

At cross purposes: Islam and the crucifixion of Christ, a theological response

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**Brent Neely**

Independent researcher

Abstract

The paper relates to the classic issue of Islam and the Cross of Christ. It is in two parts. The first part tackles the “textual” issues of the crucifixion (or not) in the Qur’an and *tafsir*, including some of the “minority reports” in Islamic thought. The second part moves on to a Christian theological engagement with the mainstream Islamic (if not qur’anic) denial of the crucifixion of the Messiah. Some of this section springboards off of the well-known discussion of these issues by Kenneth Cragg and others, but (perhaps) the most original emphasis in this “theological” half of the paper is the attempt to bring the Christus Victor model of the Atonement into interaction with Islamic denials of the cross of Christ.

Keywords

Atonement, Christian-Muslim theology, crucifixion, Islam, Qur’an, *tafsir*

Part one

The cross as crucial in Christian-Muslim relations

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Corinthians 1:22-25, ESV)

[157] And for their saying, “We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the Messenger of God”—yet they did not kill him, neither crucified him, only a likeness of that was shown to them. Those who are at variance concerning him surely are in doubt regarding him; they have no knowledge of him, except the following of surmise; and certainly they killed him not—no indeed; [158] God raised him up to Him; God is All-mighty, All-wise. [159] There is not one of the People of the Book but will assuredly believe in him before his death, and on the Resurrection Day he will be a witness against them. Q 4.157-159. (Arberry, adjusted)

It is well known that standard Islamic theology categorically denies that Jesus was crucified.¹ From a Christian perspective, there could hardly be a more critical divide between the two faiths than the

Corresponding author:

Brent Neely, PO Box 363, Booker, Texas 79005, USA.

Email: carmelvista@gmail.com

issue of the cross of Christ, for the cross is the core symbol of our faith, a cosmic event, and the fulcrum on which human salvation turns. Nonetheless, it can be argued that from the Islamic perspective other issues present a greater obstacle to Muslim engagement with Christian truth claims. Throughout a long and contended history, in *elite* Christian-Muslim theological debate, the dominant arenas of dispute were particularly the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation.² For Islam, it is precisely the theologies of Trinity and Incarnation that run afoul of the core Islamic dictum, *tawhid*, that is, the doctrine of the radical transcendence and unicity of God.³ For some scholars, then, the cross is *a* divide between the faiths, but probably not *the* divide. To paraphrase Mark Swanson, for the Muslim, Trinity and Incarnation are blasphemy, while the Crucifixion is merely error.⁴

For most Christians the cross of Christ will be seen as a much more definitive matter than that. There are Western scholars (whatever their personal faith) who have indeed placed the issue of the cross “front and center” when it comes to Christian-Muslim relations. Todd Lawson calls the crucifixion of Jesus “probably the greatest single obstacle” in Christian-Muslim relations.⁵ And some Christian thinkers living in the world of Islam have been emphatic about the centrality of the crucifixion when it comes to the mission of the church to Islam. One example is the accomplished Anglican missionary and scholar of Arabic, W.H.T. (“Temple”) Gairdner (d. 1928):⁶

Probably this failure to have faith in the death of Jesus Christ is a more fatal one than the rejection of other Christian doctrines; for, if a man’s heart is thoroughly broken, and softened by what he learns of the death of Christ, he will specially make Christ the Master and Owner of his life, and the rest will follow.⁷

The cross remains a hotly contested issue between Christianity and Islam. But, speaking as Christians, we must insist that integrity and fidelity to God, and to our Muslim brothers and sisters, disallow our setting aside the *kerygma* of Christ crucified as we seek to communicate across the religious divide. For the Christian, the cross is vital, definitive, and non-negotiable. It is essential to the Christian story of redemption. In this paper, we are most expressly concerned with the issue of the actual crucifixion and death, or otherwise, of Jesus; in truth, though, speech about “the cross” is often theological shorthand for the whole soteriological complex of the death-burial-resurrection-exaltation of Christ. In any case, even if much Christian-Muslim debate has “really” centered on questions related to the identity and nature of God, for the Christian, the cross actually *is* vital to precisely those questions.⁸ It is in the “foolishness” and offense of the cross that God himself reaches us.

Consider the famous “kenotic” passage of Philippians 2.5-11 on the suffering, obedience, and self-emptying of Jesus.⁹ When Paul speaks to us of Christ in this passage he is clearly communicating something about God himself. At a minimum we note the following points:

- Christ is seen to surrender *divine* prerogatives.
- Christ is declared to be “Lord” (*kurios*).
- Christ is so highly exalted that he comes to share in that exclusive, most exalted “name” (which in context could only be the sacred name of YHWH himself).
- Christ is expressly honored in terms culled from Isaiah chapter 45, which speaks of the exclusive and singular honor and authority of the One God himself.

For Paul, the death of the Servant on a cross actually reveals *God* to us. In the cross we see God participating most fully in the human story (*even to death on a cross*) so that we might participate in the divine life with him.¹⁰

In Part One of this essay we examine the issue of the crucifixion of Christ (as event or non-event) in the Qur’an, attempting to look at the text holistically, from a literary-critical perspective; we also consider the standard Islamic interpretation of the text, a conventional understanding of the

Qur'an by means of classical Muslim commentary (*tafsir*), itself based on the deployment of prophetic traditions (*hadith*). It is this *interpretive tradition* (as opposed to the Qur'an *tout simple*) that fundamentally has determined Muslim theology when it comes to the cross of Jesus. In Part Two we turn our attention to this theological chasm between the two faiths, the definitive divide over the crucifixion of Jesus—its debated historicity, purpose, and ultimate significance. More precisely, we focus on a few Islamic objections to the notion of the crucifixion of the Messiah and provide a theological response based on Christian conviction.

It is common knowledge that the crucifixion of Christ is a reality denied and excluded in mainstream Islamic thought. Denials of the death of Jesus emerge on many fronts and from multiple motivations. This instinct to reject the cross of Christ involves a variety of elements and impulses: For example, there are prevalent ideas that Christians are confused and their scriptures “corrupt.” One also finds Islamic tendencies to privilege heterodox and even dubious reports such as the so-called Gospel of Barnabas.¹¹ There are also numerous *theological* objections to the proclamation of Christ crucified. These include the issue of the impossibility of a “dying God”; the “injustice” of a substitutionary atonement; and the unthinkability of God allowing the shame of crucifixion to fall on his prophet, Jesus (particularly as Jesus functions as a precursor, type, and penultimate model to Muhammad).

One might also mention varieties of what Mark Swanson has called dilemma-questions Muslims have raised about the cross in Christian theology—questions centering on the tensions and antinomies inherent in the story; paradoxes concerning sovereignty and free will; ironies involving (evil) human intent and (blessed) divine results in the death and resurrection of Jesus; and so on.¹² The invidious connection, in the mind of Islam, of the cross with the crusades also poses a problem. In reality, there is a veritable torrent of possible Muslim objections to the Cross of Jesus. Space will permit us to interact with only a few of them here, in the second part of our essay. In any case, it is clear that the cross remains a “stumbling block” in the Muslim world. As Swanson memorably put it, the cross is “folly to the *hunafa*” (that is, the pure Islamic monotheists).¹³

Clearly, complex moral, spiritual, socio-historical, and theological agendas are key drivers behind the Islamic objections to the cross of Christ. But, on the face of it, a fundamental impediment to Muslims acknowledging the death of the Messiah on a cross is the categorical rejection of the historical verity of the event by the Qur'an itself. A bald and bold denial of the crucifixion is writ large in the holy text of Islam, or *so it is generally and almost universally assumed*. It is to that text that we now turn.

The cross in the Qur'an

The central passage of contention is Q 4.157-159 (especially 4.157) cited above. The larger context of the passage is a recitation of Jewish perfidy and resistance to God, to his messengers, to Mary, and to “the Messiah, ‘Isa son of Mary” (as Jesus is so frequently called in the Qur'an). The standard Islamic position has long been that the crucifixion never happened to Jesus, but that somehow God intervened, rescued him, and raised him to heaven. Taking this verse in isolation, the standard interpretation seems fairly reasonable, although the verses themselves are rather terse and uninformative. However, it may be advisable to consider the verse(s) in the wider qur'anic context, rather than simply as an isolated datum. It is also important to realize that upon closer examination, the actual language in the Arabic of 4.157 turns out to be anything but obvious or clear.¹⁴

There are at least two significant grammatical and semantic issues to be decided here. The first is deciding the referent to the pronoun in the phrase “they did not kill/crucify him” (incorporated within the verb, in Arabic). Who is the “they”? Here, as usual, the Qur'an is famously allusive, fluid, and spare when it comes to historical identifiers. Occasionally one encounters some

ingenious “spin” on the verse by some Christian apologists: “It was the Romans who actually killed Jesus, not the Jews; the ‘they’ is the Jews, but the Qur’an is simply stating that the killing came at Roman hands, not Jewish.” This interpretation should probably be set aside. Romans figure nowhere in the passage, but it does seem fairly clear in context that the ones who somehow failed to crucify Jesus, *or otherwise failed in their aims*, are “the Jews.”¹⁵

This hardly means that the interpretation of the entire verse is easy and clear. One may ask, what exactly is being denied here? Is any death at all being denied? Or is it the identity of the actual victim that is in doubt? Or might the real uncertainty simply lie with the question as to whether or not the Jews were ultimately victorious? And, this brings us to the second and more difficult textual issue in the verse. The complicating phrase is the expression translated by Arberry as “a likeness of that was shown to them”. This two-word expression in Arabic is notoriously hard to translate and interpret. Yusuf Ali’s translation of the Qur’an gives: “so it was made to appear to them.” Kenneth Cragg provides: “They were under the illusion that they had.”¹⁶ Tahir-ul-Qadri’s English text very freely renders it: “But (in truth) someone was made the like (of ‘Isa—Jesus) in their view.”

The basic verbal idea behind this rare construction (Arabic: *shubbiha lahum*) involves the notions of “appearing,” “seeming,” or “resembling,” sometimes with an overtone of doubt added to the picture.¹⁷ So, “the Jews” were made to think something was so that was not. But, *what* was that “something” that was “made to seem so to them”? Was it Jesus, some other person, or the crucifixion event itself that was made to resemble something else? Was the entity which was given an alternate semblance a “he” or an “it”? The grammar of the Arabic text alone will not tell us.

In the text, the bottom line is that, in the event, the Jews’ attempts were confounded. They came under an illusion. In the aftermath, many (Jews, Christians, others?) came away contending with one another, all of them unsure. (Indeed, prominent in the Qur’an’s profile of Christians is the idea that they are divided and confused.) But, how are we to be more precise in handling this verb-plus-prepositional phrase (“it was made to seem so to them”)?

With respect to the meaning of this verse (4.157), three main lines of thought present themselves: a) Perhaps someone other than Jesus was substituted for him and was victimized on the cross. This “substitution view” is the dominant one in Islamic teaching. b) Perhaps the entire event of the crucifixion was only apparent, an illusion arranged by God. c) perhaps the death of Jesus in the most literal and strict sense is not being denied at all, but rather it is his ultimately being vanquished which is denied. That is, the confounding or illusion comes in the fact that God and his prophet are actually vindicated at the end of it all, *whether or not Jesus actually underwent death on the cross*.

If we may call option “b” the “illusion view”, we will dispense with this approach rather quickly as space prohibits detailed engagement. I believe this view is unlikely on either historical or literary grounds to best explain the qur’anic text. Of the various ways to construe this “illusion” option, some represent a minority stream of Islamic interpretation of Q 4.157f., and some are not really “Islamic” approaches at all. The wide variations on this view include the idea that Jesus was crucified, but survived the experience, being resuscitated in the tomb and went on to live and to die a natural death;¹⁸ or, alternatively, there is the idea that, by a divinely-engineered illusion, Jesus only seemed to die on the cross, when in fact the “real” Jesus escaped. This might mean that *the whole event of the crucifixion was an illusion cast there by God*; or that at the crucifixion “the Christ” abandoned the “borrowed” body of Jesus; or that Jesus’ own body was always and only an illusion. These latter two options pick up on the overlap between some qur’anic language and a variety of Gnostic/Adoptionist/Docetic concepts. Think, for example, of the “Adoptionist” sound of Q 19.35 or the “Docetist” idea that Christ only “seemed to be” [whatever] in Q 4.157.¹⁹

Although the Qur’an’s view of Jesus is not truly Gnostic, there is some shared anti-incarnationism between Islamic and Gnostic theologies and, possibly, an “illusion” emphasis connected to the crucifixion. Such understandings of the crucifixion are unlikely to reflect the Qur’an’s actual meaning,

though, because the presence of lingering Gnostic Christian influence in 7th century Arabia is quite speculative.²⁰ And the Gnostic/Docetic impulse to relieve Christ of a real human body is hardly qur'anic or Islamic. Interestingly, Todd Lawson points out that our earliest documentation presenting the denial of the crucifixion of Christ as *the* Muslim interpretation of Q 4.157 comes from St. John of Damascus (early eighth century); John expounds the Muslim understanding using quasi-Docetist language.²¹

Option “c” we may term the “confounding view.” In whatever iteration of this view, the “illusion” or the “seeming” comes simply in the fact that “God wins,” that he confounds the aims of the enemies of Jesus. In essence, what is being denied is not necessarily the fact of the crucifixion of Christ, but rather the success of the Jews’ plans. On this view what the Qur’an (as opposed to Islamic theology) denies is less clear than it might seem at first blush. This understanding could be harmonized with certain voices in the Islamic exegetical tradition which ultimately fell outside the mainline consensus; a few exegetes rendered the phrase translated above as “certainly they killed him not” to mean: “they did not ‘really’ kill him.” (The idea here being that a death in body alone was not *truly* a victory since “God raised Jesus up.”)²²

Option “a,” the “substitution view,” is the dominant view in Islamic thought. This view understands the phrase “he/it was made to seem so to them” to mean that someone was caused to resemble Jesus, that person was killed, and Jesus escaped as God raptured him into Paradise. This view faces some serious historical and ethical difficulties. On the latter, it is hardly complimentary towards God that he should concoct a sleight-of-hand on the cross whereby a deception spawns an enduring faith community, Christianity (see below). On the former, there is simply no question in the earliest record (Gospels, Jewish counter-claims, pagan sources) that Jesus indeed died on the cross;²³ of all the controversy surrounding Jesus and the cross in the first century—*whether or not he died there was simply not a contested point*.

Finally, there is in fact a bit of a grammatical challenge to the substitution view. We could, of course, opt for the more vague (though possible) understanding of the verbal phrase in question; that is, “*shubbiha lahum*” is to be understood as “*it* was made to seem so to them,” where “*it*” must be a generic reference to the “situation.” If, however, we want to try to honor the text with greater precision, we might assume that the reference in the passive verbal phrase (“was made to seem”) is a pronoun referring to a named person, a “he” not an “it.” But, in this case, the only logical referent for this pronoun is Jesus himself, and that is where the problem comes in: On the standard substitution view *someone else* is made to look like Jesus; however, in terms of the grammar, the text would then be saying that “he” (i.e. Jesus) was made to appear a certain way to the onlookers.²⁴ That is not in fact how the standard substitution stories run.

[Incidentally, there are actually more than just two lexical and linguistic ambiguities in the passage we are considering. For example, one minority strand in the exegetical tradition of Islam takes the phrase translated above as “certainly they killed him not” in an entirely different manner. Note that in Arabic the singular pronoun in the phrase may be “him” or “it.” This interpretive angle renders the phrase as, “They were not certain of what they had done.”²⁵ According to some interpreters, the end of verse 157 can be understood this way: They have no *knowledge* ... except the following of surmise; and certainly they did not “kill it.” What the Jews failed to do was to “kill ‘it’;” that is, they failed to “*kill knowledge*,” the latter expression said to be Arabic idiom for “removing doubt or uncertainty.”²⁶ In other words, they remained unsure and cloudy in their apprehension.]

On the substitution theory

In any case, some form of substitutionism is the dominant lens on Q 4.157f. and on the final days of Jesus’ (first) earthly ministry in standard Muslim christology. As may already be apparent, in

traditional Islamic thought, the interpretation of the Qur'anic text is not simply a matter of grammar and literary analysis, but is heavily dependent on "properly credentialed" voices and authoritative narratives from outside the text to direct our understanding. Indeed, in traditional Muslim exegesis, stories about or sayings from the prophet, handed down by duly constituted authorities, are the *sine qua non* for a legitimate understanding of the Qur'an. These narratives or traditions (Arabic: *hadith*), evaluated and then deployed by Islamic scholars, are absolutely requisite to a conventional, "orthodox" engagement with the Qur'an.²⁷

Just about all observers acknowledge that the Qur'an is difficult to interpret and lacks a substantial narrative framework or solid historical markers to root it in its contemporary setting; it is a text crying out for further light, an explanatory frame. Through the centuries traditional Islamic scholarship has provided this frame by recourse to these *hadith*/traditions, whether found in the biographies of Muhammad or in books of *hadith*. But, this is where the divide with much non-Muslim scholarship emerges most starkly: in the secular academy there is a good deal of skepticism about the historical reliability of the *hadith* collections, even those of undeniable stature in Muslim eyes. For many Western scholars, rather than being historical light on an opaque text, the traditions are exegesis masquerading as history, narratives designed after-the-fact—both to enlighten a sometimes mysterious Qur'an, and to channel the theological interpretation of said Qur'an in the "approved" direction. Be that as it may, for conservative Muslims, there is no doubt that the right understanding of the Qur'an can only be derived from commentary (*tafsir*) properly grounded in the skillful use of *hadith*. For example, there is a prophetic *hadith* that runs to the effect that if one interprets the Qur'an by one's own opinion (that is, without reference to the traditions), that person has sinned *even if the fruits of their interpretation happen to be right!*²⁸

Given a Qur'anic text that is terse enough both to demand a more fulsome explanation and to accommodate a diverse and contradictory spectrum of explanations, the classical commentators stepped in to fill the hermeneutical gap of 4.157f. with an array of prophetic traditions. In addition to Q 4.157, the Qur'an also provides us with a series of pithy references to the death of Jesus (see below) and a *possible* nod to his role in the coming apocalypse (Q 43.61). All these passages had to be coordinated, illuminated, and/or "tamed" for the ends of a developing Sunni orthodoxy. Despite contradictions amongst the parade of *hadiths* used by the commentators, these *hadiths* were employed to smooth out the text and conform it to the contours of an emerging theology.

This Sunni theological consensus gathered around a variety of agendas and interests ranging from sectarian polemics to apocalyptic eschatology (in which the "never-having-died" Jesus returns near the End to enforce Islam on the earth). Further, the traditions also operated in service of a theology which intrinsically disallowed the salvific, atoning death of the Messiah, and which could not brook Jesus as Savior, Son, or Risen Lord. Jesus as either Suffering Servant or Anointed Son violates the essential soteriology and prophetology of the "revealed book," and casts an unacceptably deep shadow over Muhammad himself. (Interestingly, some of the non-Twelve strands of Shi'ism have entertained notions of a suffering and dying Jesus; naturally the idea of a Jesus in heavenly occultation until the end of time is satisfying as a typological model for Shi'ite thought generally.²⁹ None of this, of course, implies that Jesus is taken to be the ultimate Savior and Son of God.)

So, the august commentaries (*tafsir*/pl., *tafasir*) marshal a procession of "acceptable" *hadiths* to illuminate Q 4.157 and sister texts. As Lawson points out, it is remarkable that these dominant "substitution *hadiths*" are not traced back to Muhammad but only as far as the Companion, Ibn 'Abbas [d. 687].³⁰ In any case, a rough outline emerges: Jesus was not crucified, but was rescued from the horror and ignominy at the last moment. God elevated him to heaven, where he now waits in timeless abeyance. Meanwhile, the image of Jesus was cast on another (the "substitute"), thereby confounding the Jews who had this unfortunate soul crucified instead. At the end of days, Jesus

will return as Islamic warrior and ruler, to rescue the beleaguered *umma* (the Muslim community), and to impose total Islamic dominance on all lands. Notably, he extinguishes the Dajjal (the Muslim Antichrist), and his mostly Jewish followers; brings all non-Muslims into Islam or death; and expunges all pigs *and all crosses* (!).³¹ Only Islam remains. God then saves Jesus and the Muslims from the onslaught of Gog and Magog. After a period of rule, he too will marry, die, and be buried next to Muhammad in Medina, just prior to the general resurrection.³²

There are a diversity of reports about who the “substitute” in question is. In some cases, God exacts revenge on the traitor, casting the image of Jesus on Judas. (This is the claim in the “Gospel of Barnabas.”) In other cases the individual is named “Titanus.” Sometimes Simon of Cyrene seems to be the candidate. (This last option has parallels in a few “alternate” gospels of a more Adoptionist or Gnostic hue.)³³ In some versions of the story, it is in fact one of the faithful disciples who volunteers to sacrifice himself and receive Jesus’ image (see further on such traditions below).

Of course, there are vast collections of prophetic traditions, beyond those deemed “acceptable” to mainstream Muslim scholarship. Among the many stories, there are those that include details from the New Testament Gospels’ passion narrative, with its foreboding and with Jesus undergoing suffering and abuse. But, then, at the last moment, there is the *deus ex machina* rescuing Jesus from the cross.³⁴ “Substitutionism” could take a variety of forms: in keeping with his rationalist credentials, the famous Mu’tazilite scholar, ‘Abd al-Jabbar (d. 1025), provides a detailed “substitution story” which avoids any miraculous and direct divine intervention; the crucifixion of an “alternate” all comes down to an unfortunate sequence of decisions, either errant or conspiratorial.³⁵ A very few reports, usually classified as “dubious” by Muslim scholars, actually do include Jesus dying on the cross. (Wahb b. Munabbih has a report on three hours/days in the grave. Baydawi carries a report allowing for a seven-hour interlude of death before Jesus is raptured.³⁶) Such “minority report” narratives have, however, carried almost no weight in mainstream Muslim thought.

Q 19.33, Q 3.55, and the prophetic traditions

We will continue to investigate the Islamic understanding of Q 4.157f. based on the “substitution stories.” However, in constructing the qur’anic picture of Jesus (and especially the end of his earthly ministry), one must deal with *all* the relevant passages in the qur’anic text, whether from a traditional Muslim perspective or with a more critical or skeptical view. Two verses in particular must be brought into the discussion of the meaning of 4.157f. These are Q 19.33 and 3.55.

In Q 19.33 (the infant) Jesus says, “Peace be upon me, the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised up alive!” (Arberry). On the most straightforward reading, these lines imply a normal course of life-death-resurrection. Despite the bewildering variations in translations, it seems fair to say that on their own terms these verses would likely place the death of Jesus already in the past. One encounters virtually identical wording (of life-death-resurrection) applied to John the Baptist (Yahya) in Q 19.15; in John’s case there clearly is no question of a “death delayed.”

Of course, in *hadith*-based interpretation, this is *not* how Q 19.33 is taken. As indicated, the expectation is in place for the as yet “deathless” Messiah to return from heavenly occultation at the last days, eventually to die, and then to be raised up again with all humanity at the Judgment. There is no whisper of this in the qur’anic text itself, but questions of hermeneutics can never be settled in isolation from questions of authority. And, for conservative Muslims, it is clear that the authority for “right interpretation” lies within the guild of Muslim scholars (*‘ulama’*) relying on *hadith*-based interpretation in the classical commentaries.

Q 3.55 reads:

When God said, "Jesus, I will *take thee to Me* and will raise thee to Me and I will purify thee of those who believe not. I will set thy followers above the unbelievers till the Resurrection Day. Then unto Me shall you return, and I will decide between you, as to what you were at variance on." (Arberry)

The verbal phrase in italics above (*mutawaffika*, in Arabic³⁷) is critical. The same verb, *tawaffa*, is used of Jesus in Q 5.117. This verbal form is used 25 times in the Qur'an, and overwhelmingly it is linked to the notion of "death," even in contexts which may also involve the idea of "sleep" or other connotations such as "taking a soul" or being "brought to full term" by God. A plausible translation could be "I will cause thee to die, and raise you to myself." However, it is the rare translation that allows any connection to death for this verbal root *in the two verses related to Jesus*. (Revealingly, the Muhammad Ali translation, which represents an Ahmadiyya outlook, does read "cause thee to die." For the Ahmadis, Jesus survived the cross and later died a natural death.) If the verb is allowed the natural sense of "cause to die," both 3.55 and 5.117 seem comfortably to speak of the presumably past death of Jesus.³⁸ (In a related vein, Q 5.75 and 3.144 use almost identical language in asserting the mortality of Jesus and of Muhammad, though with no use of the verb *tawaffa*; again, there is no hint of a miraculous delay of death for Jesus.)

But, theology, lexicology, and exegesis inevitably compete for space on a shared stage with the result that in most cases 3.55 is understood to refer to the "rapture" or "raising to heaven" of Jesus (*take you to me*), rather than to his death. In terms of the syntax, this understanding makes the text vaguely redundant, but it sits nicely with the *hadith*-based outline of Jesus' career and coming role in the apocalypse. It also furthers the agenda of a cross-less Christ.

And, how have the Muslim commentators dealt with the phrase, "take thee to me" (etc.)? To simplify, three main lines of explication emerge in the sources. The phrase may mean, a) "cause you to sleep," b) "seize you," or c) "cause you to die." Before exploring these options further, it may be useful to digress just a little to look at tradition(s) on Jesus' final day on earth in his prophetic career, the day in which God "took Jesus up to him."

Gabriel Reynolds points to one *hadith* brought by the great commentator Tabari (d. 923) which, Reynolds says, displays "midrashic creativity." It reveals that Jesus had 13 disciples. One called Sergius volunteers to take Jesus' place (and image) as his enemies advance. Jesus *falls asleep* and then *is taken into heaven*. The Jews who detain and kill Sergius fall into argument about why there are only 12 disciples.³⁹ Here we find exegetical warrant for the "cause-to-sleep" understanding of Q 3.55;⁴⁰ a general explanation of Q 4.157f; a description of the "doubt, variance, and dispute" of those confounded by God's intervention (4.157); and the origins of the "error" of the Twelve Disciples tradition.

Another tradition brought by Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) provides a different explanation of the phrase about those who "dispute" and "are in doubt." It relates that after Jesus disappeared his followers divided into three groups, which are anachronistically described as the Muslims ("true" followers of Christ) and the Jacobites and the Nestorians (two of the three main churches active in the Islamic empire of the Middle Ages). The latter two groups kill and eradicate the Muslims. Here we have traditional exegesis *cum* heresiography, as Reynolds says. This account also conveniently explains why there is no solid historical trace of the supposed original Muslim followers of Jesus—the "corrupt" churches violently removed them!⁴¹

Turning back to the understanding of the phrase *mutawaffika* in Q 3.55, many commentators, in harmony with the traditions about Jesus' ascension before any crucifixion, take it to mean that Jesus was "caused to sleep" or was "seized" by God before being "raptured" to him. Either of these two uses is clearly intended to dovetail with versions of the ascension/escape stories from the

“substitution *hadiths*.” [The famous 15th-century commentary, *Tafsir al Jalalayn*, on Q 3:55 takes the phrase (*mutawaffika*) to mean “I am seizing you.”⁴²] Again, this understanding of this particular verb in the Qur’an is applied in an atypical way to Jesus as compared to the other 23 verses that have the same verb.

But, there is also the live lexical possibility of option “c,” namely, “cause you to die.” Some mainstream Sunni commentators do allow for this interpretation, but they still subject it to the controlling hermeneutic of consensus theology; for these interpreters, we are dealing with a figure of speech in Q 3.55, one in which there is a stylistic dischronology in the text: *mutawaffika* does refer to the death of Jesus. However, even though the death is mentioned before “the raising to God,” it actually happens *afterwards*, as the *hadiths* state—the reference is to his coming death at the end of days. This is the understanding of Ibn Kathir, the classical commentator much lauded by today’s *salafi* Muslims.⁴³ (The Arabic term for this figure of speech in which the latter is mentioned before the former is *taqdim wa-ta’khir*.)

There is, then, even within the privileged reports of the classical *hadith* collections, a welter of internal contradictions or uncertainties—for example, the question of the identity of the alleged “substitute.” Further, there are multiple grammatically-possible understandings of key qur’anic verses. Nonetheless, Sunni theology doggedly manages to derive its preferred meanings from holy writ. From an outside perspective, the control that the *hadith* stories exert on the qur’anic text at the hands of the conventional Muslim commentators is quite fantastic. On the other hand, for the conservative Muslim there is no embarrassment in this, “no bones about it”. Functionally, the authoritative *hadith* are also revelation; interpretation without them is invalid. It might seem that the tail is wagging the dog, but for the “orthodox” that is just as it should be.

Back to Q 4.157

There is obvious antipathy to the cross in Muslim theology, on multiple levels. One of the more common reasons for denying the crucifixion of Jesus is the commitment to the shame-free honor, impeccability, and manifest triumph of God’s messengers—especially the “major” ones like Jesus (who, like Muhammad, is called “Messenger of God” in the Qur’an, alongside other even more remarkable honorifics [e.g. Q 4.171]). It is important to note that the prior messengers in the Qur’an are intended to cut a typological profile prefiguring Muhammad’s own dramatically, and politically, successful career. So, while prophets typically struggle and face rejection by their people, and some are even said to have been martyred, such a level of shame—that Jesus should be so humiliated and brutalized by his enemies—that is unthinkable. Right and Might must be seen to be aligned. And so, to achieve his righteous and victorious ends, God himself is said to the “the best of schemers” (Q 3.54) against the recalcitrant Jews.

We have seen that the traditions are used to portray Jesus as a key figure in the latter days, just prior to the resurrection and judgment. This “apocalyptic” focus of the *hadiths* is tied into the “judgment language” of 4.159 (*There is not one of the People of the Book but will assuredly believe in him before his death, and on the Resurrection Day he will be a witness against them*⁴⁴) and 3.55 (*I will set thy followers above the unbelievers till the Resurrection Day. Then unto Me shall you return, and I will decide between you, as to what you were at variance on*). Reynolds rightly points out that, in the Qur’an, Jesus is tied to ultimate eschatology, the Day of Resurrection and Judgment; however, on its own terms, the text does not so clearly tie him to apocalyptic, the events of the latter days of history.⁴⁵ That ingredient is almost entirely supplied by the *hadiths*.

One might wonder why the apocalyptic *hadiths* (on the return from heaven of a Jesus who has not yet died) have been afforded such importance from the Middle Ages up to our day. One major reason is that the structure of the stories of the latter-days Jesus serves emphatically to set other

competing monotheist groups “in their place.”⁴⁶ (Jesus *in some ways* overshadows the other messianic figure so prominent in Shi‘i Islam, the Mahdi; Jesus kills the Jewish allies of the Dajjal; Jesus breaks the crosses and either vanquishes or “Islamizes” everyone else, Christians included.)⁴⁷ In today’s world, on the internet no less, apocalyptic *hadiths* are still deployed as polemic against competing confessions.

If we try to approach the Qur’an holistically, free from the boundaries established by the exegetical traditions, a very different possibility for understanding Q 4.157f. emerges. Gabriel Reynolds would translate Q 3.55 along the following lines: “... I will make you die, raise you up to me, and purify you from those who disbelieved...” He then argues that this sequence in Q 3.55 is programmatic for our understanding of Q 4.157: That sequence is exactly what happened in 4.157.⁴⁸

The point of Q 4.157 with respect to the death of Jesus on a cross is that the Jews did not *really* bring any of this about, God did! After all, from the Qur’an’s own perspective it is clear, only God actually takes and gives life. For example, when the early Muslim warriors killed, it *really* was God who did it.⁴⁹ On 4.157, Reynolds contradicts conventional interpretation by 180 degrees: Contextually, Q 4.157 falls in a pericope excoriating the Jews for their sins. Indeed, a frequent charge against the Jews is “killing the prophets” (Q 2.91; 3.181f.; 4.155 (!); 5.70). So, Q 4.157 actually presents Jesus’ death *precisely as an illustration of this very point*.⁵⁰ Arguably, this is why the passage ends (4.159) with Jesus judging his slayers on Judgment Day. This passage’s defense of both Jesus and Mary is reminiscent of attacks on the same in the Talmud,⁵¹ and is yet another reminder that the Qur’an was birthed in a context of inter-religious contest, the so-called “sectarian milieu.” The twin purposes of this passage are a denunciation of the Jews and an affirmation of God’s sovereignty over life and death.⁵²

To sum up, the larger passage seeks to critique the Jews and refute their claims (not necessarily to deny that Jesus really died). In effect, the Qur’an could be saying, “Don’t think of the Jews as having killed Jesus; actually God took him (in death). God won, and Jesus will be vindicated over his enemies.” Taken in its broader context, Reynolds argues, Q 4.157f. is calling on the hearer to take the whole event of the crucifixion as God’s doing, an event by which he outwits Jesus’ enemies. The point of the passage is not therefore to insist that Jesus did not die on the cross, but simply to insist, by way of flourishing—if confusing—Qur’anic rhetoric, that his enemies did not accomplish their ends. As Cragg argues, the “being made to seem” has nothing to do with a “substitute” interjected, but rather implies that the effect of the event of the cross was “other than it seemed” to the onlookers and enemies.⁵³ This is a version of what we above have called the “confounding” interpretation of Q 4.157-159. It may be suggested that the “negation” of Q 4.157-159 is “a negation of fact *on behalf of a negation of significance*, that the apparently tragic end was no end at all but a spiritual triumph.”⁵⁴ (Compare the view of the martyrs enjoined in Q 3.169: Don’t think of them as dead, for they are alive with their Lord.)

Possible Muslim stances on “the cross”

Of course, Christian apologists were not slow to point to the ethical/moral dilemma created by positing that either a substitute was killed on the cross or that God cast an illusion there; the East Syrian Catholicos, Timothy I, in the late eighth century is already criticizing the notion of “casting an illusion” or “making things seem to be other than they were.”⁵⁵ But Muslims too have struggled over the logical or ethical implications of the substitution stories of the *hadiths*. Is such “trickery,” and its massive consequences, worthy of God? Some exegetes (including the great Tabari [d. 923]) have tried to hold that the Christian claim that Jesus was crucified is in fact wrong, while at the same time assuming that this errant belief was innocently held.⁵⁶

The famous exegete Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1210) acknowledges the difficulties of the Substitution theory's "image-projection" narrative. For Razi, the idea of an illusion/substitute *might* be viewed as ethically problematic, but it *certainly* presents a challenge to the principle of "secure historical testimony" on which so much Islamic thought depends.⁵⁷ Razi's ruminations on these questions are expansive and varied, and Robinson (in his work just cited) assumes that, as an Ash'arite theologian, Razi would be unlikely to hold God's ethics up to scrutiny. However that may be, Razi ultimately seems to come down on the side of God's free right to enact "exceptional" miracles; Razi *may* allow that the Qur'an asserts a "substitution," or it may simply be that a conspiracy of deceptive reporting provided the momentum to the story currently disseminated among Jews and Christians. Little wonder that Martin Whittingham speaks of the "twists and turns" in al-Razi's argumentation.⁵⁸

The reader will already have gleaned that throughout the historical record there has been a faint witness running counter to the conventional Islamic stance that Jesus did not die. There have been those Sufi or Shi'i mystics who focused exclusively on the "spiritual escape" of Christ, leaving open the possibility that the body may actually have died, or simply that the entire result remains shrouded in mystery. Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240) seems to skip the cross and death issue, and his attention simply jumps, with Christ's spirit, to the Fourth Heaven.⁵⁹ Lawson highlights the trend in which some of the ancient commentators held that Jesus was indeed crucified and his body died, but he was also vindicated and raised (at least "spiritually"). This view appears in the works of Isma'ili and Zaydi Shi'is (and related philosophical movements like the "Brethren of Purity"), but does not take hold among the dominant Twelver Shi'ites, or, of course, the Sunnis. It is, surprisingly, arguable, however, that the stalwart Sunni great, al-Ghazali (d. 1111) may have been influenced by this view.⁶⁰ None of this implies for these Muslim thinkers that Jesus is therefore the Son of God or atoning Savior. Further, even in *some* Islamic interpretations which allow that Jesus' body died (with his spirit ascending to God), the idea of his death *at the hands of his enemies* is still denied.⁶¹ (Interestingly, in his apologetic to Islam, the Miaphysite Christian theologian, Abu Ra'ita [d. ca. 830], read Q 4.157f. as asserting the failure of the Jews to kill Christ's "divine nature," even though his body did expire.⁶² Similar argumentation is found in a 14th century Christian apologetic based on the earlier work by Paul of Antioch.⁶³)

There is also a small stream of progressive Islamic thought which abandons the substitution theory of traditional commentary as unworthy, both historically and also theologically/ethically.⁶⁴ Mahmoud Ayoub is representative of this intellectual strain.⁶⁵ He argues that to take the Qur'an in 4.157f. as making a negative historical statement is to miss its point (and to detour down the fruitless path of "substitution theory"). Rather the Qur'an is making a theological assertion that human wrong did not (and cannot) overcome God's "Word" and purposes. Jesus may well have been crucified, but this could never extinguish the "light of God."⁶⁶

Still, there remains no doubt that denial of the crucifixion of Christ generally retains its status as required "orthodoxy" in Islamic thought in the modern period. The famous Egyptian commentary from the early 12th century, the *Manar Commentary*, in the section on Q 4.157, includes an attack on the historicity of the crucifixion of Jesus; an attack on the reliability of the Gospels; an argument for the Islamic notion of reward and salvation; the assertion that a theology of redemption through the cross is pagan; and so on.⁶⁷ The authors of the *Manar Commentary* posit that it was Judas who was crucified; this commentary leans for support on the Gospel of Barnabas and assumes that Jesus did die a natural death before his assumption. Notably, it rejects the *hadiths* on the return of Jesus.⁶⁸ In his commentary, Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), the Islamist ideologue, includes mention of both the New Testament gospels' witness, as well as the narrative in the Gospel of Barnabas. Qutb holds that the historical record as a whole is thoroughly obfuscated and thus the truth about the crucifixion can only be known via (qur'anic) revelation. For him, we cannot know the mode of

Jesus' gathering to heaven (body and soul, or soul only?), but we must hold (with the Qur'an) that he was neither killed nor crucified by the Jews; it seems another victim was provided.⁶⁹

When it comes to the crucifixion, Christians assessing the Qur'an may well be impressed with argumentation along the lines given above: *The Qur'an denies Jewish success or even primary agency in doing Jesus in; it does not deny his actual death on the cross. It rather affirms his ascension, divine victory, and ultimate vindication.* Be that as it may, such literary-critical argumentation holds virtually no water for most Muslims. Whittingham deals with the attempt by some (e.g. Temple Gairdner) to commend the reliability of the Gospel passion narratives on the grounds that they meet the Islamic standard of multiple-attestation called *tawatur*;⁷⁰ though the issue of the "*mutawatir*" (multiply-attested) nature of the Christian crucifixion reports has sometimes been taken up by Christian and Muslim interlocutors, for the Muslim, these matters really are secondary. For the Muslim, the ultimate *mutawatir* text is the Qur'an. Thus, in these and all issues, *it* alone is *the* criterion (the Furqan).

But, in fact, to say that is not really to go far enough: for most Muslims, the true watershed is the Qur'an *as it has been authoritatively understood in Islamic tradition.* As Lawson points out, it is not so much the Qur'an but Muslim commentary on it (*tafsir*) which denies the crucifixion of Jesus.⁷¹ To be more precise, Lawson is at pains to show that mainstream Islamic commentary has come to be dominated by the Substitution view, which denies the crucifixion of Jesus, *but that in fact the history of Islamic commentary reveals more diversity and dissenting opinion on the matter than is commonly thought.* In any case, the weight of tradition is behind scholarly commentary which establishes the Substitution view. *That* is where the authority lies. On these grounds, for the Muslim, the crucifixion of Jesus is categorically and unambiguously denied in the text. The Substitution view remains dominant, even today. And we must engage Islam as it is, not as we think it should be.

In the rest of this essay we turn our attention to a Christian understanding of the cross of Christ and its significance. As we do so, we seek to engage Islamic counter-claims on this very issue. In particular, Kenneth Cragg's thought on the interface of Christianity and Islam over the cross leaves its imprint in these pages. About Jesus and the cross he rightly says: "Islamic convictions about Jesus and the Cross have never simply been those of mere investigators dealing with evidence. They have been those of believers persuaded already by theology."⁷²

Turning again to the *Manar Commentary* the Muslim scholar, Rashid Rida, puts the contrasting views and Muslim objections sharply and starkly:

The truth is that Islam is the religion of Muhammad and the Messiah and all the prophets. But it is not possible to combine the religion of the Qur'an (which is without error and cannot be contradicted) and the paulinist religion, which is based on the premise that three-are-one and one-is-three and also on the pagan redemption-doctrine of the crucifixion. How can one combine *tawhid* (Islamic monotheism) and Trinity? Or how can one combine the doctrine of human salvation and happiness through knowledge and effort and the doctrine of salvation by one's faith in a Lord who cursed himself and tortured himself for the sake of his own servants, even though [God's] purposes [of salvation] still might not be achieved through all this?⁷³

In what follows I seek to forward a Christian theology of the cross in view of Muslim objections and to put my views forward with clarity and conviction. My aim is to hold to the historic Christian *kerygma* of the cross without demurral, but with respect towards those who do demur. My goal is not "debate," for in this matter (and most issues of ultimate importance) we simply do not inhabit a cosmos that will provide irrefutable, empirical "proofs" that must inevitably command the ascent of all "reasonable people." That fundamentally is not the sort of world we all live in. So, I simply hope to present Christian conviction about the cross, in the context of Islamic denials, with both

fidelity and integrity. While disavowing the aim of “winning an argument,” I do hope my reflections are coherent, and perhaps even persuasive to some.

Part two

For if he was crucified in fancy only, salvation is a fancy also, since our salvation comes from the Cross. (Cyril of Jerusalem)⁷⁴

The cross and the law: Healing the hole in the human heart

To approximate Cragg’s happy turn of phrase, the mainline Islamic position with respect to whether the crucifixion of Jesus happened is that historically it did not, redemptively it need not, and morally it should not.⁷⁵ Characteristically, though, Cragg seeks as much common ground with Islam as possible, and he underlines that, when it comes to the events surrounding the crucifixion, the Christian and the Muslim can at least agree on the evil intent of humanity and on the unfailing fidelity of Jesus, though not on the soteriological intent of God.⁷⁶ The cross is what happens when a love like Jesus’ encounters a world like ours.⁷⁷ And as the trilingual sign above Jesus’ head would indicate, the cross is for us, for all the world. This event in ancient Palestine reveals our common condition.

We must make a brief comment on the side about the term “salvation,” for here we are underlining the Christian conviction that in the cross of Christ is our *salvation*. It can be argued that “salvation” is more a Christian category than Muslim. That may well be, but my task here is to write *as a Christian*, although hopefully with a measure of sensitivity to things Islamic. Furthermore, whatever the terminology, Islam surely has much to say about humanity’s final state, judgment and reward, and a right relating to God. Salvation is one term relevant to this complex of ideas. With such cautions in mind, we shall continue to speak of “soteriological” matters.

Jesus was faithful to his mission, but was that mission accomplished by “raptured escape” or “costly embrace”?⁷⁸ For the Christian, faith is still predicated on Jesus crucified and risen; Islam holds to the conviction that for Jesus it was a crucifixion avoided by means of a mysterious reception into heaven. The question of the mode of Jesus’ faithful obedience (cross or rapture) is tied to the nature of his mission in the first place, which itself is tied, in part, to questions of spiritual anthropology: What is the human condition, the human need? What is required for wholeness, salvation, or right relationship between humanity and God? On this point, the cross of Christ speaks volumes, for its darkness, degradation, and destruction highlight the depth of human hurt, loss, and need. The cross is the metric of the human plight. Human wrong, sin, and evil being that bad, required an antidote that severe. Salvation to be effective must intersect at the point of our human tragedy, at the juncture of our willful sin. On the cross it does.

In contrast, Islam’s answer to the dilemma of human sin, evil, and “lostness” seems simply to be to apply the light or guidance of divine revelation. “Divine command” and “heavenly reminder” are required to rectify human erring, to redirect human straying, to remind human forgetfulness. Put simplistically, the answer to human ills, the path to beatitude, is the application of God’s law, that is, the Shari’a, founded on Qur’an and Sunnah. The answer is to apply the right by means of might. As Rida put it above, Islam’s is a “doctrine of human salvation and happiness through knowledge and effort.”

From a Christian standpoint, this solution is inadequate “and problematic.”⁷⁹ And what of our spiritual anthropology according to the Qur’an? What is humanity’s nature and need? What are the means of wholeness, restoration, or “salvation”? Well, positively, humankind has, uniquely among

God's creatures, received the "breath of God" (Q 38.72; 15.29; etc.) and is said to be born in a state of religious purity and right predisposition (*fitra*— e.g. Q 30.30). (A famous series of *hadiths* on the *fitra* held that everyone is born into this state of purity/Islam, and "unfortunately" it is one's parents who make of the child a "Jew or a Christian." This tradition was important in protracted debates centered around free will and predestination.) We are made in the "fairest form" (Q 95.4). On the other hand, humans are weak, prone to stray from God's path and direction, subject to forgetfulness of God and to erring. *Shirk*, the great sin of associating other things with him, and idolatry are all too common. And thus, the Qur'an is brought as a bracing call to return to "the straight path," to abandon "going to excess," and to pursue the (right) "middle path" (Q 2.143).

Problem and solution come off as relatively simple. What Christians think of as humanity's warping due to sin is in reality mainly a matter of "ignorance," and thus divine books come primarily as "guidance" (*huda*, cf. Q 2.1-6; 6.88) or as a "reminder" (e.g. Q 3.58; 6.90; 7.2, 63, 69) to rectify the ill. It would seem that the qur'anic view of the human condition lacks both the grandeur and the horror of the biblical narrative: on the one hand, we are not said to be made in God's own image,⁸⁰ created for fellowship with him. On the other hand, the doctrine of *fitra* readily denies or papers over the notion of a Fall into original sin.⁸¹

While to my mind the Qur'an is in fact too cursory with respect to plumbing the significance of human sin, we must acknowledge, with Cragg, that it does deploy *language* which graphically implies the radical, scarring nature of evil when it uses phrases such as "wronging of the self" (*zulm al-nafs*) and "sickness in the heart" (*marad fil-qalb*).⁸² The weight of these terms seems not to be given its due, however, when it comes to Islamic theories of sin, "salvation," and reward and retribution.

As D Miller articulates so well,⁸³ many of the key anthropological (and thus hamartiological and soteriological) differences between Bible and Qur'an emerge at the very beginning. In the story of Adam's sin in the Qur'an [e.g. Q 20.115-124] we do not really have a devastating Fall wreaking havoc on humanity and nature. We seem simply to have an errant, forgetful Adam, fallen into ignorance and needing "guidance." With no hint at any coming redemption, almost with casual fiat, God simply forgives and guides the wayward man, Islam's first prophet. (The text is ambiguous as to whether or not Adam is explicitly said to repent [Q 2.37; 20.122], and the translations thus vary on this point.)

In my view, it is precisely here that we encounter something of a theological disconnect in the Qur'an. On the one hand, the core human problem, "sin" if you will, seems not to be really that drastic after all: weakness, forgetfulness, ignorance, or what have you. There seems to be no real concern with a radical human depravity or an offense to a holy God. No, God remains remotely sovereign, utterly free simply to forgive (or condemn) as he wishes.⁸⁴ On the other hand, some of the most graphic, powerful, and even lurid passages in the book are in its descriptions of hell, of the horrific eternal torment of the Fire. Qur'anic eschatology suspends heavy warning (and also potential reward) over the heads of its audience.⁸⁵ Divine retribution is said to be exhaustive and exact,⁸⁶ horrific,⁸⁷ and abjectly humiliating.⁸⁸

The emphatic and excruciating stress placed on the ultimate requite seems out of proportion to the relatively light assessment of the actual depth of humanity's core problem. Evil is writ large in the human story, and according to the Qur'an (let alone the even more graphic *hadiths*), the price for sin, rebellion, or idolatrous infidelity (*kufir*) is astronomically high. And yet, for all that, the nature and depth of the illness of the human soul is somehow underplayed in qur'anic anthropology.

Now, on a Muslim accounting, none of this is usually conceived of as problematic. The whole range of possible human behavior is assessed along a legal spectrum from things required to recommended to neutral to discouraged to forbidden; at times the *inherent* rightness or wrongness of any given act is far from clear.⁸⁹ Sinning is neither a dark state of the human disposition, nor an

action offending a holy God and severing a family-like bond to a Father. But, once again, speaking as a Christian, it is hard to see solid grounds on which the God of the Qur'an should care all that much about either human sin or submission.

In an Islamic anthropology humanity is not radically fallen and in desperate need of redemption. Rather, we are merely "straying," "ignorant," "forgetful," and "weak." All that is required is prophets with books, heavenly guidance, which, *once implemented*, will put human society back on track. (There is, of course, a heavy community, social, and even political emphasis inherent to Islamic thought and theology.) Rectifying the human condition before God may be boiled down to apprehending and heeding God's guidance, submitting to God and his Messenger, by submitting to his revelation, the Qur'an, or (more fully) to that elusive entity the Shari'a. In terms of Christian theology (and, I would argue, in terms of lived experience) this misses the depth of the human problem, and thus misdirects the solution. If the diagnosis is missed, the prescription will miss.

However useful the concept may be on other grounds, the project of applying divine law so as to set right our relation to God, or even to heal society, is not up to bearing the strain placed upon it. The law cannot transform the human soul. Further, this approach (sometimes termed "reformism" or simply "Islamism") when aggressively implemented tempts fate, courting further ills and unintended consequences. When the religious elite, or any other authority, are unduly empowered to enforce "the divine will" in society, new horrors emerge because coercive might has been entrusted to those who (on a Christian reading) are as radically fallen and susceptible to evil's seductions as any other.

An over-optimistic assessment of the human condition, the glossing over or minimizing of our moral brokenness, is as spiritually and socially dangerous as an anthropology of morose pessimism and despair. But, painful and dark as it must appear at first blush, a theology of the cross speaks power and hope to humanity in its darkened state. The cross of Christ is an expression of God's love for and commitment to us, precisely as we are. The evil and brutality of the crucifixion are the measure of the darkness of the human heart estranged from God; the cross *is* the measure of our sin, the measure of our deficit, and it is there that God meets us. The cross represents a starkly realistic evaluation of our spiritual state. In the cross, as both fact and symbol, the tragedy of human sin is taken at its fullest measure, and evil is borne away by Christ.⁹⁰

God in Christ did not underestimate, let alone paper over, the consequences of human wrong, rather he absorbed them. How is such healing, forgiveness, and transformation accomplished in the cross? To be frank, the human mind cannot exhaustively explain the dynamics of redemption. Nonetheless, we shall have more to say about the mysteries of atonement and salvation below. But first we try to take account of some common Muslim objections to the cross of Christ.

Does the cross demean God?

The phrase "take account" is deliberately chosen. While the freedom and forgiveness of the cross of Christ is earnestly commended here, our intention is not to present a scholastic syllogism or rationalistic proof to trump a counter-claim. Again, in the here-and-now none of us operates in the realm of "ultimate and undeniable proofs." Rather, our goal is to respond to these important theological challenges from within the framework of Christian faith, with the hope that the process may be fruitful for proponent, detractor, and inquirer alike.

Above we noted that there is angst and antagonism on the part of most Muslims to the notion that God would allow his great prophet, Jesus/'Isa, to bear such ignominy in crucifixion. The cross is seen to demean the prophet. In reality, however, we ought not to stop there. If in the crucifixion God's prophet is demeaned, then what does that say of God himself? God is the real issue. Does not the cross proclaimed by the apostles demean God himself? That must never be!

For the Muslim, God has no need in any case to stoop to such unworthy measures to restore and to forgive. The whole superstructure of atonement theory is (for Islam) an undignified and unnecessary construct. Forgiveness is easy for God: as easy as was his creation of Adam himself. He need only say, "Be . . . and it is" (Q 3.59)."⁹¹ Such loss, defeat, and shame are contrary to the honor of God, and indeed to his ways with prophets and nations. Jesus was, perhaps, only a precursor to Muhammad. But surely the course of Jesus' career, precisely *as* a type of the coming final Messenger, could not end in such disaster! Muhammad's travail was real, but had to end in a "manifest triumph" on the political and temporal plane.⁹² There is then no possibility of a cross, not for Christ, not for any of God's key envoys. That is not God's way, for, after all, "God is great" (*allahu akbar*)!

The Christian, however, comes at this very same issue from the diametrically opposed direction. Will there be mystery and paradox involved here, realities that transcend our human ken? Undoubtedly. That is hardly a fatal problem for people of faith; by definition believers have a metaphysic which extends beyond the merely empirical and routinely material. And this is where Christian thought inverts Islamic intuition: in seeking to aggrandize God, Muslims may be limiting him. We ought not deploy even time-honored dogma to muzzle him. We ought not use doctrine to prohibit God's breathtaking, unexpected, unearned condescension. We should not disallow his "stooping" in compassion.⁹³ It may well be that such humility on the part of the King offends us. It offends us not only because of what it says about God, but also because of what it says about us. The possibility of such offense is hardly new, but is there in the earliest record of the apostolic preaching (1 Cor. 1.22-23). The cross portrays the depths to which God had to descend in order to lift me. The cross hurts. It hurts our pride, our self-view, our presumed status or self-sufficiency. In fact, we must be hurt to be healed.

Paradoxically, the cross also reveals the majesty and mystery of God. Think of the intertwining of "glory" and "being lifted up" in the Gospel of John, where the latter expression points in the first instance to the crucifixion:

Had the cross been Jesus's end, it would not have revealed God. But, seen in the light of his manifest glory in heaven, it is the supreme revelation on earth of God's glory. It is what 1:14 ("we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth") especially refers to. This investment of the horror and shame of the cross with glory makes sense because glory is the manifestation of God's character. The cross as the supreme enactment of God's love is also the supreme revelation of his glory— of who he is . . . John is not, as has been alleged, suppressing the horror and shame [of crucifixion] in order to turn the death of Jesus into a glorious act of divine heroism. This would negate the whole purpose of John's use of the language of glorification, which is that the horror and shame of the event constitute the extraordinary lengths to which God's love for the world went.⁹⁴

Yes, the cross cuts the root of human pride; it bursts the limits of our comprehension and insight. The cross demands that we acknowledge that divine "foolishness" trumps our wisdom (1 Cor. 1.25). And, as we shall explore, the crucifixion (and resurrection) was a shocking, brilliant, and unanticipated tour-de-force, an act of *power* by which God disarmed evil, and upended sin, death, and rebellion. In bearing the cross, Jesus unveils the strength of God, his power, and his surprising wisdom (1 Cor. 1.17-18, 24, 30). Consider that Paul tells us that the Gospel unleashes the "power" of God to save (Rom. 1.16); this is clearly consequent on the "powerful" raising of the crucified Jesus as reigning Messiah (Rom. 1.3-4). All of this is *the* dramatic last-days intervention by God, a mystery now "revealed" (Rom. 1.17; Greek: *apokalypytetai*). By the death of the Son, death itself is undone. The "best of schemers" (Q 3.54) indeed! (In fact, there is an intriguing linkage between the paradigms of "wisdom" and "power" in biblical literature informed by an "apocalyptic mood,"

from Isaiah to 1 Corinthians, from the gospels to Revelation; God *powerfully* intervenes in the world, upending evil and establishing his rule, by the revelation of his deep wisdom, a mystery once hidden from the world's "wisdom elite," but now revealed to those with "eyes to see" and "ears to hear.")

Beyond all doubt, the cross of Christ was from the start a measure of shame, a political and social horror in the pagan world generally, and a sure sign of messianic failure and even divine curse in the Jewish world. Christ and his cross remain a stone of stumbling in our world today. The cross is at one level a symbol of shame as a measure of our human brokenness—Christ comes *for* us and also *to represent* us. No doubt, in Islamic thought and in the world of shame/honor cultures, this "shame bearing" is indeed a big shock. But the challenge is for the Muslim to see that in the Christian story the cross is not a picture of shame inherent to the Lord, but it is exactly *ours*—our shame which he carries. This is the painful, material point.

Shame and loss? Yes. There is no evading their palpable presence in the passion story. That is as it was. That is as it must be, for that is "as we are." So is our world, but for God's merciful entry into it. We are under shame and loss, alienated from our maker by our own wrong. However, Bill Musk points out that, even in this story of shame and loss of honor, the whole narrative is pregnant with a mysterious sense of Jesus' power: through his painful, brave fidelity to God—even to death on a cross—he transforms the shame; in keeping his honorable commitment to his Father, Christ achieves for us victory over evil and life everlasting.⁹⁵

The cross of Jesus is a story of the invincible faithfulness of our Lord to God's mission.⁹⁶ Seen through the inverse lens of faith, the story of the cross is a story of the unsurpassed honor, not to mention victory, of Jesus the Messiah. The "power" of the cross will command more of our attention soon (in the sections below on the Christus Victor concept and on "power, will, and love"). But, for now, we insist, in its paradoxical power, in its fathomless compassion, and in its dynamic wisdom, the cross upends all human brilliance, expectation, and opposition. Its effect is hardly to demean God; the cross resounds with his glory.

Is the cross unjust?

Another objection that may be expressed against a theology of the cross is the Islamic aversion to the notion of redemption, particularly the vicarious atonement of Christ on behalf of a sinful world; this objection would hold that the Christian idea of the cross of Christ is illogical and, especially, unjust. *This complaint is inherently weighty. In responding to it we may gain new perspectives and a more expansive view of the beauty of the story of our salvation. As we engage the Islamic challenge throughout the following segments of the essay, some version of this problem never lies too far beneath the surface.*

It is a standard truism that each one must bear their own guilt, no one bearing the sin of another (e.g. Q 6.164; 35.18; 39.7; cf. Ps. 49.7).⁹⁷ Set in its most appealing light, the Qur'an is emphatic about both the justice and mercy of God:

God charges no soul beyond its capacity; standing to its account is what it has earned, and against its account what it has merited. Our Lord, take us not to task if we forget, or make mistake ... Our Lord, do Thou not burden us beyond what we have the strength to bear. And pardon us, and forgive us, and have mercy on us; Thou art our Protector. And help us against the people of the unbelievers. (Q 2.286, Arberry, adjusted)

Even though Islamic thought does reject the cross as a vicarious rescue of humanity, it still is worth bearing in mind that there actually is quite a bit of play given to the notion of "intercession" in

Islamic eschatology. The merits of one (the prophet, other prophets, martyrs, saints, etc.) can potentially be applied to another at the Judgment. If this still does not amount to a vicarious atonement based on the substitutionary death of the Savior, and if these notions of “mediation” are much more difficult to support from the Qur’an than from the traditions, the idea of intercession and mediation does enjoy significant sway in the Islamic world. (Bernie Power deals with many of these concepts and also points to the fact that in arenas other than pure soteriology there is ample potential for mediation, substitution, or representation in Islam, in areas such as rites of the Hajj, blood money, and so on.⁹⁸) Nonetheless, once these qualifications have been considered, the Muslim protest remains: a cross-based redemption is unjust; it is not moral and not worthy of God.

Clearly the concept of a vicarious redemption, especially a (penal) substitutionary atonement, is a raw nerve when it comes to Christian and Islamic ideas of salvation. This mode of salvation centered on the cross of Christ evokes seemingly insuperable objections and even animus on the part of many thoughtful Muslims. We have already quoted from Rashid Rida above. Demonstrating a certain clarity, though perhaps not generosity, Rida (in the *Manar Commentary*) states that the facticity of the crucifixion of Christ is not a central issue; more critical for him, and the locus of his complaint, is that Christians make redemption in the cross their fundamental doctrine, whereas this “should have been” a commitment to *tawhid*, radical monotheism.⁹⁹ Rida blasts the Christian notion of redemption from theological and historical angles. He critiques the reliability of the New Testament Gospels, as well as the integrity of Paul, all the while commending the Gospel of Barnabas. Finding the Islamic exhortation to human will, choice, and self-purification (with repentance) a far superior path to salvation than the “pathetic ignorance” of the “Christian cross,” Rida parodies a salvific scheme by which it took God all of human history until about AD 33 to figure out how to be both just and merciful through the crucifixion of his son.¹⁰⁰ To take another example, Fazlur Rahman was an esteemed modernist Islamic thinker. He frankly dismissed the notion of a redeemer, savior, or intercessor. Interestingly, though, he did acknowledge the strong “psychological factor involved in the ideas of intercession and redemption,” even for Muslims.¹⁰¹

Of course, it is not only Muslims who have queried the value of (aspects of) the substitutionary atonement model of the cross. Cragg himself is worth discussing in this connection, even if he does not intend to *categorically* rebut a vicarious salvation. He does speak with genuine eloquence about an atoning mercy we might call “vicarious”—*redemption as the costly bearing of the burdens, loss, and consequences of sin, one for another*. Poignant examples he gives are the suffering Servant of Isaiah and the self-humbling father in the “prodigal son” parable. But, unfortunately, he seems to needlessly contrast this powerful imagery of redemption with what he calls a “flawed analogy of levitical sacrifice,” much to the denigration of the “levitical” model.¹⁰²

Cragg’s language is just oblique enough that it is hard for the reader to be certain, but he seems to look askance at the witness of the levitical sacrificial system *per se* (and not just a flawed use of it). If we read Cragg rightly on this point, this may be yet another manifestation of his complex (conflicted?) relationship to the Old Testament.¹⁰³ We would certainly agree with Cragg that crass versions of a substitutionary atonement (based on a reading of the sacrificial system of the Torah) are detrimental to Christian-Muslim communication and are damaging to both our concept of God and the biblical witness itself. Cragg speaks of unfortunate presentations of the atonement as an arbitrary operation in which the guilty escapes scot-free while the innocent is arbitrarily punished, a sort of “shuffling of the cards.”¹⁰⁴ (Writing for a different context, Nijay Gupta refers to a simplistic style of “justification theory” as little more than “heavenly paperwork” for the nullifying of sin.¹⁰⁵) On this point, we shall have more to say later regarding the justice of Christ as our “substitute on the cross.”¹⁰⁶

Cragg remarks that Jesus in Gethsemane was utterly unlike “a helpless scapegoat.”¹⁰⁷ True enough, but to insist that his bold, voluntary, and sacrificial self-offering could be in no way related to “scapegoats” (and thus, the Yom Kippur, for example) would be to either misread or simply

bypass the connections between the cross and sacrifice that, for example, the author of Hebrews wishes to make. How much better to handle the “levitical witness” with nuance and adroitness, allowing it to take its place in the fuller symphony of voices and images informing the biblical panorama of redemption. With respect to “levitical” metaphors, it has been argued that the narrational momentum of the Jesus of the Gospels—including his authority with respect to forgiveness of sin; his independence of the Sadducean elite; his “temple action”; the Last Supper; and ultimately his passion—all points to Jesus replacing sacrifice (becoming the ultimate instance) and himself reconstituting the temple—the locus where heaven and earth meet and are reconciled.¹⁰⁸ One might say he embodies and completes the levitical paradigm conclusively.

In our thinking on the cross, we would do better to refine and reincorporate the picture of blood atonement derived from the books of Moses and the sacrificial system of Israel, rather than to simply discount it wholesale. Caricatured or one-sided applications of sacrificial imagery surely are unhelpful, but, at the same time, the importance of sacrificial imagery in the Old Testament, in the very writing prophets so beloved by Cragg, and not least in the New Testament itself (whether the Gospels or Hebrews or Paul), would surely militate against our silencing this voice from Scripture. Cragg seems to assume that the only point of contact between sacrificial imagery (such as the “scapegoat”) and the cross must be the arbitrary and unfair imposition of punishment on an unrelated party. But, surely the sacrificial imagery can be (and is) applied with more sophistication and diversity than that in the New Testament. Surely we may allow the senses of “innocence” and “representation” to come through the images of animal sacrifice without importing the notions of “unfairness” or rank “helplessness,” and without insisting that these images are *alone* sufficient to inform our view of the cross. (And, of course, the levitical background is not the only biblical imagery informing the paradigm of penal substitution: equally important, and prevalent in Scripture, are forensic terminology, the notion of God as ultimate Judge, and the concepts of condemnation and justification.¹⁰⁹)

Atonement theory has long been a battleground within the church, let alone with Islamic theology. Our advocacy here is for a fully-orbed canonical approach to the mystery of salvation, with diverse perspectives converging in relative harmony. Penal substitution as a lens by which to understand the work of Christ on the cross is native to the New Testament witness (e.g. Rom. 5.9-11; cf. Eph. 5.2; 1 Jn 4.10).¹¹⁰ However, this theology may be articulated fairly and with restraint, or, conversely, in exaggerated and extreme terms. Let us avoid the latter. As Michael Bird puts it, “It is wise for advocates of penal substitution to listen to their critics and ensure they are not theologically bankrolling an atonement theory that legitimates violence or a brutal patriarchy. Neither is it helpful to inflate the biblical language for substitutionary judgment ...”¹¹¹

Further, Penal Substitution is hardly the only theological lens through which the New Testament refracts the image of the cross—it may not even be the primary one. In his *Evangelical Theology*, Michael Bird makes note of eight different modes or images of the atonement achieved on the cross of Christ.¹¹² Bird suggests that the one mode best suited to integrate and correlate all the other explanations of the work of the cross is that of *the cross (and resurrection) as the manifest victory of Jesus over the evil powers*, that is, the *Christus Victor* model. Bird argues that this particular focus on the achievement of Christ tallies best with the apostolic preaching of Acts, is probably the most prominent emphasis in early church theology, captures the sweep of salvation-history and biblical narrative most fully, unifies the themes of the Kingdom of God and the Cross; and *ties together the seemingly divergent emphases of victory and sacrifice*.

The Christus Victor model places Jesus’ death in its proper coordinates as an apocalyptic event that reveals God’s rescue plan against the evil powers (see Gal 1: 4). Evidently Jesus’ substitutionary death constitutes the basis and center of the divine victory—a victory not only against sin but also against Satan ... Thus

Jesus' substitutionary death for sinners is the means to the cosmic triumph of God's purposes for God's people leading to God's new creation. This seems to mesh with the theological contours of Romans 8 and 1 Corinthians 15 that move from atonement to triumph ... Jesus' death for sinners on the cross is part of a bigger picture that is laid out in redemptive history, visible in the very shape of our canon, apparent in biblical theology, ubiquitous in historical theology, and explicit in Pauline theology. The doctrines of penal substitution and Christus Victor do not compete against each other, for the former is clearly the grounds for the latter.¹¹³

Forgiveness of sin through faith in Christ and his vicarious suffering on the cross is indispensable to the proclamation of the cross, but this message does not exhaust the purpose and significance of the cross of Christ—both these points must be kept in mind as we tell the story of Christ's passion in a Muslim context. (Below, we devote two sections of our discussion to the Christus Victor paradigm and to the cross as God's power manifest.) In any case, as we gratefully affirm the vicarious salvation of sinners wrought by the cross of Christ, we still must grapple with the Muslim instinct that this biblical theology is illogical, inequitable, or ultimately unjust.

There is always a cost to evil

In answering the charge that the Christian notion of atonement through the cross is unjust, Cragg raises the simple but powerful point that to all evil there is a cost. Whatever one's religious background, shared human experience tells us that forgiveness has the power to break cycles of hate and the destructive impact of evil. Forgiving brings healing and transformation. But, this never happens without cost, a cost most often borne by the offended party.¹¹⁴ There is no reason to impute injustice or immorality to this dynamic by which an initiative of forgiveness heals a rift and treats sin's wounds—quite the opposite in fact; this dynamic is beautiful, restorative, and noble. But, again, it always entails a cost. In the transaction of grace by which the sinner is redeemed there is hardly a trivializing of justice and a glossing over of evil—as noted above, the depth of pain of Christ's undeserved suffering is the measure of our own darkness; no one forgiven by the mercy of the cross comes to its healing unaware.

If the pattern and power of costly forgiveness is evident and effective in human experience, might it not be that God too has acted with breathtaking and unanticipated initiative, wisdom, and power to break the cycle of sin and judgment? Might not God lift the death sentence under which a fallen world labors by bearing the cost of our wrong and our rebellion himself? And if the deficit of fidelity, of worship, of piety (Arabic: *taqwa*¹¹⁵), is a debt owed to the majestic “Lord of the worlds (cf. Q 7.54),” then it is *ipso facto* a great deficit indeed. In that case, the necessary cost to be borne in restorative action must likewise be infinitely great. And, in that case, might not the power, grace, and love required for this forgiveness be greater still?

It is most Islamic to acclaim the “greatness of God.” In Christian terms, in bearing the weight of our sin, God, the offended party, chooses to take the initiative *through the cross* to reach us and to heal us. Can we not see in this that God is merciful, powerful, and just? That he truly is *great*, but in no way “immoral” or “unjust”? The recipient of the love and mercy of God flowing out from the cross of Christ is quite aware, *in the nature of the case*, of the undeserved nature of divine grace; of the inviolable claim that this redemption places on them; and of the overwhelming power which unseats the rot of corruption, looses the chains of sin, and unleashes liberation and transformation in the grateful human heart. The cross indeed *empowers* a movement from alienation from God into grateful submission to, love for, and fellowship with him. (In Islamic terms this is a movement into belief and submission out of the condemnation of idolatry, out of a state of “infidelity” [Arabic: *kufi*, a concept linked to *ingratitude*].) This transition, this redemption, is not unjust, but it is, rightly, *costly*.

The mystery of the divine way

A concomitant protest that runs alongside the Islamic charge of the “injustice” of the cross is that the Atonement is illogical. And so, on the question of the rationality *and* justice (or otherwise) of the cross, another consideration surfaces, namely the reality that faith entails mystery, the recognition that God’s ways transcend ours. The divine economy sometimes defies a simple, linear calculus. For those committed to an exclusively materialist worldview in which all history, all reality in fact, is ultimately reducible to a closed, mechanical continuum of physical cause and effect, an appeal to mystery will be dismissed as rhetorical evasion, a “cop out.” This is not the place to address that audience. But for the Muslim there can be no objection to the miraculous, the supernatural, to transcendent and mysterious revealed truth as such.

Indeed, the limits of human comprehension and the mystery and paradox of the life of faith are part and parcel of any theistic outlook. The greatest minds in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thought have been intensely exercised over the “mystery” of the relationship between infinite creator and finite creation, the intersection of the self-existent with the contingent, of eternity with time. All believers see the necessity of divine revelation in a finite and more-or-less corrupted world; this revelation may be salvifically effective, but our apprehension of it will not be epistemologically exhaustive. That is, God’s revelation may be sufficient to “guide” or to “save,” without that implying that all our existential questions are answered. Many matters will remain only partially within our grasp. (A classic conundrum on the Islamic side is the relationship of an eternal [Arabic!] Qur’an both to finite human history as well as to the eternal God—the Qur’an being neither God himself, nor an eternal entity alongside the only Eternal Entity.) The crucifixion of Christ is certainly mysterious from multiple angles, including the mystery of its sovereign, prior design set alongside human freedom and responsibility (cf. Acts 2.22-24; 13.26-29). However, once again, the problems of that particular dynamic are hardly unknown to Islam. Battles over free will and determinism were intensely debated by Muslim theologians from at least as far back as the ninth century, and apparently the eighth.¹¹⁶

And so, with all candor, Christians acknowledge divine mystery in the drama of our salvation. God has made known to us the essential outlines of our redemption, but we still cannot explain *everything* that might be asked. Nor can we lay out an engineer’s schematic of how the redemption of the cross “works.” There *is* symmetry, beauty, internal coherence, and a resultant peace to the paradoxical majesty of Christ on the cross. But, in the nature of the case, the wonder of our salvation will outstrip our capacities to explain.

Of course there is mystery in the atonement. One locus of that mystery, put generally, is what the cross tells us of the nature of God; specifically, part of the mystery of the cross issues from the mystery of God’s triune nature. Here we may encounter irreducible divisions between Christian and Islamic convictions: biblical reflection on the cross is intimately linked to the issues of *God incarnate* and *God as Trinity*. Beginning with one “sticking point” (the cross), we end up alighting on the other major *skandala*. (Note again Rida’s incomprehension of and disdain for the “paulinist” Trinity in the quotation above.) In view of such tensions and divides, one might be tempted to call for inter-religious dialogue that studiously avoids these hindrances altogether, but such a scheme is doomed to frustration from the start. Why? Because, in biblical theology, God himself is revealed at the cross; he is revealed as Immanuel and as Three-in-One. To disallow these elements in any inter-religious conversation is to aim at a discussion of faith where (for the Christian) the very nature of God is “off the table” from the start! This is inter-faith communication reduced to an oxymoron.

Consideration of the cross leads to consideration of God, which then leads to consideration of God as three-in-one; as I said, “mystery.” In the Trinity we experience God-at-work-in-human-redemption. What we might call the “lived Trinity” (or the “economic Trinity”) imparts great

coherence, beauty, and depth to the story of our salvation. In the atonement we do not have a vengeful Father brutalizing an unwilling Son for the unrelated crimes of a third party. In the Trinity we do encounter the Son bearing the penalty of human sin, as a substitute;¹¹⁷ at the same time, in the Trinity, and in Christ as God-with-us, we see God himself acting *for* us. The gift of life through the death on a cross is not an *external* action to propitiate a barely willing Judge. The Father gives the Son; the Son gives himself.¹¹⁸ In the cross we have a picture of God in *self-giving*. Does this picture of God exceed our ability to explain, to contain, to control? Simply, yes. But, this is not immoral or illogical. This is one God, distinct persons acting in concert for human rescue. This is the vicarious suffering of Isaiah Fifty-Three. This is God *in Christ* reconciling the world to himself, binding us to himself, in Christ, by his Spirit (cf. Jn 10.17-18; 2 Cor. 5.19; Eph. 5.2).

Here yet further mysteries are involved: in the cross sins are not overlooked, not bypassed, and not simply “transferred” to another’s account. They are in fact *accounted for*. How so? By faith in Christ the sinner is forgiven and restored to right standing with God, not, again, as an effect of the mere shuffling of “divine paperwork.” No, at faith and repentance, based on the work of the cross, there is indeed a categorical, forensic, and *existential* transaction. A ransom has taken place (Mk 10.45; Rom. 8.15, 18-23; Gal. 4.4-7; Eph. 1.7). It is not only that a nominal change in status occurs for the believer, but a full transfer of authority, realm, and citizenship has occurred (Phil. 3.20; Col. 1.13-14). An adoption has taken place, an incorporation into a new family (Rom. 8.15, 28-30; Gal. 4.6-7; Eph. 1.5).

Most critically, there has been a transfer, mysteriously, *into Christ*. In redemption, we are united to him, our only head and representative. Somehow, in union with Christ, what happened to him has happened to us. We too die with him, and are raised in the promise of eternal life with him (Rom. 6.4; 8.17; 2 Tim 2.11-12). At the opening of this essay we noted that the cross reveals God himself to us, a God who “participates” fully with us, that we might “participate” with him.¹¹⁹ Through the incarnation, climaxing in the death and rising of Jesus, we can “participate in the divine nature.”¹²⁰ In some real way, in Christ, *our* sins and *our* shame are actually dealt with. The victory over death is his, and in him, we too conquer (Rom. 8.31-39). There is a sense of corporate identity in the atonement. As believers, we all belong to him and are part of the body of which he is the head. (See more below on the communal aspect of redemption.) We are actually changed and renewed; we are joined in submission to God through Christ by the Spirit, being readied for the coming New Creation (2 Cor. 5.17).

We must allow for categories of truth which are beyond the strict limits of our own capacities. And the notion of God as mysterious and transcendent is hardly un-Islamic! Not every aspect of the redemption of the cross can be limited to linear, mathematical explanation. So to say is not to endorse irrationalism. No, there is much in human experience that is real and “important” which cannot simply be reduced to straightforward, empirical “proof.” A great deal of the dynamic of the cross pertains to the relational, the moral, the spiritual; it is based on *love*. If the lived experience of loving relationships in our daily human experience transcends mere empirical explication, might it not be the more so with respect to our Maker?

There is much to ponder in the timeless impact of the time-bound cross, in the fact that the “eternally slain” lamb becomes the climactic intervention of God in history on our behalf (Eph. 1.3-4; 1 Pet. 1.20-21; 2 Tim. 1.9; Rev. 5.6f.). The historical reality of the cross becomes the pivot of human time, but was “already” a reality hidden in eternity with God (like the Qur’an in Muslim tradition?). No question, there is great wonder in one act of surpassing worth forever altering human destiny. But that sort of dynamic should not be ruled out on prior grounds, certainly not by a “believer” committed to the limitless possibilities and unfathomable ways of God. The cross is the paradoxical wisdom of God unfurled. The paradox of the cross has to be embraced in unflinching faith: so it has been from the apostolic era onwards. (For Theodore Abu Qurrah, ninth-century

Bishop of Harran, the very fact that the Christian faith, with its cross at the center, was scandalous and counter-intuitive on “psychological or sociological grounds” is an argument *for* its divine validity.¹²¹) By his wounds we are healed, and like the redeemed of the Revelation to John standing on the further shore of redemption, our response is not to present a didactic explanation, but to erupt in grateful worship (Rev. 5.6f.; 7.9f.; 15.1-4).

In the cross justice is done

Even if one cannot reduce soteriology to mathematical equations or Aristotelian syllogisms, on a New Testament reckoning, we must insist that at the Cross justice is by no means ignored. In fact, there would be greater injustice in God’s forgiving without reference to the cross, merely by divine fiat, the raw exercise of will. *Allah but says, “be,” and it is.* (To reference Abu Qurrah once again, he further debated the Islamic position by insisting on the necessity of “balanced” justice and mercy *provided through the mediation of a suffering Messiah*.¹²²) There is greater injustice when there is no atoning, no accounting, no ontological transformation of the sinner’s being.¹²³ Forgiveness must not simply be a function of judicial decision, even a decision by God himself. (And, again, if we take the “substitution *hadiths*” as the alternative to the cross of Christ, the “justice” on offer in those stories looks rather doubtful indeed.)

Now, we must at this point back up and acknowledge that Islam (and the Qur’an) does emphasize the virtue of repentance and the necessity of moral effort, of the (greater) *jihad in the path of God*. But, even so, without an atoning at a divine level, without supernatural transformation and intervention, even repentance does not sufficiently account for the past. With repentance alone, wounds are not wholly healed, wrongs not thoroughly undone, debts not fully cleared. God does not expunge inveterate rebellion by bare decree; one does not simply wave a wand over genocide (for example); and even repentance, as necessary as it is, cannot be cosmically sufficient (or “just”) on its own. A stack of righteous deeds in repentant remorse for our willful and insidious evil thoughts and actions cannot span the gap. On the one hand, we each bear a deficit of harms and hurts done to our fellow humans; additionally, there is the deficit of the lives we *should have offered up to our Maker*, lives of true worship—that is, lives of seamless virtue, pure obedience, and unfettered fellowship with him. Abu Qurrah makes similar points, namely that repentance alone cannot bring about the perfect love and obedience required by the Law and that God does not “in mercy” simply “brush aside the claims of his Law.”¹²⁴ We need not only a judge who will forgive, but also a savior who will rescue. And, ultimately, only God *saves* (Isa. 45.21-25; 59.15-21; Jude 25); *God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself*.

Islamic thought presents a whole complex of elements that seem to determine the “final state” of any given individual (e.g. divine justice and mercy, one’s deeds in this life, and the “divine decree” [*qada’ wa qadr*]). In my estimation the collective witness of Islamic theology has placed the greatest accent on the inscrutable and unbridled *divine will* (cf. Q 6.35; 13.27). The more radical and arbitrary predestinarian traditions are not the only voice in Islamic theology, but they do tend to dominate in the *hadith* collections.¹²⁵ One thinks, for example, of that mysterious eschatological category of the 70,000 who enter Paradise “without reckoning.”¹²⁶ If any one factor may be said to count most in Islamic thought, it arguably is the irresistible force and power of God’s will, even above any notions of justice.

In New Testament faith, human restoration and salvation require more (not less) than repentance and raw judicial decree. As 1 Peter puts it, *in the very context in which God is acclaimed as the just judge of all human deeds*, we are ransomed and redeemed by the precious blood of the spotless Lamb of God (1 Pet. 1.17-21; cf. 1 Pet. 4.17; Rom. 10.16; 2 Thess. 1.8; Heb. 3.16-19). Our rescue was accomplished by divine intervention and costly sacrifice, not to the detriment of justice,

but in fulfillment of it. *Thus* we are changed and purified. Thus, the Gospel of the cross is something not only to be “believed” but also “obeyed” (Acts 6.7; 2 Thess. 1.8; 1 Pet. 1.22). In the atoning sacrifice of the cross God is strangely and wonderfully both “just” and “the one who justifies” (Rom. 3.24-26).

The wonder of the death and resurrection of the Messiah was an unanticipated drama on behalf of human salvation, a divine intervention for which the elites of our world were unprepared (1 Cor. 2.6-8); the cross is a marvel to which humanity in its darkened thinking remains resistant, until, by grace, scales fall from our eyes (cf. 2 Cor. 3.12-4.6; Eph. 2.1-9; 4.17-24). When it comes to God’s victory in the cross over sin, death, and hell, can we “explain it all?” No. Is there mystery in the event of the cross? Unfathomable love? Calculations beyond our capacity that God should so love the world in this way and to this extent? Yes, in the cross we find all these. Without hesitation, we assert that of course faith is required. But the death and resurrection of our Lord is the only sure ground of forgiveness, of liberation from bondage and despair, of the defeat of death, and ultimately of new life in a new world. The Cross is the power of God, not the wisdom of man. But, equally true cross-theology does not ignore justice. Rather, on the cross we see God in judgment remembering mercy.

Christus Victor and the power of the cross

In his forthcoming work on *hadith*, *Engaging Islamic Traditions*, Bernie Power discusses themes such as martyrdom, divine hospitality, sacrifice, intercession, and ransom; even if not generally tied to “redemption” in Muslim thought and culture, they are “familiar” categories which happen to overlap with a Christian understanding of the cross. Here we consider a conceptualization of the work of the cross, aspects of which we believe resonate with the typical Muslim emphasis on the power, might, and triumph of God. Our subject has briefly been referenced above, namely the “Christus Victor” model of the atonement. Clearly there are multiple ways in which salvation, redemption, or atonement through the cross are conceived in the New Testament. Arguably, the Christus Victor paradigm—the victory of God in Christ over sin, hell, and dark powers through the death and resurrection of the Messiah—is the central image of “the cross” in the New Testament. At the least it is a promising motif to place at the center of our “theological mosaic.” To reiterate, sacrificial or “levitical” imagery is non-negotiable in the early Christian exposition of the cross. However, when set against Jewish expectation in the first century, the role of a Messiah was not typically that of offering himself as a “blood sacrifice” for the sins of the people, let alone the world. (This is not to deny overtones of sacrifice or even “atonement” in Jewish martyr stories such as those in the Maccabean literature, for example.) No, if a dominant image might be discerned at all, surely it would be one of a delivering warrior King, rescuing Israel from pagan power and oppression, leading her to victory, leading her to purification, national renewal, covenant blessing, and a glorious age of divine favor.

The Messiah of the New Testament surprisingly is presented as both fulfilling and subverting this messianic expectation. Jesus does indeed come in power as king (“declared with power to be the Son of God”) and leads the people of God out of bondage into the “glorious freedom of the sons of God,” unseating all illegitimate authority and the sway of evil. He fulfills the paschal expectation of a second great Exodus, unseating false deities and liberating slaves, now sons and daughters receiving their inheritance. But this redemption story pivots on an unanticipated axis in that the dominant enemy being unseated is not “the pagans” or Romans, but the oppressive powers of darkness that exploit the sinful human heart, not least the hearts of the “chosen,” of Israel herself. The people of God *are* restored and renewed, not by revived Torah-fidelity on the part of Jews, but by faith in the risen Jesus, on the part of Gentiles as well as Jews. (Note, then, that in this assessment

of the accomplishment of the crucified Lord, forgiveness of sin retains its vital place, even when the cross is viewed through this lens as a “military victory.”)

However likely or not, however contrary to conventional expectation, the story of the cross is indeed a story of *power*, a story of the conquering king. In the crucifixion, vindicated by resurrection, the world is remade, humanity reborn, Jews and Gentiles reconciled, Jesus exalted to the highest station, and principalities and powers thrown down (Acts 2.32-36; Eph. 1.7, 19-23; 2.13-17). The cross is the locus of a pitched battle where humans are set free from sin and the blight of evil is publicly undone (Col. 2.13-15). At the cross Jesus squarely faces down “the prince of this world,” the cosmic powers of “this present darkness.” The cross is a symbol of victory *and* a subversive story, a story of life through death, of gain through loss, of triumph in suffering. The Passion is a paradoxical story of power.

The theme of the victorious Messiah is hardly confined to pauline theology or to the admittedly “strong” johanine Jesus. No, the Jesus of the synoptic passion stories also is committed, faithful, and resolute under pressure, temptation, and violent opposition—relentless in his mission, even when deserted by his own. “He set his face towards Jerusalem.” There is no question of the strength of this Jesus to, before, and on the cross (witness his executioner’s *volte-face*¹²⁷). Further, in terms of power in the Passion, there are plenty of divine portents and dramatic acts of power associated with the time of the crucifixion, let alone the undeniable power unleashed in the resurrection itself. The sweep of this storyline and the gospel characterizations of Jesus belie the caricatured attempts of some Muslim critics to paint the Jesus of Gethsemane’s travail as weak and pathetic. Even were we to limit our gaze to the events in the grove of Gethsemane, Jesus’ trial in prayer hardly gainsays the evident fact that he resolutely chose to “drink the draught to its dregs,” being ready in advance to stand his ground before his attackers without fight, flight, or fright.

As noted, Islam is well acquainted with the theme of “power”: force exerted in raising God’s religion to the highest, force exerted in aid of the rectification of society, force exerted in overcoming idolatrous foes, force exerted in the mastery of one’s own self. But “power” is also critical in the gospels and throughout the New Testament. Counter-intuitively, it is even a key motif in a theology of the Passion: true, victory comes through the humble submission and suffering of the Messiah. True, the enemy to be vanquished is not “flesh and blood,” but “principalities and powers” (even if one might construe these spiritual powers as manifest in social structures). Nonetheless, the mission of the Son climaxing at the cross is indeed an expression of *God’s own power*. The Son came to *destroy the works of the Evil One*, and “now” (at the cross) the “ruler of this world” is driven out (1 Jn 2.8; Jn 12.31-32). The recourse to martial vocabulary in John’s writing is remarkable. Jesus’ ministry in the Galilee, as well as his later action by the Spirit through the apostles in Acts, is portrayed as one of forgiveness but also, importantly, as a work of liberation, of unseating the devil, and of *power* (cf. Acts 10.38; 26.18). God (and Christ) as divine warrior is an Old Testament theme repeatedly attested in the New Testament, not least in John’s Apocalypse where the conquering warrior is simultaneously the “slain lamb.” In the pauline witness the armor of God (again, an Old Testament heritage) is closely related to that of the Messiah himself, the one who ultimately disarms death (Rom. 13.12-14; 2 Cor. 6.7; Eph. 6.11f.; 1 Thess. 5.8-10; 1 Cor. 15.55, all with allusion to Old Testament prophetic writings).

Jesus meekly riding a foal into Jerusalem to die stands in quite some contrast to the trajectory of the Muhammad’s biography (the *sira*) wherein he rides into Mecca in “manifest triumph,” assuming the reigns of political power and laying the foundations for the Muslim empire.¹²⁸ All too often the Islamic complaint against the cross has been its alleged “passivity,” its weakness and failure in terms of “might unfurled for the right.” The classic historian Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) can even be seen to chide Jesus for failing to give rein to the impulse of prestige and coercive power befitting the prophetic calling.¹²⁹ Nonetheless, it *is* Christ’s path down the *Via Dolorosa* which

eventuates in Jesus conquering the grave for us all. In the story, the resurrection is, of course, vital (“... and raised for our justification”), but the path to victory had to proceed by way of Golgotha. Upending all historical experience and cultural norms, Christ’s cross becomes a sign of victory, *the victory of the one suspended on it*.

We do well, then, to reinvigorate this Christus Victor paradigm, a retelling of the cross story as a story of power unleashed for our liberation and for the honor of God. It is important to use a wide angle lens on the significance of the cross, so as to capture the breadth of its significance in the New Testament *kerygma*. The Christus Victor profile is a critical part of the picture. And this emphasis on “power” in the cross may be all the more relevant in our approach to Islam.

How so? Too often Muslim approaches to our Gospel have misconstrued the story as one of defeatism and a morbid obsession with weakness, death, and loss. A tale of an effete pacifism. For those Muslim dialogue partners seeking truly to understand, it is important that we offer a genuine Christian perspective “from within.” Beyond all doubt and without any equivocation, we glory in the cross, an ostensible symbol of loss, death, and shame. But *why*? Because it is also the miraculous site of God’s cosmic victory, brilliantly executed to his glory and for our salvation—a salvation precisely *from* those things (loss, death, shame) in which humanity is enmeshed by sin. Sacrificial love? Absolutely. Pain? Yes. The cross is a dying to gain. But, by death the Lord unravels death (Heb. 2.14). It is a paradoxical story, but a story of power and glory nonetheless.

This cross must be communicated to Muslim interlocutors. This cross matters. Not because we naively assume that with a fresh telling of the story of Redemption the entire structure of Islamic theology will evaporate; it is not that in a single movement the story of Christ crucified will become the creed of the Muslim world as well, or that a shift in Christian communication strategy will lead to Al-Azhar’s adopting *Church Dogmatics* or *Systematic Theology* as basic texts of their curriculum. Nevertheless, truth needs telling. Our patient hope is that the cross of Jesus may be better understood, and in many cases received.

... looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2 ESV)

Power, will, and love

Temple Gairdner’s thought merits consideration, even if, at times, his discourse seems unrestrained and aggressive when judged by contemporary standards. He makes a strong case for “power” in the Cross, the power of God’s love. It is a Power necessary for our salvation and necessarily characteristic of God. But, strength and power as concepts are not always univocal. There is “power” and then there is “power.” Gairdner takes aim in particular at the sort of arbitrary power which can all too easily characterize a God whose essence is assumed to be ever unavailable to his creatures. One might note that of the seven attributes of God classically enumerated in Islamic theology both “power” and “will” are prominent.¹³⁰ Significantly, love is not one of these primary attributes. Gairdner quotes al-Ghazali on God’s disposition towards his creatures:

“These to bliss and I care not; and these to the Fire, and I care not.” But, in all seriousness we ask, is this more likely to improve our theology, or turn us into atheists forthwith? In these fatal words Muslim theology finally showed its hand, and we may truly say that it is impossible for us to love such a God as this.¹³¹

(Al-Ghazali may well be taken as the apex of Ash‘arism with its radical construal of the divine will as unconstrained by any necessity of “goodness towards God’s creatures.” But, JW Sweetman

discusses the breadth, scope, and volume of al-Ghazali's production and raises the possibility that al-Ghazali was not so categorically bound by Ash'arite tradition (*taqlid*) on such matters, not so prone to endorse the "arbitrary" divine command.¹³² To examine these questions in al-Ghazali in any detail would undoubtedly entail, among other things, disputes about development in his thought.)

This mode of Muslim thought seeks to safeguard God's independence, transcendence, and freedom. In so doing, his power, will, and inscrutable nature may be emphasized *to the detriment of other ethical categories*. God may be thought of as good or just or wise or what have you, but in reality these descriptors refer very little to anything relevant to us as human beings. God's essence remains basically unknowable, and he is not "just" in the sense that he should in any sense adhere to some measurable standard of just-ness or right-ness. We have here strong forms of the doctrine of divine transcendence or of anti-analogical thought which have tended to dominate Sunni theology. "There is nothing at all like him" [Q 42.11].¹³³ For all the grandeur, mercy, and justice of God in the Qur'an, one is left with a great deal of uncertainty about one's destiny.

The actual foundation of God's righteousness and of his mercy would seem hard to articulate, for to say he is "just" or "merciful" is, apparently, not to assert that his "justice" or "mercy" are anything like justice and mercy as they are understood in ordinary discourse. (Historically, one thinks here of the Ash'ari-Mu'atazilite debates. Of course, debates on such issues certainly have their place in Christian historical theology as well, e.g. "voluntarist" vs. "intellectualist" stances.¹³⁴) On the other hand, some "progressive" Muslim scholars, such as Fazlur Rahman, would allege that this problem of arbitrariness of judgment or uncertainty of destiny based on opaque "will" lies in either biased Western approaches to the Qur'an or in later Muslim theology, not in the Qur'an itself.¹³⁵ In any case, there is a tendency to nominally uphold God's attributes while making them functionally inaccessible, screened off by a relentless determinism. This trend is well established in Muslim thought and culture, if not in the holy writ.¹³⁶

For Gairdner, the strength and power of God cannot be adequately discussed until both the vital character of God and the predicament of humanity are rightly understood. Gairdner forcefully appeals against the picture of God as an essentially unknowable volitional force. For him, the "emotions" of God (wrath, love, mercy, pity) are in fact commensurate with the stance of a loving, holy, moral being towards flawed, but potentially whole, creatures made in his image. These dispositions are *not* beneath God. And, after all, the Qur'an does employ descriptions of God which allow for wrath and even compassion and mercy. All of these "emotions" or "attitudes" of God must cohere together in response to sinful humanity, unless we want the arbitrary God (essence untouched by his attributes) unmoved either by the beatitude or damnation of humans.¹³⁷

God must be understood as truly (if not exhaustively) revealed in his attributes, particularly those of holiness and love.

We see then that "love" and "holiness" ... [are] two sides of one and the same thing. Love is that which will not leave the sinner till all has been done for him. Holiness is that which, for the sinner's own sake, and for righteousness sake, and for the sake of all that makes life worth living, will not receive the sinner without taking full account, and making him take full account, of his sin ... The relations of God in Heaven to man are determined by this ... and led to Calvary's cross.¹³⁸

Once again, for Gairdner, there is "power" and then there is "power." In the cross of Christ we encounter the overwhelming "power" of God's love, but power appropriate to what he calls "moral" categories, rather than approximating to raw force. In a physical contest the stronger one is always easy to determine; but to show greater "moral strength" may indeed require actions that in the physical realm appear "weaker" (sacrifice, surrender, silence, etc.). For the redemption of humans,

a moral victory, not a victory of sheer force, had to be won. Sin must be able to “do its worst” and so be defeated. The “twelve legions of angels” were not an option.¹³⁹

But this [victory] involved going the whole length—to death. Had He stopped short of this, sin’s nature would not have been fully exposed and its issue would not have been fully seen. To reveal its nature he had to bear its nature, namely, the desire to kill all that is good. And to reveal its inevitable doom he had to bear its doom, namely, to perish terribly ... [I]n the Cross holiness and love, wrath and pity, justice and mercy, meet together and kiss one another.¹⁴⁰

In that which Muslim eyes regard as weakness, Christian eyes see power! What the Muslim admires as power seems to the Christian under certain circumstances as sheer weakness—the weakness of the blundering giant who displays his force in a delicate moral case where it is utterly out of place. All these differences of view culminate in the Cross, which (rather than the Incarnation) is the real battle-ground between the two faiths. To the Muslim ... the Cross is a blasphemy, the very embodiment of weakness and defeat; to the Christian it is the very symbol of moral strength and victory, and through it he has learned to say “the weakness of God is stronger than men.”¹⁴¹

Despite different idiom and tone, emerging from very different historical contexts, we see here several elements of commonality between the thought of Gairdner and Cragg. In Gairdner’s words we hear something like Cragg’s emphasis on the cross intersecting with our human point of need and wrong, and thus exposing our darkness for what it is. Cragg too underscores the “power” of God revealed in the cross, the one and only power by which evil is redeemed. This is a power which undergoes “the worst that we can do in sinfulness and for that very reason masters it without remainder,” accomplishing our forgiveness ... That power is love.¹⁴²

The connection between the *power* of God and the *love* of God in biblical theology might profitably be developed, on another occasion, at much greater length.¹⁴³ In particular, it would be interesting to delve deeper into the ways the conjoined themes of love and power were developed in both the writings and the ministries of Kenneth Cragg and Temple Gairdner. Both were scholar-practitioners in the Muslim world who served with enduring commitment. An articulated theology and missiology of these themes in these two Anglican authors would undoubtedly manifest further layers, tensions, and insights. A full study would entail consideration not only of the published work of these scholars, but also historiographical (and archival) work in their biographies, some of which has been done.¹⁴⁴ (In the case of Gairdner, investigation in his few Arabic New Testament commentaries could be fruitful.) Of course, the “genealogical” linkage (in missiological and intellectual terms) between these two figures has already been noted by others, not least Cragg himself.¹⁴⁵

God revealed his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5.8). As D Miller puts it:

The early Church summarized this Scriptural mystery [of our salvation] with simple formulas like “for us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven,” and “we believe in the forgiveness of sins.” The vocation of the evangelist or preacher is not to analyse the mystery in detail, but to discern what mode of communication will connect to the context of the hearer, and in doing so to move more deeply into the salvific fellowship of Trinity.¹⁴⁶

The “internal mechanics” of redemption may forever remain beyond our comprehension, but experience and revelation indicate something of both the “how” and the “why” of our salvation. At the heart of the former is, marvellously, the *power* of the cross. Built-in to the latter are considerations of God’s glory and the infinite *love* of the Father.

The cross and the community of the redeemed

For the most part we have been considering the cross and the God-human relationship from a perspective that is somewhat systematized and individualistic. Hopefully, this has been helpful in terms of clarity of thought, but we must remember that in Christian theology salvation is not a timeless, static principle intuitively abstracted or distilled from “spiritual enlightenment,” moral exertion, or what have you. Salvation has a “history.” It is a story of God’s action within human history to reach out to his whole world. Even in didactic theological writings, a “holy narrative” lies in the background.¹⁴⁷ In this connection, we may cast our gaze backwards to the Edenic vision of Genesis 1-2 or to the restorative promises given to Abraham (Gen. 12-22), aimed at reclaiming that vision in the face of a world gone “off the tracks.” The Bible ends with the image of that vision realized (cf. Rev. 21-22). And, in view of this larger panorama of salvation, it bears noting that God’s intention has always been a “world made whole” and life-giving fellowship with “a people,” with *his* people. All this to say, that as much as the Gospel is a call to the individual, redemption necessarily has a communal and corporate dimension to it as well. The salvation story is “communal” and “incorporative”—a story of a Shepherd and his flock, a Father and his children, and God, the King, and his people. By the power of the cross we are called into fellowship and incorporation with our Lord, and with one another.

From the beginning (and certainly from the Medinan era), the revelations of the Qur’an were intended to construct a *community* of faith, gathered around and in obedience to God, or perhaps more importantly, gathered in obedience to God as he asserted his rule through his prophet. Thus, if the Qur’an comes as “guidance” to the person, it is also very much addressed to “the believers” as a group. By extension, Islamic law comes as mandatory direction for the Muslim community. One sees the foundational layer of legislation in various areas of the Qur’an. In the book, life is regulated as to prayer, “religious” rites, jihad and the participation in the spoils of war, treatment of widows, divorcees, and so on. Of course, the Qur’an is not comprehensive in these (or many other) matters. Therefore, employing *hadith*, custom, and legal reasoning with the qur’anic text, Muslim theologians have constructed systems of Islamic law which regulate most of life to a minute degree (including, for example, a detailed emphasis on ritual purity related to everything from prayers to sex). In this way, it is thought, God addresses the community as a whole.

As we consider the communal aspect of faith, we can include other specific concepts which have their importance in the realm of redemption and salvation, ideas of intercession and representation for example. We have briefly noted that these too are not alien to Islamic thought. This is certainly true when it comes to Muslim cultures, which usually emphasize corporate belonging, shared identity, communal glory and/or shame, and so on. Solidarity is a vital value embedded within the Islamic *umma*, a community said to be “just,” “balanced,” or “in the middle” (cf. Q 2.143). To speak of representation is to speak *ipso facto* of community bonds or some form of corporate identity or belonging; the individual represents his community/family, and vice-versa. Though standard Islamic “soteriology” clearly disavows any such thing as representative atonement, there clearly *is* a possible intersection of thought when it comes to the communal impact of both sin and blessing.

The necessary tension between the individual’s lonely responsibility before God, and his/her vital incorporation into the “divine community” (the sodality of the *umma*), is a tension applicable to both faiths. Craig suggests Q 5.32 as the starting point for potential Islamic reflection on shared human identity, and of corporate responsibility in our experience of both evil and benediction.¹⁴⁸ Looking through the lens of the New Testament, prior to any divine intervention, the human condition is “in Adam”, to use Paul’s terminology. To say we are “in Adam” is to confirm the tragedy of our common human solidarity in sin, brokenness, and need. We might also speak of the traumatic

human solidarity “in Adam” as being a shared network of wrong, as one’s sin is never exclusively “private” but redounds to a bitter harvest in our shared world.¹⁴⁹

For the Christian, just as faith *must* be individual and personal, at the same time it can never be merely individual. God reconciles the nations to himself in Christ so as to redeem and constitute a joyful “people of God.” Salvation, as we have noted already, does not happen by random “external” means in which one unrelated party undergoes some irrelevant process of suffering for another unrelated party, and somehow, out of the mix, we end up forgiven. No, in a marvelous—if mysterious—way, we are saved by Jesus *our representative*; what he bears, he rightly bears for us, and what is true of the Lord becomes true of his people. We are saved and renewed by incorporation into the “last Adam” (cf. Rom. 5 and 1 Cor. 15). Not only are we saved *by* Christ, but also *into* Christ.

For Paul, the notion being incorporated “in Christ” is never far from any of his thought. Just as human solidarity was actual and hopeless in Adam, so in Christ (crucified and risen) is our hope and restoration—as well as an inclusive incorporation, one with another. (Think too of the incorporative language of Jesus’ prayer in John 17.) This dramatic new life and new identity, while entered into by individuals, is shared, communal, and corporate. It is “in Christ” we know God the Father, gazing on the divine face, as it were. To be together in Christ is also to share in his healing sufferings for the world (cf. Phil. 3.10-11).¹⁵⁰

Glaser remarks insightfully on our incorporative salvation in Christ:

Most Muslims come from cultures that function collectively ... Muslims know that, if you are a member of a family, you are implicated in all that happens to that family ... Paul is telling us that if we are members of Christ, we are implicated in all that happens to Him ... And, if we are implicated in Christ’s death, we are also implicated in His resurrection. We have brought shame on Him, but He has borne it. Now, we can share in His honor and triumph.¹⁵¹

The aim of God in Christ is not merely a “saved collection of souls.” Rather, God, on the basis of the redemptive action of the cross, calls us to himself to be *a* people, *his* people, a redeemed and renewed community of worship, hope, and life. Conviction rooted in my own experience of grace in Christ catalyzes a hope in me that God will yet call many beautiful people from the world of Islam into fellowship with himself in the Son—not for the sake of aggrandizing any particular church body or entity; not so as to export some Western (or other) “brand” of religion, still less to swell the denominational rolls or coffers of this or that Christian institution. No. But rather, Christ gave himself and calls to himself all who will come ... “that he might redeem [them] from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds” (Titus 2.14).

The proof is in the pudding

Paul the Apostle says that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. In that same passage he goes on to elaborate how the apostolic band prosecutes their ministry of proclamation *precisely as an embodiment and application of that larger ongoing mission of God in the Messiah*. By extension here, and elsewhere in the New Testament (Mk 8.31-38; Jn 20.21; Phil. 2.5-11), the fact of our redemption in the cross calls all who are “in Christ” to emulation, to cross-bearing, to following in his path. The people of Jesus are called to a cross-shaped existence of love, sacrifice, and even death as the Lord ushers in his Kingdom. This is congruent with Paul’s determination to never “progress” beyond the cross of Christ in the face of worldly sophistication (1 Cor. 1.10-2.5), to glory only in that cross (Gal. 6.14-15).

This long and costly discipleship in the way of the cross (adapting Islamic idiom, *sabil as-salib*) is part of the answer to the wrong, injustice, and sin in our world. Cross-bearing in the lives of

Jesus-people is, of course, reflective and derivative of the accomplished mission of Jesus at Golgotha, but it is a real and vital expression nonetheless. Perhaps more than all arguments, *this* is the cruciform, self-emptying love the Muslim world needs to encounter in the church: to meet believers who can say, *I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me* (Gal. 2.19b-20). Once again, in Christian-Muslim dialogue we are not operating in the realm of irresistible “proofs.” But, in terms of *compelling evidence*, we might say, the “proof is in the pudding.” That is, the narrative of the cross is at its most compelling and most coherent in the testimony of lives changed.

However foreign to Islamic idiom, in the cross we see the divine love, a love that suffers.¹⁵² This love, received by the community of Christ, necessarily is a love expressed *by* that same community. Abu Qurrah’s commendation of the cross in the Islamic milieu of the ‘Abbasid empire included the expectation that we “share in the pains” of Christ.¹⁵³ So, what is lacking in the sufferings of Jesus is not their efficacy but their imitation (Col. 1.24).¹⁵⁴ We are followers of the God-who-is-love. That love is not appropriated in our lives merely on the basis of our observation, at a cool distance, of Christ as a model. No, we are actually *impelled by* the love of God (2 Cor. 5.14-15). This love flows to us from that epicenter of our very existence as a people: the Cross of Christ. Exalted adjectives or eloquent virtues attributed to God, such as the 99 “beautiful names” in the Qur’an, are elegant and fine so far as they go. But as long as they remain abstractions or bare descriptors, devoid of the supporting narrative, character, and “history” of the God revealed in Jesus, they gain no real traction. Generic references to Love, Mercy, or Compassion do not bring peace, do not lead us to God. As Rollin Grams states, it is in the cross that we truly know the love of God, not as an abstract concept, but as the love that in fact *is*¹⁵⁵—with all its challenge, conviction, and call to repentance, with all its pain, truth, hope, and life.

Concluding with Timothy I: The cross to Islam

Timothy I, the Catholicos of the Church of the East (late eighth century), gives a beautiful oration on the life that comes from the death of Christ on the cross. Addressing the ‘Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi, he underscores the Oneness of God, glory in loss, the love of God, and the indestructibility of divinity—all with rhetorical eloquence appropriate to an Eastern/Islamic context.¹⁵⁶ Here one may also detect subtle resonances with the Christus Victor model referenced above.¹⁵⁷ We close with Timothy’s glorying in the cross.¹⁵⁸

And our victorious King said to me: *Why do you worship the Cross?*

And I replied: *First because it is the cause of life.*

And our glorious King said to me: *A cross is not the cause of life, but rather of death.*

And I replied to him: *The cross is, as you say, O King, the cause of death;*

but death is also the cause of resurrection, and resurrection is the cause of life and immortality.

In this sense the cross is the cause of life and immortality, and this is the reason why through it, as a symbol of life and immortality, we worship one ... indivisible God.

It is through it that God opened to us the source of life and immortality.

And God who, at the beginning, ordered light to come out of darkness; who sweetened bitter water in bitter wood; who, through the sight of a deadly serpent, granted life to the children of Israel, handed to us the fruit of life from the wood of the Cross, and caused rays of immortality to shine upon us from the branches of the Cross.

As we honor the roots, because of the fruits that come out of them, so also we honor the Cross, as the root of which the fruit of life was born to us, and from which the ray of immortality shone upon us ...

*It is only just, therefore, O our victorious King, that the medium through which God showed His love to all, should also be the medium through which all should show their love to God.*¹⁵⁹

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Notes

1. I would like to thank Jim Bennett, Ayman Ibrahim, two anonymous reviewers, Eloise Neely, and Azar Ajaj for comments and input on this paper. Any errors are mine alone.
2. See Swanson M (1994) The cross of Christ in the earliest Arabic Melkite Apologies. In: Samir SK and Nielsen JS (eds) *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750–1258)*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 117–118. Cf. Thomas D (2006) Christian theologians and new questions. In: Grypeou E, Swanson M, and Thomas D (eds) *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 257–276, esp. pp. 274–276; Thomas D (2008) Denying the cross in early Muslim dialogues with Christians. In: Singh D (ed) *Jesus and the Cross*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, pp. 49–53. For early examples of Christian engagement on these issues, see Griffith SH (2006) Answers for the Shaykh: A ‘Melkite’ Arabic text from Sinai and the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation in ‘Arab Orthodox’ Apologetics. In: *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, pp. 277–309; and Griffith SH (2008) *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 53–57 (and sources cited), on the earliest Arabic apology for the faith—*On the Triune Nature of God*.
3. Cf. *Church in the Shadow*, p. 93f.
4. Cross of Christ, p. 118.
5. Lawson T (2009) *The Crucifixion and the Qur’an, A Study in the History of Muslim Thought*. Oxford: Oneworld, p. 95.
6. For an example of discourse on the cross by an ancient Christian figure from Muslim realms, see the words of Catholicos Timothy I cited at the end of this essay.
7. Gairdner WHT (1910) *The Eucharist as Historical Evidence*. Cairo: Nile Mission Press, p. 1. (Comparable is his (1916) *God as Triune, Creator, Incarnate, Atoner*. Madras: Christian Literature Society for India, p. 54.)
8. Think in modern theology of the provocatively titled *The Crucified God* by Jürgen Moltmann.
9. See, e.g., Bockmuehl M (1997) *The Epistle to the Philippians*. London: Continuum, pp. 114–148.
10. Cf. Zahniser AHM (2008) *The Mission and Death of Jesus in Islam and Christianity*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, pp. 234–235.
11. Cf. Zahniser, *Mission and Death*, chapter six.
12. Swanson M (2006) Folly to the *Hunafa*’: The crucifixion in early Christian-Muslim controversy. In: Grypeou E, Swanson M, and Thomas D (eds) *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 251–253.
13. See Folly to the *Hunafa*’, pp. 237–256.
14. Lawson’s chapter one (*The Crucifixion*) is devoted to looking at the lexical, semantic, and broader Qur’anic context of Q 4.157–158.
15. The profile of the Jews in the Qur’an is often of a people who, having received a Scripture, harden their hearts and are abased by God; are greedy and contentious; corrupt their divine revelation in some way; and oppose (or kill) God’s messengers and prophets—not least the ‘last and greatest,’ Muhammad himself. Cf. Reynolds GS (2012) On the Qur’an and the theme of Jews as ‘killers of the prophets.’ *Al-Bayan* 10(2): 9–32.
16. Cragg K (2003) *Jesus and the Muslim, An Exploration*. Oxford: Oneworld, p. 170.
17. In this case, the verb being ‘form II,’ the idea is of something *being made* to resemble something else. See Lane EW (1863) *An Arabic–English Lexicon*. Medford, MA: Williams and Norgate, p. 1499.
18. This theory enjoys currency among Ahmadiyya Muslims.
19. Cf. Cragg K (2008) The Qur’an and the Cross—Less absent than you think. In: Singh D (ed) *Jesus and the Cross*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, pp. 181–182, and *Jesus and the Muslim*, pp. 173–174 (and notes 9–11).
20. In suggesting the ‘mainstream’ churches as the primary Christian voices present at the rise of Islam, rather than the elusive (Jewish or Gnostic) Christian heresies, see Griffith, *Church in the Shadow*, pp. 7–9; Griffith SH (2013) *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the “People of the Book” in the Language of*

- Islam*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, chapter one, and Reynolds GS (2014) On the presentation of Christianity in the Qur'an and the many aspects of Qur'anic rhetoric. *Al-Bayan* 12: 42–54.
21. Lawson, *The Crucifixion*, pp. 7–8, 18–21. See too Mark Swanson, *Folly to the Hunafa'*, pp. 239–240.
 22. See Lawson, *The Crucifixion*, p. 82.
 23. See, for example, the arguments in Zahniser, *Mission and Death*, chapters seven, eight, 10, etc.
 24. For those wishing to follow the grammatical trail into yet more complexity and detail, guided by the Muslim commentator Zamakhshari (d. 1144), see Reynolds GS (2009) The Muslim Jesus: Dead or alive? *BSOAS* 72(2): 243, n 19, and also Lawson, *The Crucifixion*, p. 102.
 25. In English translation, this rendering seems rather strange. On the attempt to justify this understanding in terms of Arabic idiom, see Lawson, *The Crucifixion*, pp. 65–66, and 125 (on Rida's work).
 26. See further, Lawson, *The Crucifixion*, pp. 141–142.
 27. In some cases, the actual quoted source for a tradition does not go all the way back to Muhammad, but only to one of his esteemed followers who had been with him (the so-called Companions). Traditions from the prophet are 'weightier.'
 28. See *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, Kitab Tafsir al-Qur'an 2952 (in Arabic), available at: <http://hadith.al-islam.com/Page.aspx?pageid=192&TOCID=1833&BookID=26&PID=2876> (accessed 20 June 2015).
 29. Lawson, *Crucifixion*, pp. 79–80, 94–97.
 30. *Crucifixion*, pp. 47–48.
 31. Cf. Neely B (2014) The antichrist in classical Islam: The Muslim apocalypse, Ibn Kathir, and the *Dajjal*. In: Neely B and Riddell P (eds) *Islam and the Last Day, Christian Perspectives on Islamic Eschatology*. CSIOF 4. Melbourne: MST Press, pp. 38–72.
 32. For the general view of Muslim commentary on this verse we have relied to a large extent on Reynolds, Muslim Jesus, pp. 237–258. For more detail on the relevant tradition of Islamic commentary, consult Lawson, *The Crucifixion*, and Robinson N (1991) *Christ in Islam and Christianity*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press (esp. chapters 9–13); also Ayoub M (1980) Towards an Islamic Christology, II: The Death of Jesus, reality or delusion? *MW* 70(2): 91–121. Those wishing to explore the Islamic commentaries on the verses in questions can find a few English translations of important commentaries here: <http://altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=0&tSor aNo=1&tAyahNo=1&tDisplay=no&LanguageID=2>. Also, the large and highly influential commentary of Ibn Kathir, in English translation (abridged), can be readily found online.
 33. See Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, pp. 173–174 (and notes 9–11) and Zahniser, *Mission and Death*, chapter seven. Cf. Reynolds, Muslim Jesus, pp. 252–253; Robinson, *Christ in Islam*, chapter three. Further on the Qur'an and debatable 'Gnostic overtones' see Lawson, *The Crucifixion*, pp. 2–6, and Cragg, Qur'an and Cross, pp. 180–182.
 34. A translation from a tradition in Tabari's commentary is provided by Mahmoud Ayoub, Towards an Islamic Christology, II, pp. 118–120.
 35. See Lawson, *The Crucifixion*, pp. 89–91. On al-Tha'alabi's (d. 1035) collection of relevant narratives in his *Tales of the Prophets*, see p. 91.
 36. Reynolds, Muslim Jesus, p. 247. Cf. Ayoub, Towards an Islamic Christology, II, pp. 107–108; Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 177. Compare Tabari on Q 3.55, paragraphs 5629–5630 (Arabic) in: <http://quran.al-islam.com/Page.aspx?pageid=221&BookID=13&Page=1> (accessed 2 October 2015).
 37. For more on this verb and its handling by the commentators, see Reynolds, Muslim Jesus, pp. 245–247 and Zahniser AHM (1989) The forms of *tawaffa* in the Qur'an. *MW* 79(1): 14–24. Also, Ayoub, Towards an Islamic Christology, II, p. 106f. (also on Q 3.55 and 5.117).
 38. See Reynolds, Muslim Jesus, pp. 239–240. In both *Jesus and the Muslim* and Qur'an and Cross, Cragg presents a similar view.
 39. Muslim Jesus, pp. 241–242. For the Arabic text of this story in Tabari's commentary on Q 4.157 see paragraph 8489 at: <http://quran.al-islam.com/Page.aspx?pageid=221&BookID=13&Page=1> (accessed 2 October 2015).
 40. In point of fact, I was unable to locate the reference to Jesus' falling asleep in the stories Tabari brings from Ibn Ishaq (according to Reynolds in the previous note), but the assertion of Jesus' sleeping is readily available elsewhere in Tabari's commentary. See for example paragraphs 5619–5620 in his

- commentary on Q 3.55, at: <http://quran.al-islam.com/Page.aspx?pageid=221&BookID=13&Page=1> (accessed 2 October 2015).
41. Reynolds, Muslim Jesus, p. 244.
 42. Hamza F (trans.) (2007) *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*. Amman: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought; Arabic text: <http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=8&tSoraNo=3&tAyahNo=55&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1> (accessed 18 May 2015).
 43. Reynolds, Muslim Jesus, p. 247; on other commentators, p. 245f.
 44. Another exegetical crux is the issue of 'whose death?'—that of each Jew or Christian or the future death of Jesus just before the eschaton?
 45. It would appear that Reynolds and I are using the terms 'apocalyptic' and 'eschatological' in almost inverse ways. Here, by 'apocalyptic' I mean events related to the penultimate days of history, the mysterious events just prior to the final Hour of judgment and resurrection. In any case, I agree with Reynolds that Jesus in the Qur'an seems to be connected to the Day of Judgment (what I call an 'eschatological' reality), but less clearly to the events of the last days of human history.
 46. Reynolds, Muslim Jesus, pp. 247–251.
 47. On eschatological speculation as linked to sectarian polemics, see Neely, *The Antichrist in Classical Islam*, pp. 43–44 (and throughout).
 48. Muslim Jesus, p. 240.
 49. So, Q 8.17. Cf. Q 3.145.
 50. Muslim Jesus, p. 251.
 51. Muslim Jesus, p. 257.
 52. Muslim Jesus, p. 255.
 53. See Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 172.
 54. *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 175 (emphasis added).
 55. Swanson, *Folly to the Hunafa'*, p. 251. (See also Samir's treatment of Timothy's dialogue cited at the end of this essay.)
 56. Cf. Lawson, *The Crucifixion*, pp. 72, 93.
 57. See Robinson, *Christ in Islam*, pp. 135–138. See also, Ayoub, *Towards an Islamic Christology*, II, pp. 101–102; Zahniser, *Mission and Death*, pp. 42–43. Al-Razi's complex engagement with the issue of the crucifixion is detailed also in Lawson, *Crucifixion*, pp. 105–107.
 58. Whittingham M (2008) How could so many Christians be wrong? The role of *tawātur* (recurrent transmission of reports) in understanding Muslim views of the crucifixion. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 19(2): 174. See p. 173 for al-Ghazali (d. 1111) on similar issues.
 59. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 174.
 60. On all of this see Lawson, *The Crucifixion*, pp. 77–87. (On al-Ghazali, pp. 77–79)
 61. See Ayoub, *Towards an Islamic Christology*, II, pp. 110–111.
 62. See Beaumont IM (2008) Debating the Cross in Early Christian Dialogues with Muslims. In *Jesus and the Cross*, p. 59.
 63. See the text of this 'letter from Cyprus' in Ebied R and Thomas D (eds) (2005) *Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades, The Letter from the People of Cyprus and Ibn Abi Talib al-Dimashqi's Response*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 125, 127 (English translation) and pp. 124, 126 (Arabic text).
 64. On modern Qur'an commentary on the issue of the cross (whether 'progressive' or traditional), see Lawson's chapter four in *The Crucifixion*.
 65. *Towards an Islamic Christology*, II, p. 104f.
 66. Ayoub, *Towards an Islamic Christology*, II, pp. 116–118.
 67. Cited in Zahniser, *Mission and Death*, pp. 59–60. Also on the *Manar Commentary*, compare Ayoub, *Towards an Islamic Christology*, II, pp. 113–115. The Arabic commentary may be found here: <http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=103&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=157&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1> (accessed 19 May 2015).
 68. See Seferta YHR (1986) The ideas of Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashid Ridha concerning Jesus. *Encounter* 124 (Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica): 9–10. The extensive comments and polemic at Q 4.157 are specifically Rida's, though 'Abduh's views come in in comments on earlier portions of the Qur'an (see Lawson, *The Crucifixion*, pp. 122–128).

69. Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an* v. 3, pp. 316–318 [an English translation, apparently by the Islamic Foundation (Leicester), available online at: <http://www.kalamullah.com/shade-of-the-quran.html>, accessed 19 May 2015].
70. How could so many Christians be wrong? pp. 175–177. Cf. Lawson, *The Crucifixion*, pp. 128–131.
71. Lawson, *The Crucifixion*, p. 95.
72. *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 178.
73. *Tafsir al-Manar* on Q 4.157 available here (in Arabic): <http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMad=0&tTafsirNo=103&tSoraNo=4&tAyahNo=157&tDisplay=yes&Page=36&Size=1&Language=1> (accessed 27 June 2015).
74. As cited by Mark Swanson, *Cross of Christ*, p. 129.
75. *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 178.
76. See Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 167f. Undoubtedly, most Muslims would defend the fidelity and impeccability of Jesus. Nonetheless, as I read the texts, the Jesus figure in some of the ‘substitution hadiths,’ a figure who is in distress at his impending doom and asks for a volunteer to take his place, *that* profile is less than appealing.
77. Adapting Ida Glaser’s citation of Cragg (Cross-Reference Theology: Speaking, Thinking, and Living the Cross in the Context of Islam, in *Jesus and the Cross*, p. 153). Compare Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, pp. 180–183.
78. Cf. *Jesus and the Muslim*, pp. 166–167.
79. See Miller DA (2010) Narrative and metanarrative in Christianity and Islam. *St. Francis Magazine* 6(3): 501–516 (available at: <https://duanemiller.wordpress.com/2015/11/28/all-my-articles-from-st-francis-magazine/>, accessed 7 March 2016).
80. Though intriguingly there is a hadith to that effect that is usually explained away.
81. On ‘original sin’ see the discussion below.
82. See, e.g., Cragg, *Qur'an and Cross*, p. 183; Cragg K (2004) *A Certain Sympathy of Scriptures, Biblical and Qur'anic*. Brighton: Sussex Academic, pp. 33–35.
83. Miller, Narrative and metanarrative.
84. This is not to deny a strong strain of justice, precise judgment, human responsibility, and even divine mercy in the Qur'an. Reconciling all these factors with the radical sovereignty of God has long been a major challenge in Islamic scholarship.
85. Cf. Q 37.20-32; 70.15-18; 78.40; 89.24; 104.1-6.
86. Q 69.18; 99.7-8.
87. Q 4.56 (scorched skin is renewed for re-burning); cf. Q 50.30; 52.11-16.
88. Q 78.25; cf. 7.13, 18; 17.97; 19.68; 25.34.
89. See further in the section ‘Power, Will, and Love’ below.
90. Closely paraphrasing Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 179.
91. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 180.
92. Cf., *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 173.
93. *Jesus and the Muslim*, pp. 180–181.
94. Bauckham R (2015) *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, Kindle Locations 1610–1619.
95. Musk B (1995) *Touching the Soul of Islam*. Crowborough: MARC, p. 83.
96. Cf. Zahniser, *Mission and Death*, p. 238f; Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, pp. 167–168 (the sufferer’s “will for” the cross); Cragg, *Qur'an and Cross*, p. 182.
97. For more denials of the possibility of redemptive, vicarious atonement (including many comments from the Qur'an translator, Yusuf Ali) see http://www.answering-islam.org/authors/shamoun/burden_bearing1.html (accessed 22 May 2015). The author goes on to argue that the Qur'an only denies that anyone who *himself* carries a burden of sin can bear the sins of another; thus, he argues, Jesus, the sinless one, may be seen as qualified to atone for others.
98. *Engaging Islamic Traditions*, soon to be published by William Carey Library.
99. See Seferta, The Ideas of Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Ridha, p. 10. The quotation marks used in this paragraph signal condensed phraseology to capture the sense of what Rida was communicating; they do not signal verbatim citation.

100. Cf. The Ideas of Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Ridha, pp. 10–11.
101. Rahman F (1980) *Major Themes of the Qur’an*. Minneapolis, MN: Bibliotheca Islamica, p. 31.
102. On this specific argument, see Cragg, Qur’an and Cross, p. 182. Related *positive* arguments for a ‘redemptive bearing of burdens’ are in *Jesus and the Muslim*, chapter six.
103. Cragg’s interaction with the Old Testament has been examined previously. For example, see Tebbe J (1997) *Christian Scriptures in Muslim Culture in the Work of Kenneth Cragg*. PhD thesis, Open University, UK.
104. *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 181.
105. See <https://academic.logos.com/2014/02/04/new-testament-scholarship-50-books-everyone-should-read-part-2-paul/>, accessed 23 May 2015.
106. It may be worth alerting the reader that there is no conceptual connection between the ‘substitution view’ as describing Islamic traditions about another killed in Christ’s place and the Christian idea of ‘substitutionary atonement.’
107. Qur’an and Cross, p. 182.
108. See, for example, Zahniser, *Mission and Death*, pp. 242–243, 254 (and sources cited). Cf. Wright NT (2008) *The Stream, the Lake, and the River; Acts 2.1–21 and Jn 7.37–39*. Sermon for Pentecost. Available at: <http://ntwrightpage.com/sermons/Pentecost08.htm> (accessed 13 June 2015).
109. Cf. the comments at: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/euangelion/2015/06/atonement-as-payment-or-forgiveness/> (accessed 14 June 2015).
110. Further comments below under ‘The Mystery of the Divine Way.’
111. Bird MF (2013) *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Kindle Locations 9156–9160.
112. Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, section 4.4.1.
113. *Evangelical Theology*, Kindle Locations 9278–9286 and 9295–9297.
114. *Jesus and the Muslim*, pp. 181–182.
115. Fazlur Rahman considers this the single most important term in the Qur’an (*Major Themes*, p. 28).
116. See, e.g., Watt WM (1973) *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, chapter four.
117. Cf. Acts 20.28; Rom. 3.5, 21–26; 5.8–11; 1 Pet. 2.24; Rev. 5.9.
118. Rom. 8.32; Gal. 2.20. Cf. Hooker MD (2012) *Paul: A Beginner’s Guide*. London: Oneworld, Kindle Locations 1007–1013. In keeping with the purposes of this essay, we are speaking here in terms of Father and Son, with less focus on the Spirit. To be comprehensive we would need to incorporate a theology of the Spirit in salvation.
119. Again, Zahniser, *Mission and Death*, pp. 234–235.
120. 2 Pet. 1.3–4. Cf. Athanasius’ *De Incarnatione* Book 8.54.
121. Swanson, Cross of Christ, p. 137.
122. See Beaumont, *Debating the Cross*, pp. 57–58.
123. Cf. Gairdner, *God as Triune*, pp. 64–65.
124. See Swanson, Cross of Christ, pp. 121–123.
125. See Watt, *Formative Period*, pp. 104–106.
126. See Sahih Bukhari 7.71.606 (available at http://www.sahih-bukhari.com/Pages/Bukhari_7_71.php, accessed 26 May 2015). In fact, the tradition complicates rather than clarifies the picture, but there still remains a heavy sense of the inscrutable determination of God in the narration.
127. Mk 15.39.
128. The contrast is rather striking even on so mild and favorable (to Muhammad) a telling of the story of the ‘submission of Mecca’ as W. Montgomery Watt’s in Watt WM (1974) *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 203–207.
129. Cited in Cragg K (2008) The Cross and Power: The Parting of the Ways. In *Jesus and the Cross*, p. 42.
130. See Al-Ghazali’s *Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din* as cited by Sweetman JW (1967) *Islam and Christian Theology* 2.2. London: Lutterworth, p. 29, n 1 (cf. p. 105f.).
131. *God as Triune*, pp. 57–58.
132. *Islam and Christian Theology* 2.2, pp. 51–56, 64–65.

133. See, for example, Sweetman, *Islam and Christian Theology* 2.2, pp. 21, 30–31, 59–60, 105, 112–114, 207, 217, 320; See Ibn Rushd's critique of the 'kalamists' on this point on pp. 169–174. Cragg's warning about extremism in Muslim anti-analogical thought about God (*al-mukhalafa*) is well put in Cragg K (1997) Tafsir and Istisfar in the Qur'an. *ICMR* 8(3): 313.
134. A relevant audio resource is Hans Boersma's sixth lecture in his *History of Christian Doctrine* course at Regent College (<http://www.regentaudio.com/products/history-of-christian-doctrine>, accessed 15 September 2015).
135. See *Major Themes*, pp. 18–24. See also Cragg's reference to Daud Rahbar's *God of Justice*, in Tafsir and Istisfar, pp. 312–313. The motif of 'justice' runs throughout Abu Zaid N with Nelson E (2004) *Voice of an Exile: Reflections on Islam*. Westport, CT: Praeger. Cf. Saeed A (2006) *Islamic Thought: An Introduction*. New York: Taylor and Francis, pp. 30–32, 150–152.
136. Feryal Salem helpfully complicates the qur'anic picture of freewill and determinism (*qadar*) in her article, Salem F (2014) Freewill, *qadar*, and *kasb* in the epistle of Hasan-al-Basri to 'Abd al-Malik. *MW* 104: 198–219.
137. See Gairdner, *God as Triune*, p. 58f.
138. *God as Triune*, pp. 55–56.
139. See *God as Triune*, pp. 51–54, 62–63.
140. *God as Triune*, pp. 63 and 65.
141. *God as Triune*, p. 54.
142. *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 179.
143. I thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this possibility.
144. As a start on Gairdner, the reader is referred to Cragg K (1981) Temple Gairdner's legacy. *IBMR* Oct.: 164–167; Padwick CE (1930) *Temple Gairdner of Cairo*. London: SPCK (rev. edn.); Shelley MT (1988) *The life and thought of W.H.T. Gairdner, 1873–1928*. PhD thesis, University of Birmingham; Shelley MT (1999) Temple Gairdner of Cairo revisited. *ICMR* 10(3): 261–278; Vander Werff L (1977) *Christian Mission to Muslims: The Record*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library (print on demand, 2000). Also, Neely B (2014) Temple Gairdner and the question of Christian use of Muslim scripture. *Australian Journal of Mission Studies* 8(1): 30–36. For bibliography of Gairdner, see Padwick, *Temple Gairdner*, pp. 327–330; Shelley, *Life and Thought*, pp. 353–362; Vander Werff, *Christian Mission*, pp. 279–282. As for Cragg, the literature by him and about him is voluminous and need not be rehearsed here. A very brief piece highlighting some of the 'ways in' to a comprehensive study of Cragg (and some key bibliography) is Daniel Brown's contribution at http://www.isrme.org/?page_id=64 (accessed 18 September 2015).
145. Cragg, Temple Gairdner's Legacy, pp. 164–167. Shelley's dissertation (chapter seven) and his Temple Gairdner of Cairo (p. 270f.; esp. 274–276) touch on this point. See also Tebbe JA (2002) Kenneth Cragg in perspective: A comparison with Temple Gairdner and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. *IBMR* Jan.: 16–17.
146. Personal communication from Duane Alexander Miller.
147. See Wright NT (2013) Israel's scriptures in Paul's narrative theology. In: *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, chapter 32 (a reprint of his 2012 article in *Theology* 115(5): 323–329).
148. Cf. *Jesus and the Muslim*, pp. 216–218.
149. See the section in *Jesus and the Muslim*, pp. 216–220. Also, Zahniser, *Mission and Death*, pp. 227–233.
150. Cf. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, pp. 228–231. He speaks evocatively of the Sufi speculation on 'the name written on olive leaves,' and creatively takes the reader thence on a trajectory to the passion of Gethsemane (p. 230).
151. Ida Glaser, Cross-Reference Theology, p. 148.
152. Cf. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 183. Michael Bird (*Evangelical Theology*, Kindle Locations 2739–2765) handles the doctrine of divine impassibility (immunity to suffering) with good balance.
153. Swanson, Cross of Christ, pp. 138–139, 142–143.
154. *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 183 (wording slightly altered).
155. On this whole concept, including its Islamic context, see Grams RG (2008) God the Beneficent—the Merciful, and Jesus' Cross: From Abstract to Concrete Theologizing. In *Jesus and the Cross*, pp. 157–166.

156. Not all elements are present in the excerpt given here.
157. Although the theological logic in Timothy's creative apology for the cross emphasizes other arguments. See Swanson, *Folly to the Hunafa*, pp. 253–254.
158. Another compelling area of research when it comes to Islam and the cross is the ancient Eastern Christian writing on the topic. Scholars who have done commendable work in this area include Mark Swanson, Mark Beaumont, Sidney Griffith, Samir Khalil Samir, and David Thomas, to name a few. Additionally, worth exploring in connection with the cross-as-victory-in-loss is the (pre-Islamic) early Christian martyr piety of the 'imitation of Christ' type, evident already in the New Testament and developing greatly in the early centuries. See Johnson LT (2009) *Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, Kindle Locations 2802–2903.
159. Mingana, translator. Adapted and excerpted from Samir SK (1997) *The Significance of Early Arab Christian Thought for Muslim-Christian Understanding*. Occasional Papers Series, Georgetown, DC: Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding: History and International Affairs, Georgetown University, pp. 27–28. Timothy is defending the practice of the veneration of crosses, which is not our interest in this essay. In the remaining selections from Samir, Timothy goes on to dispute about the possibility of 'God dying,' and about Q 4.157; 19.33; 3.55 and the indignity of the 'illusion' view with respect to God. The Caliph argues on the basis of the Qur'an and against the ignominy of crucifixion. It is fascinating to see the 'Nestorian' Catholicos Timothy acclaim the Muslims' defeat of the Byzantines ('Chalcedonians') because they "attributed suffering and death in the flesh to the one who cannot suffer and die in any way and through any process (p. 36)."

Author Biography

Brent Neely has served with Arab churches in the Middle East for many years. He is also on the board of the Evangelical Alliance Israel and was a member of faculty at NETS (Nazareth, Israel), a precursor institution to the Nazareth Evangelical College.