotion to the poor and in Paṭacārā's acceptance of her suffering—but also frustrating for their rigidity and acceptance of doctrinal blind spots within Catholic and Buddhist tradition. Regardless, both women leave me feeling ashamed, silenced, and humbled at my own failures in comparison to any of theirs.

In chapter 4, Thierry Meynard analyzes four examples of Jesuit missionaries reading the Confucian Classics between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. He highlights the variety of Christian readings that often depended on cultural and political contexts and offers warnings and suggestions amidst the very different context of Confucianism and Christianity today in China. For Meynard, the classics of any religious tradition are universal sources and texts that should not be controlled or politicized by any group or country. "Concrete encounter through classical texts" (73), especially through interpreting symbols and the use of reason, can point a way beyond political walls and religious superiority claims.

Two stellar chapters are included on Islam. Jason Welle first convincingly argues that the Christian encounter with the Qur'an should be characterized

by “a willingness to allow careful listening to the Qur’an to grant Christians new insights about how God has renewed all things in Christ” (97). While cognizant of the theological and textual challenges the Qur’an poses for Christians, Welle is right to highlight how the Qur’an “serves as a beneficial ‘irritation’ to Christian theology in a pluralistic word” (112). Klaus von Stoch, moreover, turns to Lefebure’s theology of Judaism and Islam and asks the question: “Can Christians learn from Qur’anic Christology?” (117). Ultimately, he contends that Qur’anic Christology can aid Christians in opposing any use of Christology for militaristic or imperial aims, but two insights really captivated me (129). The first is how Stosch argues that the Qur’an “renounces all forms of supersessionism” (125), while his other claim had me writing “wow” in the margins: “There is a way of reading the Qur’anic claims on Jesus Christ without contradicting the Christian faith” (129). This path, according to Stosch, is possible through turning to contemporary Muslim scholarship in Germany (especially Zishan Ghaffar and Vahid Mahdavi Mehr) and through Lefebure’s “scriptural hermeneutics of hospitality” (129).

Turning to Part II, Dale T. Irvin’s “The Holy Spirit of Truth and Grace” and Marc A. Pugliese’s “Communities of Faith and Salvation” awed me by their encyclopaedic knowledge of a number of worldviews/world religions in such a limited space. Irvin’s essay shows how Lefebure’s humble and hospitable readings of other faith traditions testify to the universal love of God and the grace, truth, and wisdom of the Spirit operating within and beyond the Church. Irvin writes: “Grace is thus manifested primarily as love, as connection, as communion” (234). I also appreciated Debora Tonelli’s argument that the contributions of African Biblical Studies to decolonial theology, despite the violence Europeans unleashed (and still unleash) in Africa, are sources of renewal both within and outside Africa. In Erin Lothes’ “The Buddha, the Christ, and the Amazonian Chief,” I was especially moved by her highlighting of “the cosmic common good” (through her reading of Daniel Scheid). As she writes: “Honoring this sacred dimension of the cosmos unites Catholic spirituality and Amazonian lifeways” (316). It is a fitting idea for the ethical, dialogical, and global thrust behind Lefebure’s work as well.

In Part III, Peter Phan aptly titles Lefebure as “the wise man from the west,” and a *Pontifex* bridgebuilder of East and West. The book ends with Lefebure’s words of appreciation and commentary on the essays. In closing let me add that this book is worthy of the spirit, vitality, and inclusivity of Leo. It works, as intended, both as a *Festschrift* and textbook, opening students

to the richness of interreligious encounter as transformation and a blueprint for the renewal and future of Christian theology.

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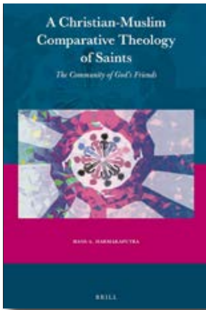
BOOK REVIEW

A Christian-Muslim Comparative Theology of Saints: The Community of God's Friends. By Hans A. Harmakaputra. Brill, 2022. 258 pages. $68.00 (paperback). ISBN 9789004510524.



In *A Christian-Muslim Comparative Theology of Saints*, a revised version of the author's doctoral thesis, Hans Harmakaputra "proposes an inclusive Christian theology of saints that could recognize the sanctity of non-Christian saintly figures" (29). To do so, Harmakaputra draws upon the work of modern Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians alongside the Andalusi scholar Ibn ʿArabī (1165–1240). He uses the constructs of sainthood developed by these intellectuals in order to formulate his own interreligious framework for understanding saints.

Besides an introduction and conclusion, Harmakaputra's book develops over two main sections, each with four chapters. The first section is an overview of saints and sainthood in Christianity and Islam. In Chapter 1, Harmakaputra looks at post-Vatican II theological discourse emanating from the Roman Catholic theologians Karl Rahner (1904–84), Elizabeth Johnson, and Jean-Luc Marion. Chapter 2 looks at Protestant theologizing, focusing on Reformers, contemporary Protestant views of sainthood, and analysis from Lutheran theologians Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45) and Paul Tillich (1886–1965). Harmakaputra's choices in these chapters are narrow from both global—most figures are from the West—and ecclesial perspectives—no Eastern Christian or broader Protestant figures are engaged. On the one hand, such delineations are necessary in order to keep the study from unraveling into something that might otherwise be too unwieldy. More importantly, the figures Harmakaputra does discuss help him to highlight key developments in Christian theology and form bases for which to build his inclusive theology of saints. Further, the author includes personal references throughout the book (a welcome inclusion in an academic monograph), such

as experiences in Central Java (63), that help to situate his reflection in wider, more global contexts.

On the other hand, however, the absence of Eastern Christian thought in Harmakaputra's book is more noticeable, especially since a key feature of his work engages Muslim intellectual developments concerning saints and sainthood. Harmakaputra acknowledges the historian Peter Brown and his work outlining the presence and function of Christian monks and saintly figures in Late Antique Syria (5, 174–77; Harmakaputra links Brown's work to the development of saint veneration in "Latin Christianity," instead of Eastern Christianity in Late Antiquity). Yet in Chapter 3, which focuses on sainthood in Islam, he does not explore the ways in which the Eastern Christian historical and regional context influenced Muslim conceptions of saints and sainthood.

Relatedly, Harmakaputra begins to highlight Johnson's "companionship paradigm" (32) in his first chapter, juxtaposing it against a more traditional conception of saints and devotees modeled on a patron-petitioner paradigm. This paradigm has its roots in the ascetic monasticism of Late Antique Syria and further informs Islamic notions of a *walī Allāh* ("friend of God"), a focus in Chapters 3 and 4. But Eastern Christian monasticism in Late Antiquity, beyond formulating holy men and women as patrons of a community's wellbeing, also informs a view of saints as companions where devotees were often said to walk like or along with a patron. Similarly, a saint could be construed as a pattern or icon upon which a devotee might pattern themselves; this former view is touched upon by Harmakaputra in Chapter 3 (83) and the latter companionship model becomes central to his inclusive theology in the book throughout. In this light, some engagement with Eastern Christian thought seems warranted, if not vital for an inclusive, Christian-Muslim theology of saints.[1]

The absence of engagement with Eastern Christian thought notwithstanding, the figures with which Harmakaputra does engage provide the necessary framework for a comparative theology of saints and prepares him to develop an inclusive theology that finds room for non-Christian saintly figures. This development begins in the second section of his book

1 For the Eastern Christian context of saints and its connections to Islamic thought, see, for example, Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); James Grehan, *Twilight of the Saints: Everyday Religion in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Charles Tieszen, "Patriarch Timothy I and the Prophethood of Muhammad: A Re-Appraisal," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 35, no. 2 (2024): 169–81.

where, in Chapter 5, he brings the insights from the universality of the *walāya* ("friends") and Rahner's notion of God's self-communication to bear on the possibility of non-Christian saints. He notes that saints can be seen as "manifestations," or revealers, "of God's grace in history," and as such mediators of God's grace (133–34).

From revealers of God's grace, Harmakaputra moves in Chapter 6 to the notion of saints' "hiddenness," drawing on concepts from Marion and Ibn 'Arābi. Here, Harmakaputra points out that "saints are hidden because they act as icons of God" (147) since their lives point towards or reveal God instead of themselves. The implications of this "hiddenness" become clear in Chapter 7 where Harmakaputra emphasizes the nature of saints as companions, or a "circle of friends" encompassing both the living and the dead (186) over and against more traditional models of sainthood that position saintly figures as visible patrons who offer mediation between petitioners and God.

This leads Harmakaputra, in his final chapter, to outline the essentials for his inclusive Christian theology of saints. Accordingly, he argues that a saint, for Christians and non-Christians alike, can be better seen as a "sign-event because she signifies something beyond herself: God, the Most Holy" (217). With this in mind, Harmakaputra offers two case studies—the Dutch Jesuit Frans van der Lugt (1938–2014) who was killed in Syria and Abdurrahman Wahid (1940–2009), the Muslim spiritual and political leader from Indonesia (206–17). The cases of van der Lugt and Wahid help Harmakaputra to demonstrate what it looks like to "respond positively to God's self-communication" and how the universality of God's holiness can appear in the world (217).

The implications for Harmakaputra's work are important for Christian-Muslim relations, comparative theology, and a Christian understanding of what it means to follow God alongside companions from both within and outside traditional ecclesial boundaries. Students of comparative theology, scholars of Christian-Muslim relations, and practitioners of interreligious dialogue will benefit from Harmakaputra's book and see ways in which they might carry his insights forward as well.

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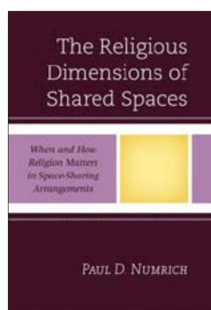
BOOK REVIEW

The Religious Dimensions of Shared Space: When and How Religion Matter in Space Sharing Arrangements. By Paul D. Numrich. Lexington Books, 2023. 290 pages. $96.52 (hardcover). ISBN 9781793639349.



Paul Numrich categorizes his book as an effort to show how religion matters in the field of sociology. In exploring the religious dynamics on space-sharing arrangements, he asks what difference does being religious make? What invested meaning is there in "sacred spaces" and how is it used? How and why do different faith communities enter into rental arrangements? What can religious and secular space sharers learn from each other? These spaces include churches hosting congregations of different denominations, synagogues renting to community organizations, and interfaith centers where multiple religious traditions operate side by side.

With an open and honest approach, Numrich employs ethnographic methods, including participant observation and interviews with clergy, congregants, and community leaders. This gives multiple layers to his analysis and ensures that the voices of those directly involved in space-sharing arrangements are up front and center. Through his use of case studies, he presents a balanced and nuanced exploration of the complexities surrounding religious coexistence in shared physical spaces.

In Part 1 of the book, Numrich surveys "The Space-Sharing Phenomenon" in the United States. Noting the extent and reasons behind the movement of different faith groups' cohabitation of shared buildings and spaces. He then elaborates his theoretical framework to guide and describe his research as follows: (a) investing space with meaning, (b) choosing to share space, and (c) structuring and maintaining the space-sharing agreement. Each of these categories draw upon a wide range of scholarship as he endeavors to demonstrate the role of religion.

In Part 2, Numrich presents several case studies on space-sharing. He organizes these studies into three chapters based on ownership of the space: (1) religious groups renting out their building to different congregations of the same faith tradition, (2) religious organizations who allow non-faith groups to use their space, and (3) secular organizations leasing their buildings and spaces to faith-based groups. A key aspect to Numrich's exploration is his inclusion of historical examples and contexts.

Building upon Parts 1 and 2, in Part 3 Numrich seeks to answer his questions. He identifies distinguishing traits of faith-based groups, which he calls "the religious factor," that gives them a unique characteristics in choosing to share their spaces, viz., (a) a worldview in which space sharing can be part of their vocation, (b) caring for others in times of need, and (c) being exemplars of religious reconciliation. Numrich uses these religious factors, along with nonreligious factors, to further the discussion on the role of religion in space sharing. In chapter seven he even ventures to propose what religious and secular space sharers could learn from each other. Based on his interviews, Numrich notes the core themes of his book boils down to clear expectations and relationships.

Part of Numrich's honest approach comes in his directions for further research in this area. These include expanding such investigations past the United States to other parts of the world and exploring the diversity of societies with their differing contexts and histories. I would like to add to this and ask for an expansion into Indigenous space sharing. Countries like Canada and the United States were originally built upon treaties with Indigenous groups. These treaties are considered by Indigenous people as sacred because land is sacred. For example, an excellent case study could be Gwaii Haanas National Park, which is the only national park in Canada to have a cooperative management agreement. With this partnership being between the Government of Canada and the Council of the Haida Nation. This would push the study of space-sharing beyond buildings and could also engage the Indian/Aboriginal Reservation systems present in countries such as Canada, USA, and Australia.

The Religious Dimensions of Shared Space is an excellent resource, not just in terms of its case studies and theory, but also in its appendices. Numrich includes the forms, questions, and guides he used in his study, along with additional rental agreements. In his venture to shed light into this area of religious space-sharing Numrich provides critical insights into how such arrangements both challenge and reinforce religious identities, practices, and relationships. His work is therefore invaluable to leaders of

faith-communities as they seek to live well among and within diverse religious communities.

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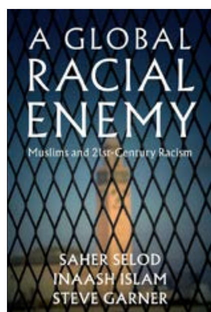
BOOK REVIEW

A Global Racial Enemy: Muslims and 21st-Century Racism.
By Saher Selod, Inaash Islam, and Steve Garner. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2024. vii + 227 pages. $64.95 (hardback), $22.95 (paperback), $18.00 (eBook). ISBN 978-1-509-54021-1.



Selod, Islam, and Garner present an array of powerful examples from four national case studies—the UK, the US, India, and China—to argue that Muslims are made into a racial Other in the early twenty-first century and that this process of racialization takes place on a global scale that exceeds the logics of Western colonial imperialism. In all four cases, Muslims are constructed as threats to national security and framed as "misogynists, violent, irrational, and a population that should be watched, monitored, deported, or even detained" (4). The Global War on Terror (GWOT) that started in 9/11's aftermath, argue the authors, reified this process at a transnational scale. Yet the volume rejects Islamophobia as an interpretive framework for Muslim racialization, arguing that the concept isolates religion from other social identities and remains too Eurocentric. Instead, *A Global Racial Enemy* champions the notion of "racialization" in order to stress the ways in which "religion is racialized" (6) as well as how religion and race intersect gender, class, and sexual orientation among other social identities. While Muslim racialization is indeed rooted in the Eurocentric Orientalist and neo-Orientalist logics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in the twenty-first century it acquires a broadly transnational character; nation-states' imperatives of securitization and expansion, especially amidst rising populism and ethnocentrism, mean that "security and surveillance practices rely on the construction of Muslims as a threat to national security and a national identity through cultural practices" (20). The GWOT's "global charge to secure the world from terrorism" (60) must be, as a result, understood comparatively and beyond a Western-centric frame of reference.

To substantiate this argument, the body of the book unfolds over four chapters, with each chapter exploring an aspect of Muslim racialization in comparative view and featuring each national context separately. Chapter 1 supplies a brief contextualizing overview by summarizing the long history of Muslims' lives in each of the four nation-states. The chapter highlights how Muslims' struggles for recognition, visibility, and citizenship, tied to histories of "migration, colonialism, settler colonialism and slavery" (32), have been central to the developing national identity of each of the four national cases. The following chapters move to the twenty-first century and focus on the consequences of the GWOT. In the US context, these chapters often highlight the events surrounding the 2016–2020 Trump presidency, while in China the focus is on Uyghur repression and persecution. Chapter 2 explores the role of media and social media in the otherization of Muslims and sheds light on the manifold ways in which Muslims are portrayed as terrorists and threats to national security in news, television, and social media. Chapter 3 examines rising authoritarianism and ethnonationalism. Here again the authors argue for a global view, claiming that "the relationship between anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiments must be understood in relation to the strengthening of national identities globally, not just in Europe or the United States" (107). In India anti-Muslim sentiment is tied in particular to a "populist-nationalist political project" (131), while in China it is an expression of settler colonial ambitions. Chapter 4 shifts the focus to counterterrorism to show how the GWOT unleashed "mass surveillance and policing of Muslims around the world" (138). The conclusion gives voices to Muslim resistance against racialization, including by spotlighting the US-based non-profit Muslim Justice League and protests held at Delhi's university Jamia Millia Islamia. The authors do not take a comprehensive approach meant to highlight every possible case of Muslim racialization in these thematic or national frameworks, but rather aim to cogently support the overall argument. The overarching conclusion is that the racialization of Muslims in each nation-state serves power and material gain, including in the name of state security and national expansion.

The cogency of the overall argument, the broad and productive applicability of the theoretical framework, and the large amount of evidence presented in each thematic area make the book a helpful contribution to the literature on the condition of Muslim lives globally. The book makes a compelling case for why the framework of racialization can address some central aspects left unattended within the literature focused on religious prejudice and Islamophobia. For scholars of interreligious studies, *A Global Racial Enemy* may then usefully broaden theoretical frameworks for engaging the phenomenon of Muslim otherization, providing a broad but

nuanced transnational perspective that can be applied cross-culturally to a variety of case studies. Because of its reliance on the theoretical literature on critical race theory and the relationship between race and religion, the book is best suited to graduate students and professional specialists in the field, yet the volume's overall argument and its broad base of evidence can be helpfully incorporated in lecture materials or used as framing for furthering conversations around the relationship of race and religion in the interreligious classroom.

Scholars working in the field can also consider ways in which their own scholarship may answer, complexify, or further extend the arguments made by the volume, specifically with regards to the lived consequences of the GWOT on the lives of Muslims around the globe and to the transnational networks that weave together the four national contexts under consideration. What are the historical, genealogical, and causal links among the different modes of racialization experienced by post-9/11 Muslims in these contexts? How do these global formations influence and interact with each other? How do Muslim communities respond to global racialization in a concerted and networked way, including in coalition with other communities? *A Global Racial Enemy* makes the case that each of these answers must be given in a global context that exceeds national boundaries—an important lesson for interreligious studies, whose scholarship is often framed within the context of a particular nation-state. For these reasons *A Global Racial Enemy* provides a well-timed addition to the growing literature on religion and race in the post-9/11 world and opens new theoretical avenues for exploring its interreligious dimensions in further literature. The book is a stimulating, thought-provoking, and well-argued volume which may encourage others to consider when the framework of "religion" itself becomes insufficient for the work of interreligious studies, and for why scholars of the discipline will find helpful answers in the literature on race and religion that is focused beyond the North American context.

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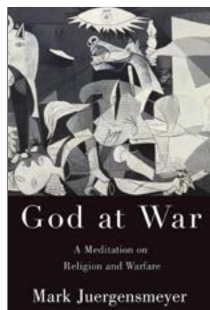
BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Reviewing and Reflecting on Juergensmeyer's "God at War" and "When God Stops Fighting"

When God Stops Fighting: How Religious Violence Ends. By Mark Juergensmeyer. Oakland: University of California Press, 2022. xiv + 179 pages. Paper. ISBN 978-0-520-38473-6.

God at War: A Meditation on Religion and Warfare. By Mark Juergensmeyer. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. vii + 107 pages. Hardbound. ISBN 978-0-19007917-9.



Mark Juergensmeyer (b. 1940), Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Global Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and William F. Podlich Distinguished Fellow and Professor of Religious Studies at Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, California, is, perhaps, the leading scholar today writing in English regarding the intersection of religion, violence, and peace. His most well-known text, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017) is currently in its fourth edition. Other important texts include: *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (1993); *Fighting with Gandhi* (1984); *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militias to Al Qaeda (2008);* and *God in the Tumult of the Global Square: Religion in Global Civil* Society (2015; with Dinah Grieco and John Soboslai).

Central to his understanding of this nexus of war/violence and religion are the concepts of war as both an "imagined" or "alternative reality" to the point of its becoming a "cosmic reality"—good vs. evil on a cosmic plane; "an absolute conflict with a moral valence, a do-or-die struggle between

good and evil" (*When God Stops Fighting*, 5). Thus, religion itself becomes an "alternative reality"—that is, a succinctly different perspective on the human condition—and all susceptible to past historical events, texts of extraordinary value, and leaders manipulating their populations to their own ends or self-centered visions, needs, and desires. Further, the various understandings of what constitutes a religion or community of so-called practicing and committed "religionists" (still a source of contention and dispute among scholars) thus helps to undergird and frame the conflicts which have been and continue to be labelled by governments, journalists, scholars, and ordinary persons as "religious wars" and those who engage in these conflicts as "religious extremists." What then constitutes the *religious* dimension of physical conflict which ultimately results in the deaths of both military combatants and non-combatants—especially children, women, and the aged— becomes the ever-present and haunting questions: Do religions cause wars? Is religion too easy a tool wrongfully used to legitimate wars and violence? Is there something inherent in the very creation and construction of religions—not only the monotheisms of Judaism, Christianity, Islam (for example, superiority vs. inferiority)—that leads people to justify engaging in horrific acts of violence?

And, to flip the coin somewhat, can religious commitment be used to end such conflicts and rehabilitate, re-educate, and transform former soldiers into productive members of their own societies and communities? Is the not-so-secret secret to "success" the very cessation of hostilities coupled with the recognition by both leaders and followers on both sides that, ultimately, neither can win? As Juergensmeyer notes, "negotiation is not possible until both sides have lost the will to fight…At the heart of the transformation from militancy to the cessation of hostilities is *the abandonment of the idea of war,* at least as it relates to the conduct of war" (*When God Stops Fighting*, 4; emphasis added).

For Juergensmeyer, "the idea of war gives conceptual clarity to humiliating and destructive events and situations. And it provides a solution—military engagement and the expectation of victory…It provides a conceptual template of understanding in which one can understand the role of an enemy—either real or fabricated—and what the appropriate response should be…The concept of war magnifies a community's fear into a worldview of opposition" (*When God Stops Fighting*, 8–9).

How, then, do the religions of the world enter these seemingly secular conflicts between nation-states for territorial expansion? Increased accumulation of resources and populations? Expansion of governmental and military authority?

> Religious culture can be of service to the idea of war by helping to create an enemy…Religious ideas and images can also be of service in helping to legitimize the fight, to imply that this is not just a contest between two equally moral sides, but a battle where one side is favored by God (*When God Stops Fighting*, 7–8).

Thus, both war and religion use (manipulate?) each other to justify their claims and actions in the minds of their fully-committed (or less-than-committed) adherents as well as those on the home fronts who support their efforts and further supply the necessary resources to continue the contest (and it *is* a contest of winners versus losers—good guys versus bad guys, God's anointed versus God's despised!).

To further support his theses in *When God Stops Fighting*, Juergensmeyer has chosen three case-studies: the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq (Chapter 2), the Sikh Khalistan movement in India's Punjab (Chapter 3), and the Moro movement for a Muslim Mindanao in the Philippines (Chapter 4). In addition to providing appropriate historical contexts for each, he also provides brief snippets of interviews and biographical data of important players in each of these situations *on both sides of these conflicts.* The brevity of the book, however—five chapters; 193 pages total—unfortunately, provides the committed reader with only a somewhat limited understanding of how Juergensmeyer's important concepts apply to real world scenarios. Thus, one would have to further engage with his other texts to more fully understand and appreciate his insights.

Finally, if Chapter 1, "The Trajectory of Imagined Wars," provides the aforementioned baseline of concepts critical to his understanding the nexus between war/violence and religion, Chapter 5, "How Imagined Wars End," provides a good summary of everything that has preceded, with an additional insight worth noting as well:

> These additional factors [of ending such violence] can be clustered into three categories: a loss of faith in the movement's vison, fractures in the communal consensus of the organization, and the awareness of alternative opportunities that provide new hope. (*When God Stops Fighting*, 120).

Overall, *When God Stops Fighting* is an important and welcome addition to the growing literature on war/violence and religion, not so much as a stand-alone text but as one embedded in the entire oeuvre of Juergensmeyer's contributions.

A Further Note

In his earlier text, *God at War: A Meditation on Religion and War* (2020), to which, in many ways, *When God Stops Fighting* is a companion text, Juergensmeyer sharpened his insight vis-à-vis the idea of war and its obvious parallel to the idea of religion and how both could draw upon each other to further their own agendas, writing:

> In the face of a hideous and deeply threatening reality, the idea of war is comforting. It comes as a moment of insight and a kind of mental relief. The image of war is the solution to a conceptual problem. It explains why terrible things are happening in the world (*God at War,* 23).
>
> War is a way of thinking about this chaos, giving it a dichotomous structured order, and imagining a way in which the confusion can be made clear, and the demons of danger conquered…war is a way of dealing with something that profoundly changes the foundation of our rational existence. This why war, whether as a fantasy of as an actual military engagement, is an exercise of imagination. It is a way of thinking through chaos in order to break free from the fear that it will become an all-consuming fire (*God at War,* 24).

When the word "religion" is substituted for "war," the same applies. Given the present moment in the American political landscape where public advocates of so-called "Christian nationalism" appear to view the world with such polarity, Juergensmeyer's insights appear disturbingly and frighteningly prophetic.

Steven Leonard Jacobs

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