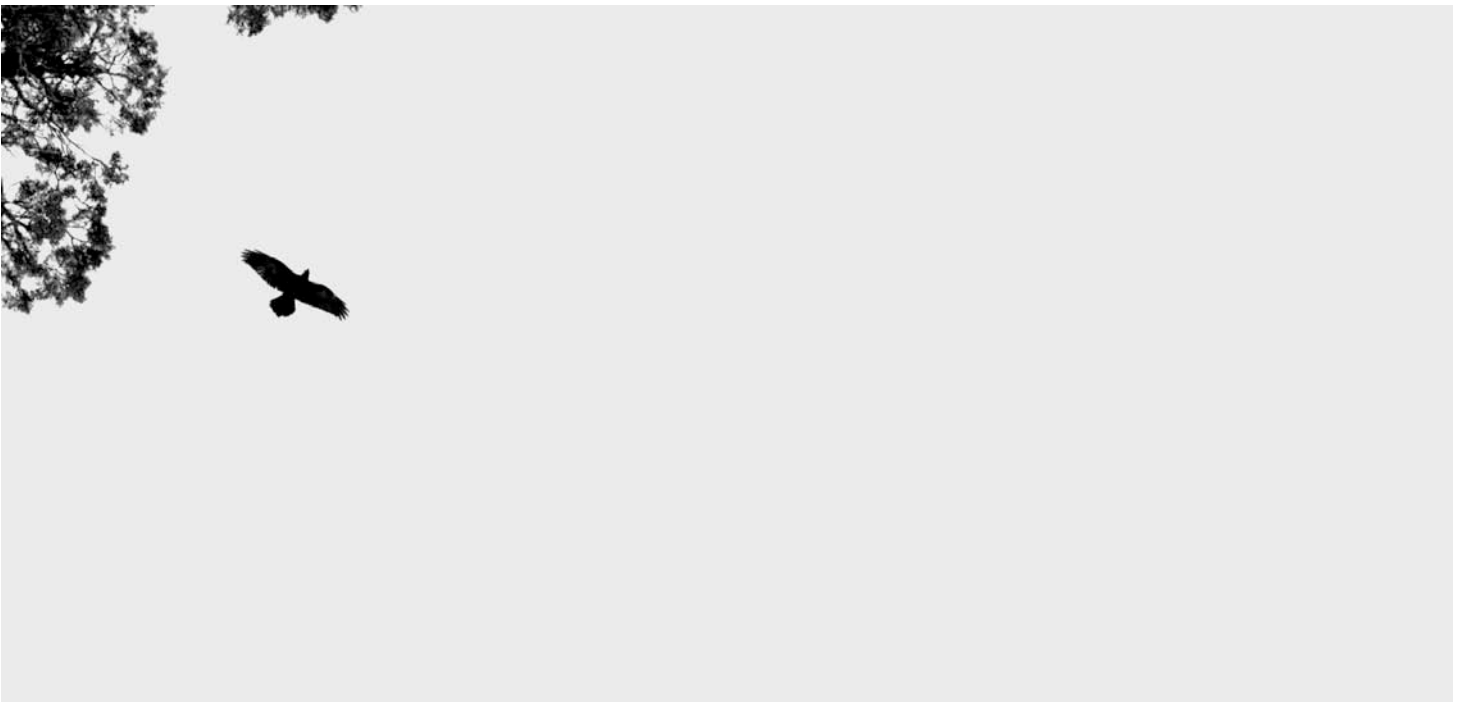




Journal of Comparative Theology

at Harvard Divinity School

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Since our premiere issue last year, the *Journal of Comparative Theology* has grown into an international platform for scholarly reflection and exchange. We regularly receive inquiries and submissions from around the world, not only from graduate students, but also from professors and non-academics alike. This burgeoning interest in the *Journal* reflects ongoing expansion in the field of comparative theology more generally. To nurture and sustain this growing interest, we continue to re-imagine our virtual content and broaden the geographical reach of our print journal.

Comparative theology fills a unique niche within the academic marketplace. It appeals to scholars who have a personal, even faith-binding, interest in the religious traditions they study. Leveraging this investment, they seek to understand a particular religious tradition through theological dialogue with one or more other traditions. The balance may prove difficult to strike at times, as comparative theologians operate within a sort of isthmus. On the one hand, they resist the illusion of detached objectivity, celebrating their intimacy with religious expression. On the other hand, they do not feel compelled to uphold the apologetic exclusivity of fully confessional authors.

The goal of this *Journal* is to offer an oasis in the wilderness for comparative theologians. It serves as a structured forum for debating methodology, engaging in critical inquiry, sharing insight and discerning best practices. We thank all of our readers for their continued support and publicity.

After our premiere issue, we decided to move the journal to a rolling submission format. We received a large quantity of high quality articles. The referees and editors are excited to showcase four particularly compelling forays into the discipline.

Green Creation: Comparative Ecological Theology in the Bible and Qur'an
pp.4-20

Craig Phillips completed his undergraduate study in music at the University of Delhi, India. Upon returning to the US, he enrolled as a graduate student at Hartford Seminary, where he is pursuing a

Master of Arts in Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations. Craig is currently engaged in research for his Master's thesis on the topic of human rights in contemporary Islamic thought.

Phillips looks to both the Qur'an and Hebrew Bible for guidance in preventing, responding to, and thinking about ecological crisis. His approach to these texts is threefold, centering on what he calls the "God-human-nature" relationship. He proceeds by examining the creation stories found in the Book of Genesis, while attending to humanity's responsibilities toward God and nature. Noting differences in its structure and approach to the subject matter, Phillips then analyzes relevant themes in the Qur'an. He cautions against ecocentric readings of the Bible and Qur'an, yet encourages his readers to consider the ways in which both bodies of scripture articulate complex synergistic relationships between God, humanity and nature.

Sabbath and Zakat: A Dialogue of Economic Justice
pp.21-45

Christopher Spotts is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. His research focuses on the use of ancient Hebrew ethical thought in modern social ethics. He has presented on a wide range of topics, including the possibilities of Sabbath in Catholic Social Thought, the Church as a marginalized community, the role of Exodus in Black Liberation Theology and the use of the Hebrew prophets in the thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.

In writing on the Jewish vision of the Sabbath and the Islamic practice of Zakat, Spotts seeks to illuminate concepts of economic justice that appear to be lacking in current discourses. Spotts analyzes the Sabbath as a "solidaristic conception of economy" that was critical to the Israelite nation and its people's relationship with God. Turning to Zakat, he considers its requirement of radical wealth redistribution as an important practice, not only for the well-being of the individuals involved in both giving and receiving, but also for the well-being of the larger community. Spotts concludes that "the modern world has lost the imagination to conceive of economic realities that provide the means of sustenance to all of humankind," and that traditional practices of Zakat and Sabbath have much to offer as a corrective today.

Similar Ways of Knowing Different Truths
pp.46-58

Lisa Gasson earned a BA in Christianity and Culture from the University of Toronto. She is currently a MTS candidate at Harvard Divinity School, where her interests include feminist theology, questions of subjectivity and issues of religious pluralism. She seeks to locate connections between theology and the lived experience of religious individuals. Her work was previously published in *Saeculum*, the undergraduate journal of the Christianity and Culture program at the University of Toronto. Outside of the academy, she enjoys independent music, bad television, and cats.

Through careful analysis, Gasson embarks on a close reading of Chapter Nine of the Bhagavad-Gita in light of Karl Rahner's "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions." In so doing, she assesses the extent to which Rahner's terminology of the "anonymous Christian" can rightly be applied to Krishna's proclamations regarding worshipers of other faiths in the Bhagavad-Gita. Might such worshipers be "anonymous Hindus"? While drawing tentative conclusions that problematize the comparative venture,

Gasson points to “transcendence” as a common denominator that opens up the possibility for further comparison.

Abraham on Whose Terms? Isaac and Ishmael as a Particularity-Driven Paradigm for Jewish-Christian-Muslim Engagement

pp.59-75

Tasi Perkins is a Ph.D. Candidate in Theological and Religious Studies in the Georgetown University Department of Theology. He primarily studies narrative paradigms of violence and nonviolence in the liturgies, texts and rituals of Islam and Christianity. Additionally, he is interested in constructive theological contributions to restorative justice, Christian theologies of Islam, and the relationship between soteriology and ethics. Tasi earned a Bachelor of Science in Biometry and Statistics at Cornell University and a Master of Divinity from Duke University and recently finished a year of Th.D. coursework at Boston University. Tasi is an ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church, which he served pastorally for four years prior to resuming his graduate education. While serving three congregations in rural Virginia, he was involved in ministries of peace and justice through work in hospitals, prisons and social services. He was also a Chaplain Candidate in the U.S. Navy. Tasi’s wife, Kristen, is a doctoral student in neuroscience at Brown University and the National Institutes of Health.

In his article, Perkins breaks open the popular paradigm that has formed the basis for contemporary Jewish-Christian-Muslim engagement, namely that of the “Abrahamic family” of religions. He argues that such a “pragmatically useful and theologically tenable” universality should be complemented by the particularities of Abraham’s children, Isaac and Ishmael. As such, Perkins maintains that particularities and distinctiveness should constitute the theological basis for dialogue, since universality often leads to sameness and assimilation. In this article, he uses the scriptural stories of Isaac and Ishmael as examples, employing a paradigm of difference that allows practitioners of these religious traditions to avoid the fetishization of similarity. Rather, through this paradigm, practitioners can overcome the historical pattern of dominance and homogeneity.

We would like to thank Jim Lopata (HDS, MTS, 2012) and Bennett Comerford (Boston College, MTS, 2012) for their help in editing this issue. We are continually grateful and honored by the advisement of Professor Francis X. Clooney, S.J., Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Theology, as well the Director of the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School.



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Contemporary society is one in which discussion on global environmental degradation is commonplace among world leaders and common folk alike. Frustrations about the heedlessness of individuals from all segments of society in relation to our environmental crisis should indeed be bothersome to us all. Some religious figures have looked at recent natural disasters as divine punishment for living un-Godly lives, while others view these as signs of the end of days and coming of the final judgment. Rather than debating what all of this means esoterically or eschatologically, should we not instead be trying to understand how our scriptures offer guidance to deal with such calamities and prevent more in the future? Clarifying, first and foremost, our scriptures' views of nature and its relationship to humankind and God will be of utmost importance in defining this guidance, and hopefully will act as a stepping stone for people of faith to lead the world into a sustainable future as part of their service to God and humankind.

Though it may be bold to quote Lynn White's controversial article, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', I do find truth and meaning between the lines and consider it pertinent to the topic addressed here. He writes, "What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to the things around them."¹ This paper aims to

Green Creation: Comparative Ecological Theology in the Bible and Qur'ān

BY CRAIG PHILLIPS

¹ Lynnn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155, no 3767 (1967): 6.

be a reflection for those who take scripture, in this case the Bible and Qurʾān, as a lens through which to view the world, and a tool to guide interaction with the surrounding environment. In essence, I aim to provoke thought on the tripartite relationship between God, humankind, and the environment.

Due to the wide expanse of possibilities to write on for a paper on scripture and ecology, I aim here to limit my sources. This paper could be extended indefinitely were I to include Islamic ḥadīth literature, Jewish midrash, and other canonical or non-canonical texts; for this reason I have strictly limited myself to Biblical and Qurʾānic verses alone, along with selected contemporary discourse in the context of those verses. To understand the complete ecological worldview of our religious traditions will require much deeper investigation, though I still maintain that focused studies are vital steps in uncovering and clarifying that worldview. It is also important to mention that all of the Biblical discussion will be from the Hebrew Bible, specifically focusing on the accounts of creation in Genesis I and II. The New Testament is not being ignored, however Sallie McFague puts it well in saying, "...there is little in Jesus' teachings about nature (and it is futile to rummage about with fig trees and hens, trying to make Jesus into a nature-lover)."² McFague makes an important point here, and reminds us to remain conscious that we often tend to over-interpret and read into our scriptures what we want to get out of them. I believe concrete, dare I say literal, interpretations will be the most clear way to have an impactful thesis, rather than referring to every tree, bird, and bee in scripture as environmental discourse. It should also be kept in mind, however, that "this text³ was not written in order to impress the reader with its biological wisdom. It was written to convey a theological message and to uplift the spirits of the readers, who were in exile in Babylon."⁴ Generally the same thing can be said about the Qurʾān.

The article by Lynn White mentioned above is often cited in Christian and Jewish books on religion and ecology. It accused the Bible, and historical Christian interpretations of it, to allow, endorse, and encourage destruction of the environment for mankind's desires. White argues, with many generalities, that the earth was much better off when lived in by pagans worshipping nature itself. Though I will not address his arguments, or the refutations that have come about since 1967 when it was published, I do find it important to mention. It should also be kept in mind, however, that White's criticisms are much less directed at the text itself, and rather in how the Church and Christians have come to interpret and act on these verses

² Sallie McFague, "An Ecological Christology: Does Christianity Have It?" In *Christianity and Ecology*, ed. Dieter Hessel & Rosemary Ruether (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 35.

³ Hebrew Bible

⁴ Aloys Hütterman, *The Ecological Message of the Torah* (Atlanta: University of Southern Florida, 1999), 11.

throughout history. Therefore, “his thesis is historical rather than hermeneutical,”⁵ unlike this paper which aims to focus directly on the text and its implications for moving into the future. White’s criticism has resulted in numerous works about the Bible and ecology, especially in comparison to the limited number of works on the Qur’ān. Had the Qur’ān faced similar criticism, Muslims may have proven to be just as reactive.

The tripartite relationship between God, human, and nature in scripture is highly interconnected, and is of utmost importance to this paper. Since, by its nature, divine revelation is a means of communication from God to humankind, for obvious reasons many verses refer to this relationship. However, it must also be acknowledged that, just as humans are, nature is the creation and possession of God. Though we tend to read our scriptures anthropocentrically, we must reflect on the fact that our scriptures are not anthropocentric, and nor are they ecocentric.⁶ In fact, among the Abrahamic faiths, we should acknowledge and be content with the theocentric nature of our revelations, and in light of this we can look to the God-nature relationship to understand just how important God has made the creation of, as the Qur’ān and Bible oft repeat, *al-samāwāt wa al-arḍ*.⁷ Understanding of this three-fold, God-human-nature, relationship is vital for us reading and acting on scriptural guidance, and to grasp truly how important our attitudes toward nature are as faithful individuals.

As a Muslim, but more vitally simply as a person of faith, this is extremely relevant to me not only as a matter of theology, but as guiding factor in my life’s purpose and activism. Motivations for writing such a paper come out of the mere fact of me being conscious and human, as only someone unconscious or a non-reflective being would be able to remain blind to the current state of environmental degradation in our world. Coming from an inclusivist Roman Catholic upbringing, a personal spiritual journey leading to my acceptance of Islam, and my persistent interest in beliefs of the world and peaceful coexistence between diverse understandings, I have written this paper to further open dialogue among religious thinkers and faith-inspired activists. When the tools of religion and its ability to motivate masses of believers for just causes is recognized by political leaders worldwide, we may then be able to witness sincere commitment to the issues that plague our globalized world.

How can faithful people look at the world around them through the lens of scripture, and what are key elements that tie us spiritually to the land we live

⁵ Peter Harrison, “*Having Dominion: Genesis and the Mastery of Nature*,” In *Environmental Stewardship*, ed. R.J. Berry (New York: T&T Clark International, 2006), 19.

⁶ Eric Katz, “*Faith, God, and Nature: Judaism and Deep Ecology*,” In *Deep Ecology and World Religions*, ed. David Barnhill & Roger Gottlieb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 164.

⁷ The heavens and the earth.

on, and off of? When religious interpretations have historically, more often than we'd like to admit, oppressed humankind and nature, how can we then reconcile history with what we interpret to be true faith in modern day? If, in fact, scripture guides the lives of believing people, and if environmental protection and sustainability are held as ethical principles for those very same people, there must be an inherent connection between the two. This paper will look at some ideas of what that connection could be.

Biblical Ecology

The accounts of creation in the Bible hold great potential, and at times controversy, for ecological discourse. Within the Genesis itself we see various narratives of creation that portray divergent views. These divergences bring with them diverse interpretations, and in turn cause diverse implementation. Certain implementations rightly so have led to harsh criticisms, as mentioned above. However, these criticisms have also lead to vast study and writing on the topic working to refute such criticisms. Fortunately, in a way, Christians and Jews now have a large number of works dedicated to the topic, and make the Biblical standpoint on humanity's relationship and responsibility with nature more clear and firm. "In the early chapters of Genesis, God is central, nature has intrinsic value, and humans- as powerful as they are- operate within strict limits monitored by God."⁸ This general statement will be helpful to keep in mind, especially in reading the variations between Genesis I and II. Confusion in the true hierarchy of sovereignty and role on earth, quite possibly, is the primary cause of the criticism, and in some cases environmental destruction.

Like all Biblical passages, the story of creation is read as a narrative. It is roughly a step-by-step process as to how the earth, and everything that exists on and around it, was created. The book of Genesis presents us with creation narratives that show quite different accounts of what happened, and likewise contain different meanings. The first account has been attributed to the priestly source, while the second is the divine, Yahwist source.⁹ The two versions present us with different points of view for looking at the God-human-nature relationship.

Genesis I

Genesis I has been referred to as "the most misunderstood part of the Hebrew Bible."¹⁰ Genesis I's progression can be summarized as follows; Day

⁸ Jeff Sultar, "Adam, Adamah, and Adonai: The Relationship between Humans, Nature, and God in the Bibl," In *Ecology & the Jewish Spirit*, ed. Ellen Bernstein (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998), 25.

⁹ Daniel Hillel, *The Natural History of the Bible*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 242.

¹⁰ Hüttermann, *Ecological Message*, 11.

and night created, sky separated from water, dry land appears from the sea and vegetation grows on land, the sun, moon and stars created, then birds and sea creatures, and finally land creatures and humankind. The climax of this account of creation is found in verses 26 through 30, with the creation of the human being, through the command of God Himself,¹¹ and his collective privilege over all other previously created entities. This privilege is the source of the main criticisms of the environmental view of the Bible, and it is these following verses that have been the pillars of such critiques:

Then God said: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. *Let them have dominion* over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground.
[Genesis 1:26]

... *Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion* over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move upon the earth.
[Genesis 1:28]

Looking at this situation, where two verses (and a few more like them)¹² have resulted in such weighty criticisms, one should be perplexed at this limited view of the text by critics.¹³ Nonetheless, these verses still require clarification to explain how these terms have been understood, and what is the general consensus among Christians and Jews on the true nature of humanity's 'dominion' over all creatures, and what appears to be an injunction to 'multiply' and 'subdue it.'

The fact remains that Genesis I asserts the human place of dominance in the world.¹⁴ Genesis I can be summarized as addressing humanity's rule. It can even be said that Genesis I is an anthropocentric account of creation, which may be a result from, or at least make sense in relation to, its priestly source. This being said, the importance of humanity in Genesis 1 can also be re-evaluated when we read in the narrative how, on the third day, land was created bountiful, lush, and full of vegetation, without any need of human action or influence. Nonetheless, the view of humanity in this narrative can be seen dualistically; as distinct from the rest of creation as a creature 'like' God,¹⁵ or being similar and equal to the rest of creation.¹⁶ These are two

¹¹ "God created man in His image; in the divine image He created him; male and female He created them." Genesis 1:27.

¹² For example: Psalms 8:5-9, 115:16.

¹³ It should be no surprise, however, since this is the case with all religious texts, where merely one or two lines of a vast book can serve as a basis for a critique of the entire religious worldview.

¹⁴ Hillel, *Natural History*, 241.

¹⁵ Created in His image.

¹⁶ Ronald Simkins, *Creator & Creation*, (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 199. ie In Gender, procreation, and command to multiply.

distinct observations about humanity's status; however, they are also interrelated and insightful.

The idea of humankind being created in the divine image offers some insight into this God-given dominion over the earth and its creatures. "Then God said: 'Let us make man in Our image, after Our likeness'..." (Gen. 1:26). "God created man in His image; in the divine image He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen. 1:27). Either we can say humans are functionally like God through their dominion over the earth, or humanity is given dominion simply because they were created in His image. It is an evident reality that humankind has a type of control over creation, and in connection with dominion and being created in the image of God, the point of the human ability to exercise its will over creation is being emphasized.¹⁷ The fundamental meaning of dominion is "by virtue of their creation in the divine image, humans represent within creation God's rule over His creation."¹⁸

Despite humanity's dominion being Biblical,¹⁹ it must also be made clear that limits are placed on the dominion. There is no free range to destroy, trample, and subjugate the earth to whatever treatment humans wish to impose on it. Rather, it is a dominion over creation bound by the limits set by God. Though we mentioned earlier that Genesis I can be, at first glance, seen as anthropocentric, we must remember that the Bible as a whole, and Genesis I read in the proper light, is in fact theocentric, therefore it is necessary to situate humanity's dominion "within a framework of God's creative intention, so that humans exercise it properly."²⁰

Lastly, it is not merely that humanity is given this special privilege, but rather they are entrusted with a task, a weighty task at that, "and as long as humans rule according to the order of creation, they contribute to the process of creation."²¹ Therefore the order that we see in the day-by-day creation in Genesis I must be maintained, and if damaged, it must be restored. For humanity to be a productive ruler over creation, this domination must be in accordance with the balance and order set forth by the Creator in the creation. This is also supported by the fact that humanity is among the

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 201.

¹⁸ Richard Bauckham, "Modern Domination of Nature- Historical Origins and Biblical Critique," In *Environmental Stewardship*, ed. R.J. Berry, (New York: T&T Clark International, 2006), 45-6.

¹⁹ Also, looking at the Biblical idea of kingship may be helpful in determining what is meant by dominion. For example, in Deuteronomy 17:14-20, the criteria for choosing a king is given, and the overall view is one of equality with the subjects being ruled over. This 'horizontal relationship', as Richard Bauckham describes it (*ibid.*, 46), of equality and duty of the ruler in relationship with the ruled is what is needed in understanding human dominion over creation. "The dominion is therefore best understood as authority within creation, not over it."

²⁰ *ibid.*, 46.

²¹ Simkins, *Creator & Creation*, 205-206.

creation, and among the groups created over this six day narrative, which further means that they are bound to the standards set by God. The Earth begins as “a formless wasteland,”²² and God creates it into a planet full of life, beauty, and sustenance, and on the end of the sixth day “looked at everything He had made, and He found it very good.”²³

Genesis II

Interestingly enough, Genesis II is an older account of creation, as compared to Genesis I.²⁴ Also, as mentioned earlier, Genesis II is from by the ‘Yahwist,’ or divine, source. Both these points make reflection on the chapter interesting and enlightening. Genesis II does not provide the reader with a day-by-day description of creation, and even more surprisingly, the order of events is quite different. It does not describe the creation *ex nihilo*, but rather zooms in, and focuses on the creation of earthly beings in the Garden of Eden. The progression of Genesis II is as follows: Man created from dust and God breathes the breath of life into him, God plants the garden, man given a place in the garden, man given a role to ‘till and tend it,’ trees grow, wild beasts created, man gives names to all things, creation of the woman, and lastly the drama with the serpent and expulsion from the garden. The focus on the earth, as opposed to Genesis I’s inclusion of the cosmos, offers much in terms of ecological discourse. The two main points I’d like to extract and discuss from Genesis II are, firstly, humankind’s connection with the earth, and secondly their role and responsibility to the earth.

Humanity, or *Adam*, was formed “out of the clay of the ground.”²⁵ Humans are not only connected to the earth, but are made of it and originated from it, and formed by God as a potter forms a pot.²⁶ “Humans are of earth, not of heaven, so their fate is bound to the earth.”²⁷ This concept can be juxtaposed with Genesis 1:27, giving human creation the status of being ‘in the image of God.’ Genesis I gives us a much more heavenly impression as to the nature of humanity’s being, however Genesis II brings us back down from our high pedestal to realize that we are made from the dust of the earth.

More importantly, and most profoundly, Genesis II gives important clues into the role and responsibility of humankind in relation to the earth. In Genesis 2:15 we read “The Lord God then took the man and settled him in the Garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it.” Other versions/translations include ‘to till and tend to it,’ ‘till and keep it,’ ‘nurture and protect it,’ or ‘serve and preserve it.’ No matter which translation is preferred, the theme of

²² Genesis 1:2.

²³ Genesis 1:31.

²⁴ Hillel, *Natural History*, 245.

²⁵ Genesis 2:7.

²⁶ Simkins, *Creator & Creation*, 179-180.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 180.

humanity's position as servant, caretaker, and steward is apparent and constant. "Thus humanity was not given license to rule over the environment and use it for its own purposes alone, but- quite the contrary- was charged with the responsibility to nurture and protect God's creation."²⁸ As seen in I Kings 12:7, the king's role is as a servant rather than a domineering oppressor,²⁹ which can offer the bridge between to dominance of Genesis I and the service of Genesis II. In fact, according to Genesis II, we must also notice that man was placed in the Garden of Eden with a clear responsibility. It was not man who used his extraordinary intelligence and skill to create a beautiful garden, and nor was it that God bestowed the garden upon man so that he could use it as he pleases, or rape it of its bounties. In fact, limits were set, and set very clearly in Genesis 2:17. When humanity, in this case Adam and Eve, broke the limits set by God, they were expelled from the garden to the primordial, barren earth, as we read in Genesis III. The Garden, therefore, was not meant for the humans to dwell permanently; rather humans were created to till the barren earth "and in this manner bring life to the sterile desert."³⁰

Genesis II is the key to understanding the Biblical idea of stewardship, which has become such a profound teaching and offers much in terms of ecological preservation and environmental protection. This short chapter both refutes the Bible's critics, as well as those who've used the concept of dominion to feed their own greed and personal interest. Viewing our position of dominance according to the responsibility and trust bestowed on us through Genesis II, and recognizing the exile of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden because of their breaking the rules of God, offers plenty of substantial scriptural evidence that the Bible both encourages care for the environment, and denounces stepping outside of God's law.

Qur'ānic Ecology

When looking for reference to the creation of *al-samāwāt wa al-arḍ* (the heavens and the earth) in the Qur'ān, we will not find a narrative like in Genesis I and II of the Hebrew Bible,³¹ but rather verses that mirror it to a certain extent. This, in fact, is the case with the Qur'ān as a whole. Even when narratives are presented, for example with the story of Yūsuf or the miraculous birth of 'Isa, they focus on the purpose, or core teaching of the narrative, rather than presenting a detailed story of the event, or life of the prophet. Keeping this in mind, the discussion on the Qur'ānic view of nature

²⁸ Hillel, *Natural History*, 242-243.

²⁹ Bauckhman, *Modern Domination of Nature*, 47.

³⁰ Simkins, *Creator & Creation*, 180.

³¹ Though a narrative like Genesis I and II will not be found, there are verses that do reflect similarities. Some of which will be given in this paper, but more specifically creation of the world in six days (or six periods of time) can be found in verses 32:4, 10:3, 11:7, 25:59, 57:4, 50:38, and 7:54.

and ecology from a creation story alone, as has been done with Genesis I and II, will not be possible; to say the least it will not yield the same results as mention of creation in the Qur'ān is found in clusters of verses spread throughout the text. Therefore, this reflection will be thematically based on topics raised in Genesis found throughout the text of the Qur'ān. In addition, it will demonstrate how the Qur'ān may differ from ideas in the Bible, or how the Qur'ān approaches the same issues while emphasizing different aspects. To begin however, we must first look at what the Qur'ān says about creation.

I have only created the jinns and men that they may serve Me.
[al-Dhāriyāt (51:56)³²]

We created not the heavens, the earth, and all between them, but for just ends. And the hour is surely coming (when this will be manifest).
[al-Hijr (15:85)]

We created not the heavens, the earth, and all between them, merely in (idle) sport. We created them not except for just ends: but most of them do not know. Verily the Day of sorting out is the time appointed for all of them. [al-Dukhān (44:38-40)³³]

To Him will be your return- all of you. The promise of Allah is true and sure. It is He who begins the process of creation, and repeats it, that He may reward with justice those who believe and work righteousness; but those who reject Him will have droughts of boiling fluids, and a chastisement grievous, because they did reject Him.
[Yūnus (10:4)]

The few examples given above begin to demonstrate a reoccurring theme with mention of creation in the Qur'ān. This theme, which not only appears in talking about creation but much of the Qur'ān as a whole, is that the creation of humankind, the heavens, and the earth, all serve as a means to reflect on our moral responsibility and accountability while present among God's creation.³⁴ As we can see in the examples given above, and when looking further into Qur'ānic mention of creation, there is always mention of the Day of Judgment where humankind will be taken to account for every minute action committed. "Then anyone who has done an atom's weight of good, shall see it, and anyone who has done an atom's weight of evil, shall see it."³⁵ Though this theme does not directly tell the reader to take care of creation, it implies that humanity's existence along with all of creation is attached to the Day of Judgment, and in a way it is saying that since God created you and everything you see, be mindful of what you do with it! It will be noticed further in the Qur'ān that it is not only through creation that

³² All Qur'ānic verses are from Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation.

³³ Also see: 21:16, 45:22, 46:3.

³⁴ Interview with Prof. Denny Clark.

³⁵ Qur'ān, 99:7-8.

moral responsibility is evoked, but rather in almost all references to humankind's purpose, and even of nature itself.

Nature in the Qur'ān

References to nature, the elements, and celestial bodies are mentioned often in the Qur'ān, though as I wrote in the introduction, every reference to nature will not be used as a profound teaching in itself. This frequent revisiting, however, of the mention of nature does show that the revelation includes the environment, and often when it is referred to, there is a lesson that follows or precedes it. The Qur'ān does share many concepts with the Bible, and to start I will mention the subservient nature of the environment. There is mention of how the rivers, sun, moon, night and day, and earth as a whole are made subject to humans and serve their purposes.³⁶ Likewise:

Do you not see that Allah has subjected to your (use) all things in the heavens and on earth, and has made his bounties flow to you in exceeding measure, (both) seen and unseen? Yet there are among men those who dispute about Allah, without knowledge and without guidance, and without a book to enlighten them!
[Luqmān (31:20)]

In this verse, though it states that nature does in fact serve humankind, the relationship between humans and nature is not exactly specified, but it is clear that this service to humans is not the only role for the existence of nature, rather it is one of many purposes. This verse brings up a profound Qur'ānic teaching on the environment; Nature is a sign of God, a proof of His existence, and a means to reflect and find meaning. "Each thing that God has created is a wondrous sign, full of meaning; pointing beyond itself to the glory and greatness of its Creator, His wisdom and His purpose for it."³⁷

To Allah belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth; and Allah has power over all things. Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alteration of Night and day; there are indeed signs for men of understanding.
[Āl 'Imrān (3:189-90)]

These two concepts, nature as a service to creatures and nature as a sign of God, serve two functions, one social and the other religious, respectively.³⁸ This purpose is referred to in the Qur'ān by God saying that He did not create everything just for 'idle sport.'³⁹ Indeed, there is a purpose behind it, and these two functions are part of that greater purpose. With this immensely important player, not only in the larger scheme of existence as a whole, but in our own personal relationship with, and responsibility to, our Creator, the

³⁶ Qur'ān, 32:4 & 67:15.

³⁷ Abubakr Ahmed Bagader, *Environmental Protection in Islam*, (Cambridge: IUCN, 1994), 1.

³⁸ *ibid.*, 5.

³⁹ Qur'ān 44:38-40, 21:16, 45:22, 46:3.

need for maintenance and protection of the environment is necessarily implied.

Another characteristic of nature is its balance and perfection. The balance of the natural world is something that can act, again, as a sign of God. That the world can be created in such a way, continuously moving in harmony and sustaining its own health, even while providing for all living creatures, is a truly amazing reflection.

And the earth We have spread out (like a carpet); set thereon mountains firm and immovable; and produced therein all kinds of things in due balance. [al-Ḥijr (15:21)]

Despite this perfection and balance created in the world, it is by human hands that this balance is disrupted. This is why humans are rebuked in the Qur'ān for their ignorance in regards to this, and also why a reminder of accountability is once again given.

Blessed be He in whose hands is dominion; and He has power over all things, He created death and life, that He may try which of you is best in deed... He who created the seven heavens, one above another: no want of proportion will you see in the creation of the Most Gracious. So turn your vision again: see you any flaw? Again turn your vision a second time: your vision will come back to you dull and discomfited, in a state worn out... For those who reject their Lord is the chastisement of Hell: and evil is (such) destination. [al-Mulk (67:1-6)]

An extension of this perfection and balance of nature is how the Qur'ān describes the environment as constantly praising and worshiping God, and therefore is *muslim*. Truly this is an exalted status whereby God Himself names the environment as being in a constant state of islām.

See you not that to Allah prostrate all the things that are in the heavens and on earth...? [al-Ḥajj (22:18)]⁴⁰

See you not that it is Allah whose praises all beings in the heavens and the earth do celebrate, and the birds (of the air) with their wings outspread? Each one knows its own (mode of) prayer and praise. And Allah knows well all that they do. [an-Nūr (24:41-2)]

Humankind, however, is the exception to this, "for they are the only beings endowed with the free choice of obeying or disobeying the command of God."⁴¹ Humankind is again rebuked when the Qur'ān reads, after saying how

⁴⁰ Also see: Qur'ān 13:13.

⁴¹ İbrahim Özdemir, "Toward an Understanding of Environmental Ethics from a Qur'anic Perspective," In *Islam and Ecology*, ed. Frederick Denny, Azizan Baharuddin & Richard Foltz (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 17.

all creation declares God's glory, "...yet you understand not how they declare His glory!"⁴² By such statements, the Qur'ān humbles human beings who reflect on its verses.⁴³

Views of nature that can be derived from the Qur'ān are ample, however the above points suffice us to say that the overall view is that nature is a humbling creation for the sight of man. Its ultimate perfection, balance, power, and magnitude are a sign of something greater. Though God has made such things subservient to humankind, it in no way exalts the human being to a state of domination or to a level able to oppress and simply use natural resources to feed one's own greed.

God, Humans, and Nature

How does humankind fit into all of this? What is the importance of the human in such a paradigm, especially in light of the last mentioned verse demeaning the creation of humankind to something miniscule compared to the magnitude of the creation of nature? The fact remains, just as we have addressed in earlier sections of this paper, that human beings are a part of creation. Such verses should remain humbling, and in fact observing and pondering on nature is, in itself, humbling and profound, yet when reading scripture we must also be able to extract where we fit in. We are deeply connected with the earth and just as is mentioned in Genesis, the Qur'ān says:

Man We did create from a quintessence (of clay).
[al-Mū'minūn 23:12]

He Who created all things in the best way and He began creation of man from clay.
[al-Sajdah 32:7]

From the earth did We create you, and into it shall We return you, and from it shall We bring you out once again.
[Tā-hā 20:55]

Human beings, as seen in these verses, are not only part of the overall creation of the heavens, earth, and everything in between, but are physically made from it and will eventually be brought back into it, and subsequently taken back out for the resurrection and Day of Judgment. Not only should this deepen our connection to the earth as humankind, but it should help us to acknowledge the fact that, just as the natural world has a purpose,

⁴² al-Isrā' 17:44.

⁴³ A similar Biblical comparison to the humbling of man in relation to nature is found in Job 28, and can be summarized in the Qur'ānic verse that reads "*Assuredly the creation of the heavens and the earth is a greater (matter) than the creation of men: yet most men know not.*" al-Mū'min 40:57, also see al-Nāzi'āt 79:27.

humankind must also have a purpose. If these two purposes were to conflict, or one's actions worked to destroy the other's, there would be an obvious fallacy in creation, and would contradict its perfection and balance.

The Qur'ānic role of humankind is not a free dominion of nature. However, the earth remains sustenance, enjoyment, and a blessing for humankind, as mentioned earlier. To reiterate this point the Qur'ān reads; "It is He who has made the earth manageable for you, so traverse you through its tracts and enjoy of the sustenance which He furnishes..." and ends with the reminder, "But unto Him is the resurrection."⁴⁴ We are free to enjoy, and make use of nature in its magnificence and usefulness, but all the while we cannot be heedless of the fact that to God is our return and that we will be accountable for all that we do. This brings up the concept of humans as a vicegerent on earth, quite akin to Jewish and Christian concepts of stewardship on earth.

It is He who has made you inheritors (khalā'if) of the earth.
[al-An'ām 6:165]

Then We made you heirs (khalā'if) in the land after them, to see how you would behave!
[Yūnus 10:14]

Behold, your Lord said to the angels: 'I will create a vicegerent (khalīfah) on earth'
[al-Baqarah 2:30]

There is a difference of opinion among Muslims as to who exactly humans are the vicegerents of,⁴⁵ however the meaning drawn from this concept remains the same regardless. Humans have a responsibility as vicegerents, and that responsibility involves preservation, protection, and stewardship. Violating this responsibility would be violating a duty placed on human beings by God, and a responsibility that humankind chose according to the Qur'ān when it states: "We did indeed offer the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains; but they refused to undertake it, being afraid thereof: but man undertook it- he was indeed unjust and foolish."⁴⁶ This trust, so big that it was refused by all other monumental aspects of creation, was bestowed on and accepted by humankind. This trust encompasses all previous discussion in this paper, and involves our moral responsibility and accountability, as well as our purpose in life to serve God and His creation. The denunciation for committing acts of disturbance or mischief in the earth is reflected when the Qur'ān reads:

⁴⁴ Qur'ān 67:15.

⁴⁵ Jaafar Sheikh Idris, "Is Man the Vicegerent of God?," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 1, no. 1 (1990): 99-110. It has been argued that humankind could be the vicegerent of God, jinns, Adam, or earlier communities. The verses above, in their ambiguity, have allowed such divergent opinions to have a certain potentiality.

⁴⁶ Qur'ān 33:72.

Do not mischief on the earth, after it has been set in order, but call on Him with fear and longing (in your hearts): for the mercy of Allah is always near to those who do good.

[al-ʿArāf 7:56]

When he turns his back, his aim everywhere is to spread mischief through the earth and destroy crops and progeny, but Allah loves not mischief.

[al-Baqarah 2:205]

This discussion on the Qurʾānic view of ecology as a whole, including views towards nature and mankind's role on it, should serve as an overview of potential developments in further studies. Despite the fact that the Qurʾān has received less criticism as compared to the Hebrew Bible, Muslims are equally guilty of the environmental crisis experienced in our world today. Ideally, Muslims will be able to take from the Qurʾānic text itself strong grounds for implementing policies to protect nature throughout the globe.

Comparative Eco-Theology

Looking at the Bible and Qurʾān in a paper on comparative ecological theology is relevant to me, as it reflects on the scriptures that have defined faith for much of my life, but should also be highly relevant to the world as a whole. Representing three of the major world religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, these scriptures hold within them enormous potential to shape the future of our world, as they have been doing since their inception. As should be concluded from the above sections, there are overlaps and common threads within these two texts that offer great possibilities for collaboration and interpretation in light of one another.

Divergences, however, are also apparent in the themes above, and with further exploration those divergences may be much more significant, especially when looking beyond the scriptures and into oral and other traditional sources. For instance, the concept in Jewish and Christian traditions, which we see above as a Biblical assertion, is that humankind was created in the image of God. In terms of our eco-theological discourse I have stated that this can be interpreted to mean that humans represent God on earth and therefore must preserve and guard it. Despite the interpretation being very much compatible with Islamic theology, the concept of humankind being created in God's image is quite problematic. For Muslims, the idea of God possessing a form or image at all is seen as a misunderstanding of who and what God is, and in some of its manifestations even heretical. Likewise, the Qurʾān states that all things in the heavens and on earth prostrate to God in a constant state of worship of the divine. Though a Christian or Jew may agree with this beautiful imagery, it would be a challenge to support that with textual sources.

Despite the divergences that can, and should, exist between readings of the Bible and Qur'ān, what can be taken away from the discussion is too fruitful to be overly concerned with them. As a Muslim, faithful to the truth revealed in the Qur'ān through the final Prophet, Muhammad, I am able to read Genesis I and II to extrapolate guidance to both enhance my understanding of creation and how it relates to ecology, as well as deepen my reading of the Qur'ān with new insights. This relationship between texts and human agency in interpretation, whether from within a specific religious tradition or not, is a common sentiment when engaging in interreligious study. In regards to the topic of this paper, the texts themselves, along with their interpretations, build upon one another and evolve into a thematic theology, in this case in regards to the environment, taking root in multiple scriptures. If the present comparative study has begun to reach such a theology, this has been a successful endeavor.

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Returning to an earlier point, the fact remains that the ultimate purpose of revelation has never been ecocentric, despite how much we as lovers of the beauty of creation may want it to be. However, despite our theocentric scriptures often read through anthropocentric eyes, such as ours, we are able to extract ecocentric lessons that tap the core of scripture's inherent quality; guidance and light for humanity.⁴⁷ Human beings, just like all creation, have a function in their worldly life; a function in direct relation to their creation, God-given human-nature, and primordial covenants.

The tripartite relationship between God, human, and nature, has been an underlying theme in this paper, and nearly all points made in our discussion of Biblical and Qur'ānic ecology can be returned back to this. God obviously serves as creator of both humankind and nature, maintaining balance within nature which is eternally in line with the divine will, while reminding humankind to be just and compassionate in protection of the creation. Nature serves the needs of humankind, as well as other facets of nature itself, while acting as a sign of God on earth and representing His perfection and balance therein. Humankind must serve nature by protecting and preserving it while enjoying its benefits, which in turn is also a service to God in maintaining His creation. These aspects of the relationship between God, humans, and nature could go on, but it is sufficient to note that ideally there must be a type of synergy between the three in order for harmony to be maintained. God, who has power over all things, is able to disrupt nature's balance and human life; humankind has the ability to destroy the environment, throwing out of balance the relationship; and nature has an overwhelming power to destroy human civilization. Maintaining this balance

⁴⁷ In reference to Qur'ān 5:49: "...and We sent him (ie. Jesus) the Gospel: therein was guidance and light..."

is our duty, and if done successfully should have positive results for the future of our world.

Through a scriptural lens, environmental protection and sustainability become more than just good things to do, but responsibilities bestowed on us by our creator. By the end of each day, when all prayers and worship have finished, the world remains in a state of decay. A person of faith should never feel content with that fact, and should strive in light of the covenant with God that requires us to be proactive and seek peace in our own lives, and in the greater environment we live in. If we as communities and individuals aim to proactively "contemplate the wonders of creation,"⁴⁸ we may then witness the brightening of our planet's future.

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⁴⁸ Qur'ān 3:191.

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Sabbath and Zakat: A Dialogue of Economic Justice

BY CHRISTOPHER
SPOTTS

Judaism and Islam both understand themselves as ethical religions. As such, each has something to say about much of modern life, including the ways in which individuals, communities, corporations and states live with, and relate to, money. For Muslims, conduct in economic life is central to their religious piety.¹ There is no distinction made between the temporal world and the spiritual one. As such, one of the pillars of Islam is Zakat, the obligation to give to the poor out of one's wealth where that possibility exists. This leads to awareness, even in the least devout Muslims, of the importance of Islamic economics within Muslim societies.² There is less familiarity within the Jewish society (Israel) about religious mores surrounding economics. Although Judaism recognizes the importance of stewardship – the responsibility to carefully manage what God has given – of one's wealth as a religious obligation, there is little attention paid to the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures and other religious documents regarding wealth. Israel, like most Western Christian societies, is committed to secular mores and the separation of religion and economics.³

In spite of these differences, Judaism and Islam each have within their respective religions something that can offer a moral criticism of modern

¹ Rodney Wilson. *Economics, Ethics, and Religion: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Economic Thought* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 116.

² *Ibid.*, 116.

³ *Ibid.*, 56.

economic practices.⁴ The Zakat tradition in Islam and the Sabbath⁵ tradition of Judaism provide alternative visions to economic systems that exploit the weak for the sake of the powerful. The intent of this article is to demonstrate the ways in which the Israelite narrative of Sabbath and the Islamic command of Zakat can speak to each other, strengthen each other, and together provide a decisive and prophetic critique of the economics of Western "Christian" nations.

I am writing this article as a Protestant Christian concerned about the ways in which the American Church has not only blindly accepted the messages of consumerism, but has also allowed itself to be co-opted for the advancement of those messages. Although the narrative of Sabbath is not strictly speaking Christian, it is one found within our scriptures, and one to which our Lord made regular allusions.⁶ As such, we cannot simply assume its irrelevance and continue our current course without consideration of the critiques it has for the ways in which we live with our wealth. The importance of Zakat in this criticism is not simply as an interlocutor for Sabbath. Many of the abuses of wealthy nations such as the United States are perpetrated on Muslim nations. As we will see, Zakat has something to say about those who use their wealth to generate more wealth, and who use their power to hoard what they have. My hope in writing this article is that a dialogue between Zakat and Sabbath can reveal lacunae in the social ethical thought and practice of not only Islam and Judaism, but of the Christian Church in America, in order that such a revelation might lead to repentance for any complicity in maintaining the status quo that has led to the poverty of Muslims, Jews and Christians alike.

The modern context of globalization is one in which any attempt to enforce ancient ethical practices such as Zakat and Sabbath would prove difficult, if not impossible. The intention of many Muslim economists to bring Zakat into the modern age poses numerous problems, not the least of which is, according to Timur Kuran, "that the scope of Zakat is far too restrictive for its intended purpose. In its proposed form, Zakat would serve a major redistributive function only in a primitive agricultural economy resembling that of seventh-century Arabia."⁷ An attempt to reinstate the Sabbath

⁴ By "modern economic practices" I do not mean any specific economic system (i.e. capitalism or socialism) but more the consumeristic attitudes that seem to define both, and thus dominate global economics. This is not a paper about economics, but is concerned with the assumptions of consumers, which cause a growing disparity between rich and poor.

⁵ I will use the term "Sabbath" in this article to refer to the whole of the Sabbath tradition, which includes the Sabbath day, Sabbath year and Jubilee year.

⁶ For more on Jesus reference of Jubilee see Ched Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*, (Washington, DC: Tell the Word, 2002); John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994).

⁷ Kuran Timur, "The Economic System in Contemporary Islamic Thought," *Islamic Economic Alternatives* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 22. Further problems include the inequities with *nisab*, the minimum at which a person is required to pay Zakat. Because they are set for a

prescriptions would prove just as restrictive. As such, I will not argue for a return to the ethical systems of a local agrarian economy, but for an understanding of the theological and historical frameworks that provided Sabbath and Zakat with their vision. Although the prescriptions of the two traditions may be problematic in a context of globalization, the historical and theological narratives that underlie them can provide the means to offer a rich criticism of exploitive and monopolistic socioeconomic policies and attitudes in which the poor and oppressed are trampled in pursuit of wealth.

Sabbath and Zakat offer many meaningful methods of reassessing the modern attitudes about wealth that have fostered a widening gap between rich and poor. First, both traditions call for a system in which wealth is not the privilege of the rich by challenging the assumptions of modern economics that the goal of every economy is the development and acquisition of wealth. Second, each tradition understands wealth as more than a blessing. Wealth carries a heavy responsibility and a corresponding threat if the responsibility is not met. One's very identity as a person of God is at risk. Such understanding radically challenges the liberal individual notions of authority over one's possessions. This liberal argument is further confronted by the assertion of the Sabbath tradition that land's ultimate owner is God; we as humans are merely tenants. Simply because one possesses the land does not make that land available for human exploitation regardless of the consequences. Finally, each of these traditions offers a narrative for understanding social justice as constitutive of one's relationship to God. This provides an appeal for social justice based not in charity or good-will, which ultimately implies that the wealthy are permitted to use their wealth however they see fit, but based on one's very identity as a member of God's people.

This article will take three steps to make its argument: first, it will note the prescriptions for both the Sabbath and the Zakat laws. As mentioned above, these prescriptions are not offered as a solution, but simply to provide some understanding of the laws themselves. Second, it will make clear the historical and theological narratives that underlie Sabbath and Zakat. This will be done to demonstrate the possibilities for economic criticism. Third, the traditions will be placed in dialogue in order to examine what they have to say together, and how they can strengthen the other's ability to offer a moral criticism of the modern economic context.

7th-Century Arabian economy, two equally wealthy people would have very different requirements placed upon them. The person whose wealth is in gold has a requirement of about 5.5 times that of the person whose wealth is in silver. Other inequities are present in livestock and grain. Most Islamic economists are concerned that any innovations to Zakat that change the *nisab* expressed in the Qur'an would mean the demise of Zakat. "They feel that Zakat is synonymous with the specific forms and rates set fourteen centuries ago by the Prophet and his companions – change these, they say, and you have done away with Zakat."

The Sabbath Prescriptions

In order to fully understand the significance of Sabbath it is critically important to realize its connection to Sabbath; for each is a response to the socio-economic reality in which the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt. With historical roots in the Exodus, and codified in the religious and theological heritage of that tradition, the Sabbath vision of social structure became a part of the legal structure of Israelite society. The remission of debts, leaving the land to lie fallow, freedom from economic and physical slavery, and the returning of all land to the original family of ownership were all a part of this legal structure. The purpose of these practices was to ensure that “there shall be no poor among you” (Deuteronomy 15:4)⁸.

Seven Days

The Sabbath day was celebrated every 7 days (Exodus 16:23ff; 20:10-11; 31:14-16; Leviticus 23:3; Deuteronomy 5:12-15). It harkens back to the creation story, where even God observed it, after six days of creation (Genesis 2:2). On this day, every one in Israel was to rest, not only Israelites, but foreigners and slaves; even the draft animals were required to rest (Exodus 10:10; Deuteronomy 5:14). Socially, the Sabbath proved to be difficult. Ancient contemporaries of the Jews had difficulty understanding the Sabbath as anything other than laziness on the part of the Jews⁹

Seven Years

The Sabbath year was celebrated every 7 years (Exodus 23:11; Leviticus 25:4ff; Deuteronomy 15:9-12) in two specific ways. First, in this year all debt accrued was forgiven, and all those who had been forced into slavery as a result of debt were set free. Because Israel lived in an agrarian society, they were intimately tied to the land they owned. If, for some reason, that land failed to produce a crop the only recourse available for survival would be to borrow from their neighbors. If one could not repay their debt they would be forced to offer their labor in payment. Ultimately, this became a kind of wage labor where individuals and families were required to work for the one to whom they owed their debt. The Sabbath year was a means of protecting those who had suffered such problems from perpetual wage slavery, by ensuring that all debts, and the slavery associated with those debts, would be forgiven. Second, the Sabbath year included the requirement to let the land lie fallow (Leviticus 25:4, 20). There is some disagreement on what the actual

⁸ Form critically the book of Deuteronomy was written after the exile, which implies that the development of these ideas was still important enough to include as a part of the identity of God's people even after the exile, or maybe especially because of the exile. (They were exiled from the land, at least according to the prophets, for a failure to live according to the jubilee vision.)

⁹ Alberto J. Soggin, *Israel in the Biblical Period: Institutions, Festivals, Ceremonies, Rituals* (New York: T&T Clark, 2001), 143

practice looked like.¹⁰ The significance of the stipulation, whether or not it was practiced, is that the land had as much right to Sabbath rest as the Israelites who lived on and worked it.

Fifty Years

The Jubilee year was practiced at a “Sabbath’s Sabbath” interval — every seven Sabbath years.¹¹ Because the Jubilee was a Sabbath year it included all the stipulations of the regular Sabbath year. The Jubilee was special because it included the requirement that all land which had been sold from one family to another be returned to the original family. In Israel, as in any agrarian society, the cycle of poverty began when a family was unable to raise enough crops to feed themselves. If a family was forced to sell its land, it was selling the only means by which it would ever be able to provide for itself. Because the family’s only means of long-term survival had just been sold for its immediate needs, the family had just ensured itself a future of perpetual debt-slavery. Whether the failure to raise adequate crops was due to natural causes, incompetence, or laziness the selling of the land ensured not only the poverty of an individual generation, but every subsequent generation as well. The Jubilee vision refused to accept this as a continuing economic system. Instead, Jubilee ensured that exploitation, poverty and marginalization were addressed every 50 years through the redistribution of land, the means for wealth creation.

The Historical and Theological Background to the Sabbath Vision

It is evident from the Sabbath stipulations that the Israelites, at some point in their history, had a conception of socioeconomics that was not based on greed, self-interest, consumption or profit maximization. Rather, the Sabbath vision presented a solidaristic conception of economy — a conception in which one’s neighbor, even the foreigner, had priority over the acquisition of wealth. In order to understand what the Sabbath vision can bring to the conversation surrounding social ethics, one must realize the theological and historical foundations that underlie the stipulations. Three such foundations arise as necessary for realizing any criticism the Sabbath vision might offer our modern context: the Exodus from Egypt, a theology of the Land, and a theology of the Covenant.

¹⁰ Ibid., 149-150. It is doubtful that the entire nation allowed their land to lie fallow at the same time. It is even doubtful that an entire family’s land would lie fallow for a year. Quite possibly, there were plots of land, which were rotated. For more on this see Robert North, S.J., *The Biblical Jubilee... After Fifty Years* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2000), 35.

¹¹ There is some debate about whether the Jubilee was practiced every 49th or 50th year. If it was practiced every 50th year then there would be two consecutive years in which the land would lie fallow. It is unlikely that an agrarian society would be able to allow the land to lie fallow for two consecutive years, as it would mean that the 48th year would have to provide for three years until the date of the next harvest. North, *The Biblical Jubilee... After Fifty Years*, 26.

The Sabbath Vision and Exodus

Walter Brueggemann, in *Hope within History*, argues that the experience of the exodus from Egypt was the defining event in Israelite history.¹² The exodus is the “foundational paradigm” for understanding salvation in the Hebrew canon. As such, it is the most important narrative in Israelite history. It is in the Exodus that the Israelites were first introduced to Yahweh, the God of liberation for the poor and oppressed. And it is the Exodus narrative that provides the primary historical narrative for the Israelite practice of Sabbath.¹³ The Israelites sought to resist an economy of debt and slavery through an egalitarian, de-centralized tribal mode of life, based on the worship of Yahweh, the liberating God of the poor.

Almost as soon as the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea they began to wonder whether or not Yahweh, who delivered them, would also be able to provide for them in the desert. They had experienced the socioeconomic systems of Egypt for 400 years, had lost the ability to imagine an economic reality outside of those economic systems. As such, the Exodus begins with a note of trepidation. The Israelites were uncertain about how they would provide for themselves, and so longed to return to the “fleshpots of Egypt” (Exodus 16:3). The fleshpots provided a sure means of sustenance; the desert provided only uncertainty. Their failure of imagination and their fear led them to ignore their oppression and slavery. They cried out against Moses, complaining that he had brought them into the desert to die. As a result of their complaints, Yahweh introduced them to a new economic system, based not in exploitation and slavery, but in Sabbath. God provided manna from heaven, bread they had never seen before.

This means of sustenance — this economy — based on Yahweh’s provision for the Israelites, is a stark contrast with Egypt’s economy in three ways. First, God’s provision is abundant, and for everybody: “Gather of it every man as much as you should eat” (Exodus 16:16). All the Israelites have to do is gather it. The provision is not based on the individual’s ability to create wealth or to be of service to the master. The socio-economic system in Egypt, and the predominant system in the Ancient Near East, consisted of urban elites or nobility monopolizing the land, extracting from it as much as possible using the labor of the poor and weak, leaving those same laborers only enough to subsist.¹⁴ The egalitarianism of manna is radically different than the exploitive economic means of Egypt.

¹² Walter Brueggemann, *Hope Within History* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 2007), 7.

¹³ I am deeply indebted to Ched Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*, for introducing me to the possibilities of Sabbath and Jubilee as a means of moral criticism for modern economics.

¹⁴ For more on this see Anthony R. Ceresko, O.S.F.S., *Introduction to the Old Testament: A Liberation Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992); Walter Brueggemann, *The Covenanted Self: Explorations in Law and Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 23- 26, 48-48; and

The second way that God's economy is radically different than Egypt's economy is that the Israelites are only to collect what they need (Exodus 16:18). In Egypt, Pharaoh ruled with impunity. His massive building projects were exercises in hubris, exercises in which the Israelites were forced to contribute bricks for bread. Pharaoh had no limitations to his greed.

"In God's economy there is such a thing as 'too much' and 'too little.'"¹⁵ The Israelites were not to store the bread. Anything stored from one day to the next would rot. Accumulation was not a part of God's economic model, because accumulation ultimately leads to idolatry.

God's economy challenges the economy of Egypt in a third manner: every seventh day, the Israelites were to cease from collecting manna. On the 6th day, the Israelites were to gather twice their daily allotment, prepare it and save it for the Sabbath (Exodus 16:20-27). The Israelites were not to continue with the productive work of gathering sustenance. Manna was a gift from Yahweh, sent in abundance, one which they were to trust Yahweh to continue to provide. Manna did not belong to the Israelites, and they were not to accumulate it as though it did. In Egypt, the goal was productivity; the goal was the creation of wealth, at whatever cost. In God's economy any attempt to control resources and maximize production is met with failure. "It came about on the seventh day that some of the people went out to gather, but they found none" (Exodus 16:27). Richard Lowery writes, "Sabbath promises seven days of prosperity for six days of work. It operates on the assumption that human life and prosperity exceed human productivity."¹⁶ This Sabbath provision is commanded later on in regards to the Sabbath year: "You shall let the land lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat" (Exodus 23:10-11). The activity of the productive members of society is restricted, so that the poor and marginalized may benefit. Consumption, the creation of wealth, and the command of resources are not the goal of God's economy.

It becomes evident from this narrative that the Sabbath day was not merely a commandment for the sake of religious observance. It was not simply a means to provide time for regular worship in the temple. Rest wasn't simply for worship's sake, but to break the cycle of work on a regular basis in order that all might rest. Sabbath was intended for the "deabsolutization of work."¹⁷ Otherwise, labor and land could too easily be exploited and the Israelites would find themselves back in the same exploitative situation from which Yahweh had delivered them. The Sabbath day was the alternative socioeconomic standard, a method of defying the predominant

Kinsler and Kinsler, 7-9.

¹⁵ Myers, *Sabbath Economics*, 12.

¹⁶ Richard Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), as quoted in Myers, *Sabbath Economics*, 13.

¹⁷ Kinsler and Kinsler, *Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life*, 10.

socioeconomic systems around them. It was more than a religious precept; it had tremendous economic and social implications. The experience of the exodus provided Israel with a spirituality of liberation, in which they were called, as God's covenanted people, to not only remember their liberation, but to live it, practice it, and find new ways to establish it. To this end, Sabbath became the guiding principle of their new socio-economic system. "The main concerns of this alternative socioeconomic system were to resist the accumulation of debts, the concentration of land in the hands of a few, and slavery."¹⁸ Sabbath promoted solidarity amongst the Israelite tribes, and was intended to be the means by which an egalitarian, tribal lifestyle was promoted. This solidarity provided a mutual support system and protection; it provided an important method for dealing with the struggles of insects, drought, bandits, and anything else that might destroy their way of life.

Sabbath and Land

The Israelites slavery in Egypt, the one from which they had to be liberated by Yahweh, the one to which Yahweh told them never to return, was the result of a famine (Genesis 42:5), a failure of the land. When the Israelites first moved to Egypt they were given the choicest land, but in the course of the famine they lost their private holdings (as did every Egyptian aside from Pharaoh.) All the land in Egypt became the property of Pharaoh, who in turn fed them from the food they had grown. This led to the permanent enslavement of the Israelites to Pharaoh.

When the Israelites left Egypt and came to Canaan they were compelled to live a different vision. "The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land belongs to me; for you are 'guests' and 'residents' with me" (Leviticus 25:23) Yahweh's ownership of the land is important. As the owner of creation, Yahweh required that the land be distributed to everybody, not based on social standing or ability to create wealth, but based upon their need.¹⁹ Land was allotted to tribes, "according to their clan," and each family had its own "heritage" or portion (Judges 21:24). Family land was inalienable; it could not be bought or sold as an asset because it was ultimately owned by Yahweh.

This provides a radical break from the socioeconomic system in Egypt. The land in Israel belonged to Yahweh, and could never be used to enslave a fellow member of the covenant. Neither natural nor human-made disasters were to be used as an opportunity to take advantage of the weak. In Egypt, the land belonged to Pharaoh, because Pharaoh had the means to acquire the land in the midst of a terrible natural disaster. Pharaoh preyed upon the weak, and took advantage of an enormous natural disaster in order to advance his wealth. Yahweh forbade the same behavior from the Israelites.

¹⁸ Ibid., 35.

¹⁹ Christopher J. Wright, "Jubilee, Year of" in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol.III, H-J (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1025.

This ensured that they would never again be enslaved to anyone, especially each other.

The land was an “inheritance” of all the people of Israel, a term that locates Israel as the heir of Yahweh. As such, the land was proof of one’s status as a member of God’s family. This status also placed a responsibility upon him/her to live accordingly. The Promised Land was more than just a place to live. The promise was that the land would always provide for them, so long as they lived according to the Sabbath stipulations that Yahweh had given. “Land is a central, if not the central theme of biblical faith.”²⁰ It is the land that is the primary evidence of the Israelite’s special relationship to Yahweh, for the land is, first, a gift of Yahweh. It is a gracious gift from the one who delivered them from Egypt. Israel could be assured of its identity and its future so long as they trusted in Yahweh as the giver of land, obeyed his word, and lived the alternative social possibility presented to them by their liberation from slavery in Egypt. If they did so, the land would always provide for them.

These responsibilities imply that the Israelites were not free to do with the land as they saw fit. There were requirements to treat the land with respect, and use it wisely. The land was not intended to be pillaged for the sake of creating wealth. It was intended to provide for their need. The promise of land is that it would do just that, if they obeyed Yahweh, but if they failed to do so, if they “defiled the land,” the land itself “will vomit you out, as it vomited out the nations before you.” (Lev. 18:28) Just as with the manna in the desert, hoarding and accumulation demonstrated a lack of faith in Yahweh, which ultimately led to idolatry.

As such, the land is not only a gift; it is a threat.²¹ The promise of land is the promise of power and wealth; it is the promise of provision. But the promise of land also implies the threat that they will forget the responsibility of an alternative socioeconomic reality and become like the Egyptians. The provision that the land offered threatened to make Israel comfortable, and lead them to forget the responsibilities placed upon them by that land. Because the land was a mark of the Israelite identity with Yahweh, their removal from the land would also include losing a piece of their identity as the people of Yahweh.

Sabbath and Covenant

When Yahweh delivered the Israelites from Egypt he delivered them from harsh service to Pharaoh, a service in which they found themselves because they lacked bread. They traded their service to Pharaoh for food to eat. The deliverance Yahweh provided Israel was not a deliverance leading to

²⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 3 (italics in original).

²¹ Ibid. The terminology of “gift” and “threat” was first used by Bruggemann.

autonomy; never did Yahweh promise absolute sovereignty. The Israelites were freed from Egypt that they might serve Yahweh.²² This service was constitutive of the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and the Israelites; the Israelites were not freed in order that they might live however they please, but that they might enter into a special relationship with Yahweh, defined by service to Yahweh.

At Sinai, God codified that service in the Decalogue. The first responsibility was to Yahweh. "I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Deuteronomy 5:6). With this covenantal relationship as the base, the people were to establish a community in which each was responsible for the well being of their neighbor. In the entire Israelite bible Yahweh directly gives only 10 commands. The ten commands given by Yahweh are a "summons to, and authorization for, membership in a quite alternative society, a society that dares to claim itself to be en route to the 'kingdom of God.'"²³ Because these commandments are directly from Yahweh, and because they are unique in that, they provide the most important piece of the covenanted person's service to Yahweh. The first three commands reveal the holiness of Yahweh, and (in theory) place Yahwism beyond systemic abuse for the purpose of justifying the idolatry so associated with many social-economic-political systems.²⁴ The last six commandments refer to the respect of one's neighbor, and serve to protect the weak from the interests and utilitarian abuses of the strong. And at the center of the Decalogue lays "Israel's most stunning counter-cultural notion of justice"²⁵ — Sabbath. "The commands of Yahweh contrast sharply with the commands of Pharaoh, for at the center is a 'sabbath' and not 'bricks.'"²⁶ The social policy of the gods of Egypt, of whom Pharaoh was a mouthpiece, was characterized by exploitation, monopoly and oppression. Yahweh's social policy was characterized by Sabbath.

However, these 10 commands leave room for much interpretation, which is where the interpretations and applications of "Moses" in the Covenant Code (Exodus 12:1-23:19) and the Deuteronomic Code become so important. It is in these codes that the covenantal responsibilities were explicated, and it is here that the Israelites were first given the instruction on how to live as Sabbath people. The stipulations for Sabbath mentioned above are all given within the context of these codes. And they are all a part of the appropriate service to Yahweh as covenanted people.

All relationships amongst members of the covenant were sacred. The nation of Israel was to be a "commonwealth of brothers whose life together was

²² Walter Brueggemann, *Covenanted Self*, 24.

²³ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

constituted by friendship and integrity.”²⁷ Every member of the covenant was judged by their willingness to live up to it. For all Ahab’s failures, it was for his theft of Naboth’s vineyard, a failure of Sabbath, that Yahweh condemned him to death. The prophets decry a community where people of power and influence use their positions to enrich themselves at the expense of those without power. As such, one finds throughout the prophetic corpus denunciations of all manner of oppression: fraudulent economic transactions (Hosea 12:7-8; Amos 8:5), the greediness of the rich and powerful that left others homeless (Micah 2:1; Ezra 22:29), corruptible judges and officials (Amos 5:7), and the violence of those with property toward a lower class that was living in poverty due to that violence.²⁸ The prophets were calling for the rich and powerful, those with property and position, to hold up the cause of the weak, to live up to their Sabbath responsibilities. Wealth won at the expense of another was iniquitous. If it caused the economic slavery of another member of the community, another member of the covenant, it was incompatible with that covenant.

Appropriate service to Yahweh was marked by a rejection of idolatry (maybe especially the idolatry of wealth),²⁹ an egalitarianism that refused to subject one person to the avarice and idolatry of another, by special concern for the weak, by solidarity with every other member of the covenant, and by a call for the common good. Any failure to practice this appropriate service to God was a failure to live in to the relationship to which God had called God’s people.

The Zakat prescriptions

There is no perfect corollary to Sabbath within Islam. However, Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, has great concern for economic justice. As such, there are traditions and institutions within Islam that are intended to address poverty and need. Probably the most familiar is Zakat. Zakat has been a “pillar” of Islam since Islam’s inception, almost 1,400 years ago. It is an obligatory tax upon all wealth, intended to redistribute wealth and provide for those in need. In the Qur’an there is a second term used in reference to Zakat: *sadaqa*. Strictly speaking, *sadaqa* differs from *zakat* because it is voluntary; however, the terms *sadaqa* and *zakat* are used fairly interchangeably in the Qur’an. The term, *sadaqa*, at its roots is Hebrew. In the Hebrew Scriptures, *sadaqa* means “righteousness,” in the sense that one lives rightly with both God and one’s neighbor. When the Hebrew prophets

²⁷ John H. Stek, “Salvation, Justice and Liberation in the Old Testament,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 13:02 (1978), 149.

²⁸ Albert Gelin, *The Poor of Yahweh*, tr. Kathryn Sullivan, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1964), 17.

²⁹ It is not by coincidence that the gods to whom the Israelites prostituted themselves were fertility gods.

decried the evils of the kings of Israel, they referred to their failure to practice Sabbath as a failure of *sedaqa*.

The term, *zakat*, is considered to be Arabic in origin, deriving its meaning from the Arabic verb, *zaka*, which has a number of meanings, including, but not limited to, "to increase" and "to be pure." Hence, Zakat is said to have the function of increasing the property of the one from whom it is given, and purifying the remainder of the giver's property.³⁰ Some jurists have sought to harmonize these two main interpretations by saying that Zakat "purifies the property causing it to grow and increase."³¹ Other possible connotations are validity (*salah*), praise (*tazkiya*), and charity (*tazakka* and *tasaddaqa*).³² One interesting cognate is the word "*zakutu*," which in Sumerian carries the meaning of being set free from obligation owed to the gods.³³

According to the Qur'an and the Hadith, the amount of Zakat owed is based on the wealth of the giver of the Zakat. Unlike *Salat* or the *Shahada*, which are obligatory for all Muslims, regardless of circumstances, Zakat is only required for those who can afford it. The wealth upon which one is required to pay this tax is determined based on differing minimum limits (*nisab*). For example, the *nisab* for silver is 595 grams, and for gold 85 grams. Anyone in possession of the *nisab* for silver or gold for an entire lunar cycle is liable to pay 2.5% for Zakat. Both the *nisab* and the means of payment for livestock and crops are a little different. Livestock is payable with other livestock, and the Zakat on crops depends on whether the land was irrigated (5%) or not (10%).

There are seven categories of people to whom Zakat can be paid: 1) the poor, those with no income and no means of attaining one; 2) the needy, those considered to have insufficient income for subsistence needs; 3) those employed to administer the Zakat, these include those who collect Zakat, those who determine which citizens are poor or needy, those who deliver the Zakat to those who will receive it, and those who are involved in managing the financial investment of Zakat; 4) sympathizers, those who may be won to Islam with some financial encouragement, and those who are considered friendly to Islam; 5) slaves and debtors, Islam does not see the abolishment of slavery as an act of justice, but as an act of charity;³⁴ as such, slaves who

³⁰ Zysow, A. "Zakat," *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, et al (Brill, 2009, Brill Online, Marquette University. 09 September 2009), http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-1377, 1.

³¹ Suliman Bashear, "On the Origins and Development of the Meaning of Zakat in Early Islam," *Arabica* 40:1, (March 1993), 87.

³² *ibid.*, 88.

³³ *ibid.*, 87.

³⁴ Charity and justice are not mutually exclusive of one another in Islamic thought. Charity can open one's eyes to the needs of the poor, and allow the giver to experience that need. Out of that experience, one can come to recognize the injustices and disparities between the rich and the poor, and this leads to a reflection of justice.

are seeking their freedom can be assisted with Zakat money if they fall short in their payments for their freedom; 6) those involved in the cause of Allah, in common parlance, these are those who fight to defend Islam via armed jihad. However, the definition can be much broader than that, including the building of Islamic schools and hospitals. Even providing water for those walking the street can be considered a part of Zakat;³⁵ 7) and travelers, this probably goes back to the Arabic requirements of hospitality.

The Theological Background to Zakat

There is some disagreement regarding the historical background of Zakat. The Qur'an is not a narrative text in the same way that the Christian or Hebrew Scriptures are, and so the historical sources are not as closely connected to the theological sources. Most sources argue that Zakat began shortly after Mohammad moved to Medina from Mecca in 622 CE.³⁶ The command to provide for the poor probably grew out of the circumstances of the new state in Medina, and the poor Muhajirun, those who had followed Muhammad to Medina.³⁷ Muhammad was the protector of those who had no patron – orphans, widows, and anyone else whose family was unable to earn a living. The community was young and vulnerable. Zakat was the means by which the young community was financially protected.

Much of the Hadith surrounding Zakat is concerned with the issue of power, and so it seems likely that Zakat grew out of a concern for those who were relatively powerless. In the early years of Islam, many of the young believers were needy migrants, who were dependent upon charity for survival. They would not have had the power to protect themselves or provide for themselves. It is likely that the prominence of charity within the Qur'an and Hadith stems from the issue of power with which the early Muslims were faced.

There are three central themes that inform the theological understanding of Zakat: return, purity, and increase. Each of these plays an important role in understanding the theological significance of Zakat for our modern context. It will become evident that the role of power is central to this theological understanding.

Return

The importance of the concept of "return" in Islam is prevalent. The Hadith states, "Allah has laid down on them a tax which is taken from the rich and returned to the poor."³⁸ When Muhammad sent out those who would collect

³⁵ Samaa Elibyari, "Zakat: an Islamic system of welfare: the challenge to Muslims after Sept 11 2001," *Ecumenism*, no. 151, 20.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁷ Bashear, 85.

³⁸ Quoted in Elibyari, 20.

Zakat, he instructed them to “take the possessions of the rich and return them to the poor.” He also instructed the donors that, “God has laid the obligation of alms on their possessions, to be taken from the rich among them and returned to the poor.”³⁹ The Qur’an also places great emphasis on the need for wealth to circulate. Qur’an 59:7 clearly records the need for a good circulation of wealth; “in order that it might not merely make a circuit between the wealthy among you.” Because of this need to return to the poor what is their due, wealth should never circulate between people who are wealthy. Furthermore, those who give Zakat should never go and retrieve it;⁴⁰ this, too, would result in a failure of wealth’s circulation. Qur’an 9:34 notes that people who hoard gold and silver, and fail to use it in the way God intends wealth to be used, will be punished with severe torture. To hoard and be covetous will lead to one’s downfall on the Day of Judgment, and the wealth that has been hoarded will rise up to convict the hoarder.⁴¹

It is important to note that in all of these examples, Zakat is not given to the poor, but returned to the poor. In order for society to be just, wealth must circulate out of the hands of the rich and back to the poor. The implication is that wealth is won from the poor, and must be returned to them.

M.M. Bravmann contended that the Islamic Zakat laws grew out of the pre-Islamic Arabic notions of property.⁴² He argues for a correlation between pre-Islamic Arab thinking and early Islamic thought. According to Bravmann, it is the social convention of each that any surplus of property must be given away by the owner, because the poor have a claim upon that surplus. As such, wealth must be returned to the poor.

One important distinction between the pre-Islamic Arab notions of generosity and early Islamic charity is the role of power. In pre-Islamic generosity, the giver of the surplus assumes a certain role of power within the community by his ability to give. Arabia is a severe place to exist and raise a family. As such poverty, as an objective reality, has always existed, however the existence of a category of people called “poor,” a group defined by their inability to provide for or protect themselves – by their powerlessness – seems to have developed shortly before the existence of

³⁹ Bonner, Michael, “Poverty and Charity in the Rise of Islam” in *Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts*, edited by Michael Bonner, Mine Ener, Amy Singer, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 13.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 13

⁴¹ In an interesting parallel to Jubilee laws of the Hebrew Scriptures, Qur’an 9:33 notes that most of the religious leaders of Judaism and Christianity “unjustly eat people’s properties.” Apparently the Jewish and Christian leaders did not listen to the criticisms that the prophets offered to the kings of Israel, as nine hundred years later another prophet was offering a similar criticism.

⁴² M.M. Bravmann. *The Spiritual Background of Early Islam: Studies in Ancient Arab Concepts* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1972), 229-253.

Islam.⁴³ As this group became identifiable, the ability to be generous would provide some standing within the community. As such, generosity could become profligate in an attempt to demonstrate one's ability to give, and thus attain power. Bonner shares the story of how a man slaughtered a camel for another tribe, with whom there was no affiliation. Someone took offense and decided that they would match that gift, and slaughter a camel of their own. The man who offered the first camel would offer another, and the cycle continues until somebody ran out of camels. It is evident from stories like this that generosity has very little to do with the one receiving the gift, and much more to do with the claim of power made by the giver of the gift.⁴⁴ In pre-Islamic Arabia, even when the possessor of surplus gave generously, without such pretension and wanton waste, and the needy recipient agreed to receive the gift, a relationship of inequality was established. In this relationship the provider of the gift becomes a permanent benefactor to the one in need. And the one who has received the gift will be at the service of his or her benefactor.⁴⁵

The gift of Zakat is directly opposed to this notion of giving in order to receive power. Zakat is not a power play; it is a new basis for social solidarity. In giving, the wealthy come to identify with the needs of the poor, understand the disparity between them, and reflect upon the need for justice.

Purity

It has been mentioned previously the etymological connection between *zakat* and "purity." Zakat purifies in three ways: first, it purifies the one who receives it; second, it purifies the giver; and third, it purifies the remaining wealth of the giver.

The Qur'an notes the atoning effects of Zakat (9:103) on the receiver, for it purifies the receiver by providing them the power to escape the potentially morally devastating impacts of poverty, including crime and envy.⁴⁶ Poverty is associated with evil. According to Muhammad it is "almost like unbelief in God,"⁴⁷ which is akin to failing to fulfill the first pillar of Islam, saying *Shahada*. As such, poverty is a test of human loyalty to Allah. In poverty one must choose between allegiance to Allah and immoral means of subsistence; Zakat provides the dignity and the power to make the right choice. "Be sure We shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss on goods, lives and fruits. But give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere."

⁴³ Bonner, 26.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁶ Robinson, Neal, *Islam: A Concise Introduction*, (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1999), 115.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Al-Tayib Zein Al-Abdin, "The Disbursement of Zakah" in *Islamic Studies* 42:1 (2003), 127.

(2:155)⁴⁸ This leads to a meaningful motivation to alleviate poverty, and Muslim society is required to confront poverty whenever it arises.

Through Zakat the giver is also purified. In this case, the purification is from greed and selfishness. Zakat was given, “as much for the purification of the giver’s soul as for relief of the needy.”⁴⁹ Zakat and sadaqa are instituted in the Qur’an not simply as charity but as a means by which Allah can “purify from guilt”⁵⁰ those who obtained wealth. This implies that there is something impure in the acquisition of wealth itself. The guilt of the one who acquires wealth is really the guilt of idolatry; acquiring wealth requires time, and energy – time that could be spent remembering and loving God, and caring for one’s family. Wealth is not evil, in and of itself, but because it requires one to turn one’s heart from the contemplation and love of God it becomes spiritually problematic. Hence, the giving of Zakat is purifying because it ensures that one does not love their wealth too much.⁵¹ Even those who have already paid Zakat can be purified from other wrong doing by giving alms. Qur’an 9:102-103 notes that those who have done wrong should give alms to Muhammad “so thou mightest purify and sanctify them; and pray on their behalf. Verily thy prayers are a source of security for them: And Allah is One Who heareth and knoweth.”

Zakat is so associated with purity that failure to pay it is an indication of hypocrisy within the individual who fails to do so. Denying that Zakat is obligatory is considered unbelief, and any failure to pay Zakat, when able, is considered a severe sin.⁵² These people will also suffer on the Day of Resurrection, when “those who have not paid Zakat will be confronted by the Zakat they have withheld (cf 9:35): their gold and silver treasure will pursue them in the form of a large fearsome serpent (3:180), with the cry: ‘I am your treasure,’ and those who have withheld Zakat from livestock will be trampled and gored by the animals they have not paid, now grown large and fat.”⁵³

The penalties for not paying Zakat are not simply left to the Day of Resurrection; the sixth Shii Imam, Jafar al-Sadiq, noted that “whoever holds out one qirat of the Zakat is neither a believer nor a Muslim.”⁵⁴ Another Shii source notes that “Zakat is the arch of Islam,”⁵⁵ and thus, anyone who withholds Zakat cannot be considered a Muslim and has not accepted

⁴⁸ Ibid., 127.

⁴⁹ Bashear, 85.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 94.

⁵¹ In this sense Zakat is much more like the Christian tithe than it is Jubilee. However, tithing is not a social structure that is intended to protect the poor.

⁵² Zysow, 1.

⁵³ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁴ Bashear, 111.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 111.

prayer.⁵⁶ The implications are that a willingness to pay Zakat is constitutive of one's Muslim identity.

The final way in which Zakat purifies is to purify the remaining wealth of the giver. "The basic idea behind Zakat is the people purify their wealth by giving a share of it to God. Just as ablutions purify the body and salat purifies the soul, so Zakat purifies possessions and makes them pleasing to God."⁵⁷ Zakat's purification of the remaining wealth implies that the wealth of Zakat somehow takes all the impurity upon itself. There is some similarity between the purification that Zakat offers to wealth and the purification in Christian theology that Jesus offers through his atonement. Zakat takes the impurity upon itself, and relieves the remainder of that impurity. So much so, that according to one Haddith, Muhammad told his nephews that they could not have Zakat money in order to be wed "for they are the impurities of the people"⁵⁸ and it would not be becoming of Muhammad's relatives to receive them.

Increase

Zakat is only payable on certain types of wealth, which at first glance have no real correlation to one another. The classical jurists explained that Zakat was payable on any property that represented or was devoted to growth: livestock, crops, gold, silver, and minerals mined. The period of one year was to provide opportunity for that growth to take place.⁵⁹ Socioeconomically, this emphasis on growth encourages investment in the means of production, because these are typically not thought of as Zakatable. This discourages the amassing of wealth and stimulates the movement and growth of capital.⁶⁰

Zakat helps protect the possibility of increase by protecting any property that remains. This ensures its increase. Zakat guarantees rain for the growth and increase of crops and livestock, and giving voluntary alms (sedaqa) is said to heal the sick.⁶¹ If the giving of Zakat leads to an increase, the failure to give it leads to all kinds of losses. "No property at land or sea is ever lost except on account of the withholding of Zakat."⁶² Leaving the required Zakat "commingled" with other property will result in the ruin of all of it. If one fails to pay what is owed, they will suffer drought and famine.

In the Qur'an, Zakat is the only viable way to increase one's wealth. Only in giving one's wealth away can one be sure to increase that wealth. The Qur'an

⁵⁶ Bashear, 110 and Zysow, 3.

⁵⁷ Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1994), 16.

⁵⁸ Ram Swarup, *Understanding the Hadith* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002), 51.

⁵⁹ Zysow, 7.

⁶⁰ Robinson, 115.

⁶¹ Zysow, 3.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 3.

notes the difference between wealth being multiplied vainly through usury, with genuinely increased wealth gained through the giving of Zakat. "That which ye lay out for increase through the property of (other) people, will have no increase with Allah. But that which ye lay out for charity, seeking the Countenance of Allah, (will increase): it is these who will get a recompense multiplied." (30:39)⁶³ Pursuing wealth through the manipulative uses of power, or by using wealth to exploit others "will have no increase with Allah." The only way to truly increase wealth is through releasing one's position of power and providing charity for those in need.

Social Justice in Dialogue

The Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – share the common origin of ancient Israelite religion. In spite of this mutual root our histories are replete with stories of violence and oppression. From Christendom in Ancient Rome, through medieval crusades to modern jihads, our inability to speak with one another respectfully and peacefully appears strained at times. And yet, there is common cause. Whether through the words of G_d, Allah or Jesus faith demands that we involve ourselves in the cause of the poor. Any conversation amongst us that leads to a deeper understanding of the traditions of the other and a stronger commitment to address poverty can only benefit the world at large.

Both Sabbath and Zakat are social structures intended to alleviate the problem of poverty and the exploitation of the poor. In spite of the fact that they come from different religious backgrounds there is much consistency in their theological perspectives. In at least three ways they are making similar arguments: first, solidarity between the rich and poor is a necessary ground for addressing poverty; second, wealth threatens our identity as people of God; third, accumulation is inconsistent with ethical economic behavior.

At the base of both Sabbath and Zakat lies the necessity of solidarity for addressing poverty. Without solidarity the wealthy can use the economic systems in which they do business to advance their wealth without ever realizing the situation of the poor, or their own complicity in that situation. Without solidarity, the wealthy are insulated from the poor, from the realities in which they live, and from the causes of poverty. Solidarity is more than charity. Charity involves little more than writing a check or making an electronic transfer. Neither Sabbath nor Zakat allow for such an impersonal response to poverty, but each calls the rich and poor into relationship with the other. Relationships change us, because the other makes claims upon us. As such, the solidarity found in these ancient practices changes more than

⁶³ See also Qur'an 74:11-17: "Leave Me alone, (to deal) with the (creature) whom I created (bare and) alone! To whom I granted resources in abundance, and sons to be by his side!- To whom I made (life) smooth and comfortable! Yet is he greedy-that I should add (yet more);- By no means! For to Our Signs he has been refractory! Soon will I visit him with a mount of calamities!"

the life of the poor; through it the wealthy realize the claim their poor sisters and brothers have on them; through it the wealthy realize that poverty effects human lives. Modern economics look to the creation of wealth, in some form or another, as the solution. Both Sabbath and Zakat realize that without solidarity more wealth only exacerbates the problem. Without solidarity, Pharaoh has the means to acquire every source of sustenance, and the powerful find ways to exploit their position to the enhancement of their own power, leaving the poor worse off as the gap between the two socio-economic extremes grows. The social structures provided by Zakat and Sabbath emphasize the need for the wealthy to be involved in the lives of the poor, and for the poor to be involved in the lives of the wealthy, in order that each may realize the claim of the other upon them.

In 1967, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. made an observation about how wealthy Americans treat the poor. He said, "The poor in our country have been shut out of our minds, and driven from the mainstream of our societies, because we have allowed them to become invisible."⁶⁴ What was true then is even more so today. The poor are walled off in their communities, safely tucked away from view. The wealthy hide in their gated communities and fenced backyards seldom venturing forth. And the Church has failed to call this reality into question. Many suburban churches have little to no interaction with their urban counterparts. Dr. King also noted, with regret, that the most segregated hour in America is eleven o'clock Sunday morning. And the only schools in the United States that aren't integrated are Sunday School classrooms.⁶⁵ Wealthy churches and their members are frequently too busy to build relationships with those who live in the urban centers and involve themselves in the lives of the poor.⁶⁶ It is evident the call to solidarity emphasized by this dialogue is urgently needed within the American Church.

Wealth is not morally neutral. Both Zakat and Sabbath recognize a close connection between wealth and idolatry. If idolatry is the replacement of the deity with a human-made image or concept, then the connection made between wealth and idolatry is a powerful critique of modern life. In any religious setting, only the gods are to be worshipped. In the monotheistic Abrahamic faiths that means only the God of creation is worthy of worship. The ancient pagans sacrificed the fruits of their labor – animals, grain, and even, in some cases, their children – as acts of worship, hoping to appease the

⁶⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 178.

⁶⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* ed. James Washington, (New York: Harper One, 1986), 270.

⁶⁶ For more on the connection between racism and poverty see Bryan Massingale, "The Scandal of Poverty: 'Cultured Indifference' and the Option for the Poor Post-Katrina" in "Faithful Citizenship: Principles and Strategies to Serve the Common Good," ed. Dennis Hamm, S.J. and Gail S. Risch. *Journal of Religion & Society*, Supplemental Series 4, 2008.

gods and curry their favor. Sacrifice is worship, which implies that only God can command the sacrifices of our time, energy, resources, and concern. To what are we more willing to sacrifice than wealth? Money requires management; possessions require maintenance; wealth requires time and energy in a way that little else does. Some are even willing to sacrifice their own children on the altar of wealth. Wealth threatens the one who possesses it; just like the pagan gods, it threatens to disappear if the sacrifices are inadequate. When the maintenance of wealth causes us to sacrifice to it, wealth becomes an idol. Not only does wealth distract us from our passion for God, it also insulates us from the pains of life that remind us of our need for God. It provides us with the means to rely upon our own resources. In other words, it protects us. When we look to wealth for insulation from evil, it is usurping God's role as protector. Because of this, wealth can too easily replace God, becoming an idol, which threatens our very existence as members of the community of God.

Zakat and Sabbath provide social structures that not only help the poor, but also provide a means by which the wealthy can resist idolatry and survive the threat to this existence. The poor are not the only ones who benefit from the redistribution of wealth. Furthermore, the requirement of God, as expressed in these structures, is not a suggestion. Zakat is a pillar of Islam. Sabbath is one of the Decalogue, and is therefore a part of the covenant responsibilities of the Israelite people. As such, both Islam and Judaism have within these traditions the means to make claims on the proponents of their respective religions. Charity, generosity, and justice are not choices to be made; they are commandments to be followed. They are constitutive of one's belonging to the people of God.

In the American Church social justice is not constitutive of a relationship with God, but derived from a relationship with God. The Church has adopted secular mores, and insists on a separation of economic and spiritual matters.⁶⁷ One's involvement in economic justice is only necessary out of gratitude for God's salvation, which implies that one's status as a person of God does not involve one's relationship to one's wealth or the poor. Economics have no spiritual or religious significance. An ethic of social justice that is consistent with Sabbath and Zakat does not accept this bifurcation; how one lives with one's money has direct spiritual implications. Both Sabbath and Zakat claim, along with Matthew 25:31-46 in the Christian New Testament, that God is concerned enough about poverty to make one's status as a member of the kingdom of God dependent upon how one addresses it.

Although Zakat and Sabbath share a condemnation of accumulation they do so in different and complementary ways. Sabbath's condemnation of accumulation is found in the *telos* for economic activity. Accumulation can be

⁶⁷ For more on this, see Wilson, *Economics, Ethics and Justice*, 115ff.

condemned because wealth is not the goal of economics. Sabbath intrudes on wealth creation. The goal is rest, not just for the possessors of the land, but also for every laborer, including the draft animals. The mutual respect of all members of society, even the “animals,” takes precedence over the creation of wealth. God’s provision is abundant, provided each person take only what they need; it is abundant enough that humanity need not hoard wealth; it is abundant enough that we can pursue community, solidarity and *shalom* rather than wealth. Consumption and wealth-creation are not the goals of God’s economy. God’s economy actually stands directly opposed to such things, because God’s economy is concerned with the development of human community.

Zakat condemns accumulation by claiming that the only valid way to increase wealth is by giving charity. Using one’s money to exploit others, whether through usury or other fraudulent economic practices will ultimately result in the destruction of everything one owns. Only by returning wealth to the poor can wealth increase. In much modern economic thought wealth is created by those who produce and that wealth trickles down, whether through the market or through the direct action of the government, to the poor. In the Islamic Zakat tradition, wealth is not created by hoarding or by gaining something for nothing (usury). Wealth is created when the surplus is returned to the poor. It is not the creation of wealth by the wealthy, but the surrendering of wealth to the poor that ultimately leads to healthy economic systems.

The problem we face in the American Church is that in a consumeristic context such as the one in which we live and practice economics people are conditioned to recognize no distinction between what they want and what they need. There is no available means to determine what the limits of one’s needs are. We have economic categories for want, but no corresponding economic categories for need. Hence, when one argues, using the Sabbath vision, that each person should take only what one needs, there is little realization regarding what that means. This is why Zakat is such an important dialogue partner in our modern context. Zakat offers something Sabbath lacks; neither want nor need are recognizable economic categories. The cornerstone of Zakat is increase through return. What one needs, one can gain only by giving away what one has. God’s abundance is not realized in collecting what one needs, but in giving away what one already has. Wealth returns, it circulates, from poor to rich and back again. And God’s abundance is realized in that circulation.

It is here that Zakat has a profound critique for wealthy nations, businesses, synagogues and churches. When the poor are left wanting, and dragged further into poverty by greedy, exploitative and manipulative practices it is not only the poor who suffer. When the poor are left wanting because churches and synagogues are more concerned about their own solvency than

the need of their sisters and brothers, it is not only poor who suffer. The failure to circulate wealth, the failure to give what one has will ultimately result in the demise of the wealthy, whether the wealthy happen to take national or religious shape. Neither business nor government nor religious institution can be ethically done when profit takes primacy. Eventually, such a concern will result in the moral bankruptcy and (if the moral criticisms of Sabbath and Zakat are to be taken seriously) financial ruin of whatever institution is being run.

There is one distinct difference between Sabbath and Zakat that deserves to be addressed: the role of the state in the respective traditions. Because Zakat developed as a mandatory tax, it became “an obligatory payment made by the Muslims to the new state that was forming, and to be spent by its representatives.”⁶⁸ The state, more often than not, is the collector, distributor, and facilitator of Zakat. The state even has the right to apply extra taxes upon the wealth of its citizens if the Zakat does not adequately circulate wealth. This is distinctly different from the historical narrative of Sabbath. In Israel the king (as an ancient parallel to the state) became the greatest perpetrator of injustice, and it was against the king that the prophets made their proclamations recalling the Sabbath laws. In modern Islam, modernists are optimistic that under ordinary circumstances Zakat will generate sufficient revenues to fund “all the activities of a state.”⁶⁹ In this sense, Zakat has come to involve so much more than the moral obligation to provide for those in need. While it may be necessary for the state to administer the Zakat, “all the activities of a state” are not congruent with the moral intent of Zakat. Even less so when rulers such as the Saudi princes live in opulence while their citizenry live in squalor. In Islamic thought the state is less important than society for resolving the problem of poverty. “Society is closer to the needy than the government.”⁷⁰ The resolution of the problem of poverty is an issue of personal worship, of voluntary action in service to God, and in solidarity amongst believers. This being said, the Zakat tradition, and the American Church, can only be strengthened by a healthy dose of skepticism regarding the state’s ability to be the sole facilitator of provision for the poor. This skepticism is present in the Sabbath tradition’s criticism of the king’s injustices.

⁶⁸ Swarup, 45. In fairness, Islam does not have a separate ecclesial body distinct from the Muslim state. There is no church or synagogue. “Law rather than theology is dominant in Islamic life. This requires that Westerners adjust their concepts of religion. It is the Islamic state rather than the Church or Synagogue that is central for the religious life of the Muslim.” Charles T. Davis III, “The Qur’an, Muhammad, and Jihad in Context,” in *The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. J. Harold Ellins, (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 31.

⁶⁹ Zysow, 20.

⁷⁰ Al-Tayib Zein Al-Abdin, 128

Conclusion

Much like the Israelites as they left the land of exploitation and slavery that was their home for 400 years, the modern world has lost the imagination to conceive of economic realities that provide the means of sustenance to all of humankind. The economic world in which we live, based in human greed,⁷¹ has led to the exploitation and slavery of people from every religious tradition. Both Judaism in the Sabbath tradition and Islam in the Zakat tradition have within their respective religions the means to offer a moral criticism of such modern economic practices, and it is a criticism the American Church is in desperate need of hearing. The similarities between the two traditions provide ample ground to begin the dialogue on economic ethics, and the differences between them make available the resources to give constructive criticism and strengthen the other. Together they have much to offer. With over half the world's population claiming adherence to one of the Abrahamic faiths, the resulting dialogue can offer a profound influence on the reality of poverty in the modern world.

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⁷¹ Take, for example, an excerpt from Adam Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*: "...every individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good" as found in Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 5th edition, ed. Edwin Cannan. (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1904), Book IV.2.9. Or, "Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer. The maxim is so perfectly self evident that it would be absurd to attempt to prove it. But in the mercantile system the interest of the consumer is almost constantly sacrificed to that of the producer; and it seems to consider production, and not consumption, as the ultimate end and object of all industry and commerce." (Ibid., IV.8.49)

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For this essay, I will read chapter nine of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which addresses the worship of other traditions, and Karl Rahner's essay "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions" together. This allows me to ask if Rahner's category of the "anonymous Christian" is useful for reading chapter nine of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Why approach these texts this way? First, because I am most familiar with the Christian tradition and this pairing offers me a way into the Hindu scriptures. Second, I am not an expert in either the study of the *Bhagavad-Gita* or Karl Rahner's theology and as such the conclusions that I draw in this essay are tentative and with further study could be expanded or changed. The scope of this paper is limited since neither the *Bhagavad-Gita* nor Rahner are absolutely representative of their traditions and I have chosen to look at *one* of Rahner's essays and *one* chapter of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Nonetheless, this pairing opens up a series of questions about the texts. What is the cosmic order that is described in chapter nine of the *Bhagavad-Gita*? Is Rahner's anonymous Christian a distinctively Christian category? Most importantly, is it possible to say that there is an "anonymous Hindu" in chapter nine of the *Bhagavad-Gita*?

These two texts will be drawn together in order to argue that, on one hand, the "anonymous Christian," as it is rooted in Karl Rahner's dogmatic teaching, is a distinctively Christian category; however, on the other hand, Rahner's dogma is based on an epistemological claim that is similar to the claims that

Similar Ways of Knowing Different Truths

BY LISA GASSON

are made in chapter nine of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. It is therefore possible to say that chapter nine of the *Bhagavad-Gita* describes “anonymous Hindus.” There will be four sections to this essay. The first will outline the argument that is made by Karl Rahner in “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions.” This section will argue that even though on one level Rahner is making dogmatic claims that are accepted by the Catholic Church, he also argues his dogmatic claims by invoking a particular epistemology. The next section will look at chapter nine of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, focusing particularly on the relationship between Krishna as the creator and his creation. This section will argue that Krishna claims to be the recipient of aesthetic worship; individuals who transcend themselves actually come into contact with the divine.

In the third section I will argue that despite the fact that Karl Rahner and the *Bhagavad-Gita* make incompatible claims about what is true, both texts argue that individuals can transcend themselves and that the grounds for that experience is the divine. Further, both texts, within the constraints of their doctrines, argue that individuals who experience transcendence through another religious tradition are in communion with the true God. Again, it is therefore possible to say that chapter nine of the *Bhagavad-Gita* describes “anonymous followers of Krishna” or “anonymous Hindus”. The ultimate section of this essay will consider the significance of the relationship between these two texts and make some suggestions about further avenues of study that are opened by this comparison.

Karl Rahner: “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions”

Karl Rahner was a Catholic theologian from Germany who worked during the second half of the 20th century. He published some philosophical works and some systematic works of theology; however, many of his most well-known insights come from the series *Theological Reflections* which was written over the span of Rahner's career and is comprised of a variety of his essays, lectures and teachings. Rahner's work came at a transitional point in Catholic theology, when the tradition was in the midst of a shift from the scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas and trying to reposition itself to converse with modernity.¹ The essay “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions” is from the fifth volume in the series *Later Writings* and is based on a lecture that Rahner gave in 1961. The notes claim that this essay is “fragmentary” and no attempt has been made to expand the notes of the lecture.²

¹ Karen Kilby, “Karl Rahner (1904-1984),” in *Key Thinkers in Christianity*, ed. Adrian Hastings et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 173-180.

² Karl Rahner, “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,” in *Theological Reflections 5: Later Writings*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 115.

Francis Clooney calls Rahner “one of the grand masters of Christian metaphysics.”³ One of Rahner's key metaphysical insights is central to understanding the claims he makes in “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions.” He believed that underneath every human act of knowing or willing there is an apprehension of the infiniteness of God's being. When a human recognizes a chair, in the act of knowing which transcends the finite object of the chair, they encounter the wholeness of being or God.⁴ Rahner calls this the transcendental horizon; and claims that God is known to humans through their natural ability to self-transcend. If this is true, then all of humanity is in communion with God. This is a very basic sketch of the relationship between humanity and the divine according to Rahner—it will be more fleshed out as this essay is developed.⁵ However, these metaphysical claims about how God is known to humankind are always held in tension with dogmatic claims about the position of the Church, particularly the assumption that Christianity is the one true religion. While vacillating between these two types of claims, “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions” offers three main theses that are relevant to this essay. The remainder of this section will outline their content.⁶

Rahner's first thesis starts with a dogmatic claim about the position of the Catholic Church. This claim is rooted in Rahner's understanding of how humankind comes to know God:

Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion, intended for all men, which cannot recognize any other religion beside itself as of equal right. There is no need here to prove or develop its meaning. After all, Christianity does not take valid and lawful religion to mean primarily that relationship of man to God which man himself institutes on his own authority. Valid and lawful religion for Christianity is rather God's action on men, God's free self-revelation by communicating himself to man.⁷

Rahner's essay is written with concern for the current situation of the Church, not primarily as a vehicle for discussing metaphysics. The world to

³Francis X. Clooney, “Rahner Beyond Rahner: A Comparative Theologian's Reflection on *Theological Investigations 18*,” in *Rahner Beyond Rahner: A Great Theologian Encounters the Pacific Rim*, ed. Paul G. Crowley, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 3.

⁴Karen Kilby, “Karl Rahner (1904-1984),” in *Key Thinkers in Christianity*, ed. Adrian Hastings et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 175.

⁵I hope that I have not oversimplified Rahner's transcendental horizon here. For the sake of this essay, I have merely summarized based on what I have previously been taught about Rahner and what was written by Karen Kilby. A fuller treatment of this idea appears in “The Hearer of the Message” in *Foundations of Christian Faith*. Point 3 on page 31 entitled “Man as Transcendent Being” would be a good starting point for anyone seeking further insight into this concept.

⁶There are actually four theses advanced by Rahner. The fourth thesis attempts to explain the continued existence of non-Christian religions in light of his arguments regarding anonymous Christianity. This thesis was not relevant to the argument that is being advanced in this essay.

⁷Karl Rahner, “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,” in *Theological Reflections 5: Later Writings*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 118.

which he wrote was diverse in many ways—most importantly religious pluralism was becoming increasingly evident. He thus starts his essay by reaffirming the unique position of Christianity and, because he is writing to a Christian audience, he seemingly feels no need to defend this assertion. He does, however, clarify *how* Christianity maintains its special place: it is through the “free self-revelation” of God that the Catholic Church gains its authority not through the work of humankind.⁸ There are therefore two levels to this thesis, first the unquestioned dogmatic claim that Christianity is the absolute religion, and second the epistemological claim that supports it. The Catholic Church knows that it is the absolute religion because God has revealed God’s self to it.

The second theses explains the importance of Christ and grace to Rahner’s first claim, while developing the relationship of other traditions to Christianity:

Until the moment when the gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual, a non-Christian religion (even outside the Mosaic religion) does not merely contain elements of a natural knowledge of God, elements moreover, mixed up with human depravity which is also the result of original sin and later aberrations. It contains also supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to men as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ. For this reason a non-Christian religion can be recognized as a *lawful* religion (although only in different degrees) without thereby denying the error and depravity contained in it.⁹

This is first a practical problem for Rahner to consider. Christianity finds its genesis in the life of Christ. However, Christianity has its roots in Judaism, a religion that is older than the historical life of Christ. It is therefore necessary to explain the action of God in Judaism before the birth of Christ; and as an extension, to explain the action of God in contemporary people who have not had the opportunity to encounter Christianity.

For Rahner this problem again depends on his underlying claim that God is present in the willing and knowing of all humankind. Here, however, he makes the further claim that in addition to the natural knowledge of God that is accessible to humans, every person also has access to the divine supernatural grace that is a gift of Christ and thus can possibly participate in salvation. This grace “offers an interior union with God and by means of which God communicates himself whether the individual takes up an attitude of acceptance or refusal towards this grace.”¹⁰ In other words, all people can know God through a natural experience of the transcendental horizon, which is enabled by grace through Christ; but they have the choice to accept or refuse this grace. So, the possibility of participating in the real salvific grace of Christ exists for people who participate in other traditions. Further,

⁸ Ibid., 118.

⁹ Ibid., 121.

¹⁰ Ibid., 123.

Rahner believes that religion is a social phenomenon—the Catholic Church has a concrete role in assisting people to recognize God—to deny the ability of other traditions to contribute to an individual's knowledge of God would negate the role of the Catholic Church. In this way, the religious traditions of others can be “*lawful*” while still being in error.¹¹ Despite this possibility of access to the grace of Christ, it is contingent (whether or not it comes through another tradition) on whether or not the individual has had the opportunity to hear the gospel.

When “the gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual,” Rahner believes that they will become Christians because in some sense they already are:¹²

If the second thesis is correct, then Christianity does not simply confront the member of an extra-Christian religion as a mere non-Christian but as someone who can and must already be regarded in this or that respect as an anonymous Christian.¹³

This returns again to the dogmatic claim that Christianity is the absolute religion. Rahner goes to great lengths to argue that humans are by nature in communion with God through the transcendental horizon, even if they have not had a historical opportunity to encounter the gospel. Yet, no matter what social circumstances have led an individual to encounter God, such an encounter always occurs through Christ; because it is the Christ-event that brought the supernatural grace that allows the transcendental horizon to *really* reveal God. Since it is through Christ that individuals encounter God of course they will become Christians when they hear the gospel, because they will recognize the fullness of their partial revelation. Therefore the salvation of people from other religious traditions is contingent on the historical incarnation of Christ, whether or not they know it. Rahner has to argue this way because Christianity has a historical beginning and this argument explains how God worked before the Christ-event. Christianity is the truth. Even though individuals might be able to commune with God outside of or before Christianity; what they do not realize is that they are in fact, already Christians.

Finally, in this section, I have argued that Rahner vacillates between dogmatic and epistemological claims. He believes Christianity is the absolute religion, but people know God through an experience of transcendence, which is natural to all humans. People who know God through that

¹¹ Ibid., 123. This discussion about the ability of other religions to facilitate salvation is unclear to me. I use this idea here in order to explain that Rahner did not feel that participation in another religious tradition necessarily inhibits the ability of an individual to experience Christ's salvific grace; however, precisely what it is that Rahner is saying about other religious traditions is not clear and would have to be developed elsewhere.

¹² Ibid., 121.

¹³ Ibid., 131.

experience but have not encountered the gospel are “anonymous Christians,” because Christianity is the true religion. If they have a chance to hear the gospel, they will become Christians, because it is a natural extension of what they have already experienced. Now, this paper will turn to a close reading of chapter nine of the *Bhagavad-Gita*.

Chapter 9 of The *Bhagavad-Gita*

The *Bhagavad-Gita* is one of the holy texts of the Hindu tradition. Most scholars agree that the text was written between 400 BCE and 400 CE, which was a time of major transformation in Greater Northern India.¹⁴ The *Bhagavad-Gita* is part of the *Mahabharata*, one of the epic series of the Hindu tradition. It takes place at a key moment in the story right before a large battle is to begin between two families. On the battlefield the charioteer Krishna becomes teacher to the warrior, Arjuna, eventually revealing himself as the incarnation of the divine.¹⁵ The text has been commented on by many Hindu scholars and is very important to many Hindus and those of other faiths.

Angelika Malinar, a commentator on the *Bhagavad-Gita* offers two lenses through which to read the tensions that exist in the text. According to Malinar, the *Bhagavad-Gita* is interested in both life on earth and the spiritual practices that allow individuals to transcend this life. This presents a tension within the text—Krishna urges Arjuna to fight in a battle, while also teaching him how to engage in aesthetic practices. Malinar claims that the *Bhagavad-Gita* attempts to mediate between two different referential frameworks:

[O]n the one hand, the realm of socio-cosmic relationships encompassed by *dharma* and based on ritual performances as transmitted in Vedic texts; and on the other, the quest for liberation from this very realm through ascetic practices and the employment of new various forms of knowledge.¹⁶

She claims that in order to accomplish this mediation, aesthetic practices are interpreted in terms of sacrificial activity and the concept of a highest god called Krishna is developed. This repositioning of aesthetic practices pushes individuals to see their practices as directed towards Krishna; when the self is transcended, union with Krishna is achieved. Krishna is thus both the royal leader on earth and the ever-liberated transcendent highest self. What feels like a tension in the text is the creation of a relationship between two worldviews.

This paper engages in a close reading of chapter nine of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which sets the stage for the theophany of Krishna. This chapter explores the

¹⁴Angelika Malinar, *The Bhagavadgita: Doctrines and Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 14.

¹⁵Ibid., 2.

¹⁶Ibid., 5.

tensions between the divine as transcendent and as involved in the world and through this lens addresses the worship of other traditions. This section will argue that Krishna, as the creator, is the grounds of transcendent worship; and that people who do not worship Krishna can practice transcendence and thus come into contact with Krishna, even though they do not know it; yet it is possible to know Krishna, because he is incarnate and speaking to Arjuna in the text. Further, it is necessary to recognize that Krishna is God in order to fully achieve union with him.

At the beginning of chapter nine, Krishna explains to Arjuna his role as transcendent creator of all in relationship to all creation. Krishna says “[b]y Me, Unmanifest in form, all this universe was spun: in Me subsist all beings, I do not subsist.”¹⁷ Krishna is the creator, but he does not depend on his creation. Through a reading of this tension, as it develops in chapter nine, a framework to understand the relationship between Krishna and individual humans will develop. R.C. Zaehner explains that Ramanuja, a Hindu scholar, interprets the text to say that because creation does not have contact with Krishna in a corporeal sense, his continued existence is not dependant on humans. The text thus is translated “my continued existence does not depend on them and because their continued existence depends on Me, I do not need them in any way.”¹⁸ The relationship between creation and the divine is thus one of unequals: Krishna is the creator, but he does not need his creation.

However, Krishna does more than set creation into motion, he actively sustains it. The text continues: “[a]nd yet contingent beings do not subsist in Me,--behold my sovereign skill-in-works (*yoga*): my Self sustains all beings, It does not subsist in them; It causes them to be-and-grow.”¹⁹ Krishna does not need his creation, but he is actively engaged in its life and growth. This is the tension that Malinar describes; Krishna is both the transcendent God and the God who is present in the life and work of human beings. Zaehner explains the way that beings exist in Krishna, claiming it is not “like water in a pot, but because he maintains them with his will.”²⁰ If Krishna is maintaining creation through his will, do individuals have free will to act? Zaehner earlier explains that one Hindu translator of the text writes “they exist in me as their Inner Controller.” What does it mean to have Krishna as “Controller”?

The next line of the text tries to explain the space in which Krishna's will operates: “[a]s in the wide space subsists the mighty wind blowing at will ever and everywhere, so do all contingent beings subsist in Me: so must you understand it.”²¹ As the wind blows freely within a wide space, according to

¹⁷R.C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gita: With a Commentary Based on the Original Sources* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 274.

¹⁸Ibid., 275.

¹⁹Ibid., 275.

²⁰Ibid., 275.

²¹Ibid., 275.

its will, so humanity exists within Krishna. There is a space for the will of human beings in the text and it opens up a space for some individuals to be closer to Krishna and others to be further away. Zaehner explains that “beings do not ‘subsist’ or ‘abide’ in God because they themselves are transient: they can only be said to subsist in Him in the sense that the wind, the most fickle and unstable of all elements, subsists in space.”²² Individuals in creation are on their own paths towards or away from Krishna.²³

Krishna goes on to explain that he is continually recreating the universe and then says “[t]hese works [of mine] neither bind-nor-limit Me: as one indifferent I sit among these works, detached.”²⁴ Zaehner explains that Krishna is not indifferent; he is “as one indifferent.” Krishna does not love or hate contingent beings, yet, those who approach Krishna through a path of indifference, which transcends passion and hate, are claimed by Krishna as his own. Though he is indifferent, Krishna can still love those who follow his path. In this way, as Malinar argues, Krishna draws together two realms of existence: human beings who actively engage in aesthetic worship are not just transcending this life, they are drawing closer to Krishna. Conversely, Krishna is transcendent, yet engaged in the life of human beings. Zaehner writes, “the God of the Gita, as must already be apparent, is as firmly established in the world of change and action as He is in the ‘fixed, still state of Brahman.’”²⁵

The middle two sections of chapter nine tie together the introduction and the final sections about worship. “God’s Incarnation as Krishna,” as titled by Zaehner, is a section that describes the tension between Krishna’s appearance on earth with Arjuna and Krishna’s true nature as the transcendent God. This prepares the way for the theophany that will occur in the next chapter but also demonstrates that some individuals will not recognize that Krishna is God in this life, which makes space to talk about individuals who worship other gods. The section also points out that there is a relationship between the incarnation and the discussion of Krishna’s role as transcendent creator. Krishna is in human form when he makes that claim; and it is therefore somehow made known through the incarnation.

In the next section, Krishna describes some of his own attributes. He starts from the ritual practices of this earth, saying he is “the rite, the sacrifice” and then connects these attributes to his transcendent nature: “deathlessness am

²²Ibid., 275.

²³This suggestion regarding the agency of human beings is made tentatively. The commentators I addressed did not draw out this particular theme. However, the suggestion that the aesthetic worship of individuals moves towards Krishna, who is the transcendent divine, seems to suggest that there is space for the agency of individuals. As a result I tentatively suggest this reading of the text.

²⁴Ibid., 277.

²⁵Ibid., 277.

I and death, what IS and what is not.”²⁶ In this section, again, ritual sacrifice is connected with transcendence as achieved through self-sacrifice. Furthermore, the introductory section about the nature of Krishna and the nature of creation is connected to the later section about the worship of other traditions through a discussion of worship practices.

The next section comments on the worship of people who are not worshipping Krishna, but other gods. This has already come up in chapter seven, where the text asserts “[w]hatever form [whatever god,] a devotee with faith desires to honour, that very faith do I confirm in him [making it] unswerving-and-secure.”²⁷ If an individual worships in the correct way, even if the worship is not directed to Krishna, it is Krishna who works through that worship. However, Krishna explains that this worship goes to the other god, even though he has enabled it. Chapter nine again, makes clear that Krishna enables the worship of humankind: “[f]or those men who meditate on Me, no other thought in mind, who do me honour, ever persevere, I bring attainment and possession of what has been attained.”²⁸

But then, the text goes on to make a stronger claim: “[y]et even those who lovingly devote themselves to other gods and sacrifice to them, full filled with faith, do really worship Me though the rite may differ from the norm.” Not only does Krishna enable the worship of other gods, he actually receives that worship. In other words, people who worship other gods, if they are engaged in right worship by seeking to transcend the passion and hate of this world, are actually worshipping Krishna. However, the text goes on to claim that “[f]or it is I who of all sacrifices am recipient and Lord, but they do not really know me as I am, and so they fall back into the world of men.” Despite the fact that individuals who worship other gods might actually be worshipping Krishna, they still have not actually recognized Krishna and thus must be born again. In the next life, they will have another opportunity to recognize Krishna.

These claims about the worship of other gods is followed up by a final section that repositions worship in terms of “The Rewards of Loving Devotion.” In this section, Krishna claims “[i]n all contingent beings the same am I; none do I hate and none do I fondly love; but those who commune with Me in love's devotion [abide] in Me, and I in them.”²⁹ This is, as was mentioned earlier, an explanation of how Krishna is not interested in the works of humans; yet because Krishna is the transcendent divine, any actions that reach out to the transcendent are pleasing to him and result in union with him. More than this, it becomes a space for inclusion amongst the different castes of the Hindu social system. Krishna writes “[f]or whosoever makes me his haven,

²⁶ Ibid., 281.

²⁷ Ibid., 252.

²⁸ Ibid., 284

²⁹ Ibid., 284.

base-born though he may be, yes, women too and artisans, even serfs, theirs is to tread the highest way.”³⁰

This reading of chapter nine of the *Bhagavad Gita* has argued that human beings are dependant on Krishna who is the transcendent creator of the universe; yet, Krishna is in no way dependant on creation. However, Krishna is actively engaged in the world, causing it to “be-and-grow”; he is even present in the world—this text is a conversation between Krishna and Arjuna. Yet not all people will recognize that Krishna is the ultimate expression of the transcendent divine. There is space to move around within the will of Krishna, moving closer to and further away from recognizing him. Krishna does not need the works of human beings; rather, whenever an individual seeks to transcend the passions and hate of this world through loving devotion, they come into union with Krishna who is the transcendent.

Comparison: Different Truth Claims, Yet Similar Ways of Knowing the Truth?

How does this reading of chapter nine of the *Bhagavad-Gita* relate to the dogmatic theology of Karl Rahner? According to chapter nine could there be “anonymous Hindus”? The final section of this essay will attempt to draw some conclusions about how these two texts can be read together. First, this section will argue that there are absolute truth claims that are being made in each text. Next, this section will argue that these truth claims are in a way dependant on the experience of human beings on earth. The experience of individuals in relation to the divine in both texts is similar—in both cases it is through an experience of transcendence—and allows each text, within the limits of what is doctrinally possible, to argue that individuals who worship other gods, if they do it in the right way, are actually worshipping the true God. This comparison is not meant to say that both texts are discussing the same God or that one text is more right than the other. It simply points out how the texts describe similar experiences in relation to the divine. The texts make very different claims about who is God. Finally, it is again important to note that these texts are not being read as absolutely representative of their respective traditions, they are being read as particular examples.

First, both texts start from particular truth claims. Rahner’s essay starts with a dogmatic claim: Christianity is the absolute religion. This is a non-negotiable fact that is not even questioned in the text. It is not necessary to do so because Rahner is not trying to write for non-Christians. The text from the *Bhagavad-Gita* is drawing together two different strains of Hindu worship, the older sacrificial Vedic system and the newer aesthetic practices; it does not speak as an interpreter for a particular religion like Rahner does. Chapter nine of the *Bhagavad-Gita* starts by claiming that Krishna, who appears as a man to Arjuna is actually the creator “Unmanifest in form” or

³⁰Ibid., 286.

the transcendent God who exists beyond creation. Rahner claims that Christianity is the true religion and chapter nine of the *Bhagavad-Gita* claims that Krishna is the true God. The basic claims to truth in this text are incompatible. If Christianity is the true religion, then Krishna cannot be the ultimate expression of the divine.

Despite this very basic difference, both texts claim that it is possible for human beings to experience self-transcendence and that the ground of that transcendence is the divine. In other words, when human beings reach beyond themselves they actually come into contact with something else. Rahner's claim that Christianity is the absolute religion is supported by a claim about God's nature: he argues that Christianity is validated as "lawful" by God's self-revelation to humankind, not by the work of humans. This is rooted in Rahner's basic claim about humans: they know God through a natural experience of self-transcendence. In their ability to think beyond the object that is immediately in front of them, humans always have access to the divine. Humans therefore are always in communion with God. Chapter nine of the *Bhagavad-Gita* claims that Krishna is the transcendent divine and that human beings come into communion with him through the practice of self-transcendence. This is a repositioning of the aesthetic practices that were already common in some types of Hindu worship. Chapter nine makes clear that they are not only reaching outside of life on this earth, they are directed towards the transcendent who is Krishna.

Further, in both texts it is possible to recognize the transcendent because it has been manifest itself on earth in a human form. For Rahner, the historical Christ event is key to the story of salvation history. It is because of Christ's appearance on earth that there is a supernatural grace acting within humankind's natural knowledge of God and it is this supernatural grace that draws people into a salvific communion with God. It is therefore through the life, death and resurrection of Christ that people come to know God. Because the divine has made itself known to humans on earth, it is possible for individuals to access the explicit truth. Therefore, in the Christian tradition if individuals have the opportunity to encounter the gospel, they will realize that they are already Christians, since it is the next natural next step in the progression of their encounter with God.

Though chapter nine of the *Bhagavad-Gita* is not about Krishna's incarnation, the incarnation is part of what is happening because it is Krishna who is talking to Arjuna. Furthermore, Krishna tells Arjuna that not all people will recognize his true nature. However, what happens in chapter nine of the *Bhagavad-Gita* is slightly different than what happens in Rahner's text. Krishna tells Arjuna that familiar experience consists of more than he realizes. When individuals practice aesthetic worship, they are already worshipping him. By appearing on earth, Krishna expands the knowledge of the divine that human beings already have. What is lacking from chapter nine

of the *Bhagavad-Gita* is the degree of urgency to recognize the true God that Rahner expresses in his text. Rahner is so urgent to have other traditions recognize Christ that he doesn't even say that they *should* accept Christianity when they hear the gospel; he says they *will* accept Christianity because they already are anonymous Christians. This points to a fundamental difference between Christianity and Hinduism. Christians only have one lifetime during which to achieve salvation. In chapter nine of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna says that individuals who don't recognize that he is the true God will be born again, which will give them another opportunity to recognize Krishna.

In both texts it is possible for individuals from another tradition to come into communion with the true God through transcendence. In Rahner's text this means that all people are potentially Christians and that all people are potentially saved. In chapter nine of the *Bhagavad Gita* it means that the worship that was already practised by individuals is actually oriented towards Krishna. However, they will still have to recognize that Krishna is the true God in order to achieve complete union with the divine. The way that people come to know God is very similar in these two texts; yet the truth claims about the divine that frame the way of knowing are incompatible. It is not possible to say that chapter nine of the *Bhagavad Gita* describes "anonymous Christians" inasmuch as the term describes distinctly Christian claims like the need to recognize Christ in this lifetime or even the claim that the Christian God is the only God. Yet it is possible to suggest that the two texts describe similar ways of coming to know the divine through an experience of transcendence that is made concretely accessible through incarnation. In this way, chapter nine of the *Bhagavad-Gita* does describe "anonymous followers of Krishna" or "anonymous Hindus".

Conclusions: limited conclusions that open possibilities?

In a way, reading Rahner alongside the *Bhagavad-Gita*, has opened up the space to tentatively claim that it is possible to understand "anonymous follower of Krishna" or "anonymous Hindus" as a category that could be useful for reading chapter nine of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. There will always be the problem of working across traditions. Rahner is not an authorized interpreter of the Hindu text; further, his concepts are dependant on exclusively Christian claims and it might not be fair to separate out his metaphysics for the purpose of making a comparison to another tradition. Yet, by not importing any of the dogmatic truth claims of Rahner, it has become possible to see the similarities in the epistemological claims of Rahner and chapter nine of the *Bhagavad-Gita*.

If there are similar ways of knowing God in the work of a Christian and a Hindu text then there is a space in which it might become legitimate to talk about their truth claims. In what way is Jesus similar to Krishna? Does the existence of one necessarily negate the existence of the other? These questions might be able to find a starting place in the similarities that are

revealed by these two texts. This would push the question from “what does each tradition say about other religious traditions” to “how are the truth claims of these two traditions related.”



Abraham on Whose Terms? Isaac and Ishmael as a Particularity-Driven Paradigm for Jewish-Christian-Muslim Engagement

BY TASI PERKINS

Sacred Stories

*O People of the Scripture! Why will ye argue about Abraham, when the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed till after him? Have ye then no sense? – sūrah al-'imrān*¹

Need for Narrative

Perhaps the most popular paradigm for interfaith dialogue among contemporary adherents to traditionally “Western” religions is the concept of Abraham’s progeny. “Abrahamic religion” has become a term of convenience for scholars and practitioners alike, and those who work toward conciliation, cohabitation, and peace among Jews, Christians, and Muslims often start with the theological premise that shared devotion to the God worshipped by a common ancestor is at the heart of Judeo-Christian-Muslim identity. For many, this project creates a counter-narrative to the paradigm of enmity underlying the theory of a “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West.² Increasingly with the collapse of the Soviet Union, global experiences of terrorism, and sizeable populations of migrant Muslims in Europe and North America, Christian fighters find themselves battling not one another,

¹ Qur’ān 3:63, Qur’ānic references are to Abdulla Yūsuf Alī’s translation (© 2004, *Amana Publications*)

² For a discussion of how Samuel P. Huntington’s famous theory is often applied specifically to a clash between the “Islamic” and “Western” civilizations, see Abdul Rauf, Feisal. *What’s Right with Islam is What’s Right with America: A New Vision for Muslims and the West* (New York: HarperOne, 2004), xxii, 4

but Muslims. Still, as pronounced as conflict between Muslims, Christians, and Jews is in the globalized twenty-first century, it is far from a new phenomenon. For as long as Jews, Christians, and Muslims have lived in contact with one another, power dynamics have both determined and been determined by theological narrations of the religious Other. Room exists in each tradition for identifying each of the others as acceptable or as reprobate, and the current implications of such identifications are meaningful and concrete. Throughout history, members of the “Abrahamic traditions” have frequently focused on only one of these options – the story of competition – to the exclusion of the other – the story of confraternity and binding ties – and the accompanying theological amnesia has often led directly to bloodshed.³ Abraham’s biography certainly can be – and in many instances is – re-remembered and re-told as a paradigm for partnership rather than rivalry: “Where the story of confrontation narrows options to coercion/resistance and assimilation, the story of compatibility focuses attention on ways of coping with conflict more effectively.”⁴ When the adherents of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam neglect their shared heritage and commitment, they restrict their scriptures, and in limiting the creative potential of hermeneutics, display, “pernicious blindness to God.”⁵ The vision of an “Abrahamic family” is a pragmatically useful and theologically tenable ideal, but is philosophically dubious as long as Abraham’s universality remains un-tempered by his children’s particularities.

Juxtaposing Brothers

Noble and useful though its intentions are in the age of globalism, much of the constructive interfaith work among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the past half-century has focused on the common ancestor Abraham. This project has had to navigate around two potential pitfalls. First, in describing Abraham as a universal patriarch, theological thinkers have faced the danger of sacrificing their distinctiveness – unity without particularity can lead to a bland sameness or a subversive assimilation. Second, and more subtly pernicious, each of the three traditions has tended to appropriate Abraham as its own to the exclusion of the others. Partisans use Abraham in polemics and apologetics to claim uniquely authentic Abrahamic descent. Rather than the uniting figure that he might be, Abraham therefore becomes a source of division among the three traditions that trace their lineage to him. Those involved in dialogue and other interfaith endeavors might focus on Isaac and Ishmael in order to navigate these pitfalls.

³ Arnold, Sir Thomas. *The Spread of Islam in the World* (New Delhi, India: Goodword Books, 2002), 396f.

⁴ Funk, Nathan and Abdul Aziz Said. *Islam and Peacemaking in the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2008), 41

⁵ Kuschel, Karl-Josef. *Abraham: Sign of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1994), 131

The scriptures underlying the three faiths describe a great rift between Isaac and Ishmael (and because of the typological nature of the foundational Genesis text, their spiritual descendents) but interestingly the boys play little active role in fomenting this division. In Genesis, Isaac is extremely passive in his rivalry with Ishmael and is, “more or less the plaything of others’ interests.”⁶ Ishmael, too, has no active role in causing the familial rift. Even when he is sixteen years old and cast into the desert with his mother the text describes him in juvenile and helpless terms – he is called a *yeled* (a Hebrew word which usually connotes a prepubescent male) and weeps.⁷ Ishmael finds himself cut off from his family, “for reasons perhaps beyond his control...The results of this alienation have always been tragic.”⁸ A close reading of the Genesis story reveals that Isaac and Ishmael are more pawns than agents in the drama that forces them apart.

Yet while the brothers do very little to alienate one another, they play an active role in bringing reconciliation. Details in the foundational text attest to this, but the Isaac-Ishmael saga receives relatively little attention from commentators.⁹ This narrative – according to the Hebrew Bible, the Christian New Testament, and the Islamic Qur’ān – serves to do more than merely describe a set of common ancestors. The story of Isaac and Ishmael can be read as the story of respect for the Other and hope for reconciliation between estranged brethren.

Caveats

I write this paper as someone who is “traditioned” and who is cognizant that such a statement is limited and limiting. I have a vested – though primarily academic – interest in constructive theological approaches to questions of violence and nonviolence in Christian-Muslim engagement. As a Christian (specifically, a United Methodist), I cannot pretend to speak theologically on behalf of Judaism or Islam (or even some universal “Christianity,” for that matter). This is partly because Christian efforts to do so have frequently been linked to colonialist or imperialist impositions, partly because I lack the depth of experience necessary to speak on behalf of the Other, and partly because any attempt to do so would circumvent the very boundary which this paper seeks to establish: dialogue, relationship, and constructive engagement are possible only insofar as the Self and the Other remain

⁶ Martin-Achard, Robert. “Isaac” (Terrence Prendergast, *trans.*) in Freedman, David N., ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (CD-ROM) (New York: Doubleday, 1997)

⁷ Hess, “Ishmael” in Freedman, Gen 21:16f.; As a further mark of God’s concern for Abraham’s children, it is Hagar who pleads for mercy but Ishmael whose cries provoke divine intervention

⁸ Brown, Brian Arthur. *Noah’s Other Son: Bridging the Gap between the Bible and the Qur’an* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 2007), 87

⁹ cf. Martin-Achard: “The majority of commentators...speak of an Abraham cycle and one of Jacob, which together share the bulk of Genesis 12-36. They seem to pass over unawares an ‘Isaac cycle’ that is limited to chap. 26.”

distinct. The principle reason that I cannot speak on behalf of these traditions, however, is that they exist only in the abstract. It is more helpful to speak of “judaisms” than of “Judaism,” for even in a single place and time traditions are always multivalent. Any essentialized use of the word “Judaism” will beg myriad questions. Yet while it is dangerous to overemphasize homogeneity, it is unhelpful to deconstruct a tradition *ad infinitum*. If I am to say anything at all, I must assume that “Judaism,” “Christianity,” and “Islam” are terms that can point to semi-concrete theological realities.¹⁰ When I use the terms, however, I do not claim exclusive dominion over their definitions. Rather, I am proposing one possible reading among others: a theological narration, admittedly from a Christian vantage point and meta-historical, of three non-essentialized traditions. I am conscious that, despite my efforts to overcome them, my theological positioning and academic interests undoubtedly color the way that I read the data at my disposal. Nevertheless, I believe that those involved in Jewish-Christian-Muslim conversation – especially portions of the contemporary Christian community which seek to overcome patterns of exclusion and dominance – can benefit from a challenge to the assumption that Abraham is a particularly useful character around whom to structure interreligious dialogue, and that focus on the Isaac-Ishmael traditions can lead to a degree of conciliation and an overcoming of such patterns.

This paper will understand three orders of reflection on the Abraham-Isaac-Ishmael narrative.¹¹ The first-order text will be the source material found in chapters 11-35 of Genesis. Second-order texts will include primary canonical texts which draw on the Genesis source material: the rest of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and the Qur’ān.¹² This paper will not consider third-order texts, such as Talmud, Midrash, pseudopigrapha, Patristics, ḥadīth, and sīrah. Even though many of these texts assume a canonical or quasi-

¹⁰ For the sake of convenience, this paper will use the triads “Judaism-Israel-Jewish community,” “Christianity-the Church-Christian community,” and “Islam-the ‘ummah-Islamic community” without distinction between their components. However this paper will, to the extent necessary, differentiate between “Islamic” (connoting theological identity and confession) and “Muslim” (a broader socio-cultural term).

¹¹ While appearing synchronous, this paper will in fact give narrative priority to Genesis and understand second-order texts as interpretations, reflections, and commentaries on this foundational text. Nevertheless, the constructive theological paradigm here proposed is intended to be meta-traditional, an offer, as it were, to the dialogue table rather than to any particular participant.

¹² This is not to suggest that Islam and Christianity are “second-order” religions or that their scriptures are subordinate to the Genesis text, but rather that such scriptures came to be in a milieu in which the Genesis traditions were taken for granted. For the idea that Qur’ānic reflection on biblical narratives is an interpretation which presupposes familiarity with the biblical tradition (and therefore makes the Qur’ān, along with the New Testament and the later Hebrew Bible material, a second-order text), see Reynolds, Gabriel Said. *The Qur’ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (London: Routledge, 2010). Still, the traditional Islamic idea that there is not a one-to-one correspondence between the Hebrew Bible (Torah) and *al-tawrāh* is a deeper problem that invites further study. Cf. n. 16 below.

canonical status in the traditions which had borne them, there is an important reason for bracketing them in this paper. As the three traditions became entrenched and developed orthodox theologies, their scholars began to define them in opposition to the others. Isaac and Ishmael became victims of this polarizing effort as theologians supplied details to their lives – largely absent in the scriptures – in order to justify claims to religious exclusivism. Augustine neglects Ishmael and highlights Isaac because his theology has no need for the former.¹³ Similarly, the Talmud considers Ishmael excluded from God's community: "A son confers privileges on his father, but a father confers no privilege on a son...Abraham cannot deliver Ishmael, (and) Isaac cannot deliver Esau."¹⁴ The *Epistle of Barnabas* appropriates Isaac for Christianity as a prefigurement of Christ.¹⁵ As the traditions grew to understand themselves in opposition to the others, they did "everything to establish themselves as the true heirs of Abraham – at the expense" of the others.¹⁶ In order to mitigate the appropriation of Isaac and Ishmael, this paper will consider primarily canonical sources.

This paper also will occasionally speak of Judaism and Christianity without thoroughly differentiating between the two. Because of its limited scope, the paper focuses primarily on Christianity and Islam and is concerned with Judaism to the extent that it shares scripture, history, and theology with the Christian tradition. The Qur'ān often considers "Jews and Christians" to be a single category (*ahl al-kitāb*, "the people of the book") and sacred texts link both Jews (biologically) and Christians (spiritually) to Abraham through Isaac while traditional Islamic scholarship links Muslims (Arabs biologically and the entire *ummah* spiritually) to Abraham through Ishmael.¹⁷ Therefore, this paper will focus on the "descendants of Isaac" and the "descendants of Ishmael;" further study might reflect on the distinct Jewish and Christian theologies of Isaac.

Finally, this paper will not deal with the issue of gender. The fact that the paradigm proposed here comes to vindicate Isaac and Ishmael and implicate Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar (particularly the latter two) in the scandal of fraternal division should not be confused with an attempt to portray biblical women as divisive (as far too many misogynistic commentators have done with Eve, Delilah, Herodias, etc.). The vast majority of biblical and Qur'ānic

¹³ Kuschel, *Abraham*, 131

¹⁴ Talmud B. Sanh 104a in Katsh, Abraham I. *Judaism in Islam: Biblical and Talmudic Backgrounds of the Koran and its Commentaries (Surahs II and III)* (New York: New York University Press, 1954), 197

¹⁵ Martin-Achard

¹⁶ Kuschel, *Abraham*, 130

¹⁷ cf. Cate, Patrick O'Hare . *Each Other's Scripture: The Muslims' Views of the Bible and the Christians' Views of the Qur'ān* (unpublished doctoral thesis: Hartford Seminary, 1974) 69f. For the Islamic distinction between extant versions of the Torah, Psalms, and Gospel and their heavenly counterparts: "Both Jews and Christians have changed the Bible because both Jesus and Moses originally agreed and both originally predicted Muhammad."

villains are male, while many devout heroes are female. The rupture between Isaac and Ishmael has more to do with generation than gender: the boys' parents drive them apart out of jealousy, greed, and spite.

Isaac and Ishmael

*[Ishmael's circumcision] means that Israel cannot absolutize its own election. Other children of Abraham, too, have been singled out by God. – Karl-Josef Kuschel*¹⁸

Spiritual Grandfather

Abraham is clearly a figure of common admiration in the three traditions of interest.¹⁹ The Hebrew community declares in the Torah, "a wandering Aramean was my ancestor."²⁰ Paul, writing on behalf of the gentile Church, discusses "the faith [of] our ancestor Abraham."²¹ The Qur'ān speaks of Muslims following "the religion of Abraham."²² The "Abrahamic traditions" share a common faith in this patriarch and his God; this commonality serves as the basis for dialogue between the religions.²³ From the Abraham story the traditions have developed similar concepts of monotheism, fidelity, and accountability. Yet though Abraham in this sense is a common figure for his spiritual descendents, the latter often appropriate the former for themselves to the exclusion of others.²⁴

The Hebrew scriptures explicitly tie Abraham's patriarchy to Israel's claim to an exclusive covenant and a divine right to the territory of Canaan: "[God said to Abraham,] Go from your country...to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and...I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse."²⁵ The New Testament claims the Church to be Abraham's true spiritual heir, to the exclusion of Judaism:

[The Jews] answered him, 'Abraham is our father.' Jesus said to them, *'If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did*, but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God.

¹⁸ Kuschel, *Abraham*, 132f.

¹⁹ A possible cultural linguistic critique (put crudely for the sake of simplicity, that the "Jewish / Hebrew" 'Avraham, the "Christian / Greek" Abraham, and the "Islamic / Arabic" Ibrāhīm are appropriated by three incommensurate cultural communities and are therefore three distinct characters) notwithstanding, the common matrix in which the three traditions have emerged and defined themselves points to a degree of overlap in the concepts of "Abraham" in each.

²⁰ Dt 26:5, biblical references are to the New Revised Standard Version (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.)

²¹ Ro 4:12

²² Qur'ān 2:135

²³ For an interesting proposal that the three faiths look not to Abraham but to Seth for their common ancestor, cf. Brown, *Noah's Other Son*, 39

²⁴ For more on the polarizing potential of Abraham, cf. Madigan, Daniel S.J. "Paul and Islam" in *Codex Pauli* (Rome: Abbazia San Paolo, 2009) *pre-published manuscript edition*

²⁵ Gen 12:1-3

This is not what Abraham did. You are indeed doing what your father does.' They said to him, 'We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself.' Jesus said to them, '*If God were your Father, you would love me*, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. *You are from your father the devil*, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth.'²⁶

Islam, too, seems to reject the notion that Abraham is the property of more than one religion: "Abraham was not a Jew, nor yet a Christian; but he was an upright man who had surrendered (*muslimān*).²⁷ Though he has the potential to unite the three faiths, their exclusive claims to be Abraham's spiritual descendents is often counterproductive to dialogical and conciliatory efforts.

To be sure, Abraham is not the only polarizing figure whom all three faiths revere. Paul uses Sarah to represent the Church, free through grace, and Hagar to represent Judaism, enslaved to the law, in "a text with much supersessionist anti-Semitic potential."²⁸ The Qur'ān appropriates even the patriarchs Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph (as well as later biblical heroes like Moses, Noah, Jesus, and John the Baptist) as Muslims.²⁹ However, because the Arab tribes, and later Islam, traced their lineage to Abraham through Ishmael, the Qur'ān is able to concede that Isaac is in fact the ancestor of the Jews (and Christians).³⁰ Similarly, because Israel and the Church approach Abraham through Isaac, they are free to ascribe Ishmael's legacy to traditions beyond themselves.³¹ Isaac (for Islam) and Ishmael (for Judaism and Christianity)

²⁶ Jn 8:38ff., *emphasis added*

²⁷ Qur'ān 3:67; Though in the Meccan period the term *muslim* was used to describe anyone who submitted to the will of God; only after the Prophet's followers began to differentiate itself from the Jews and Christians did the term come to apply to members of a specific religious community. Nevertheless, according to a synchronic reading of the Qur'ān (as well as a reading from the vantage point of later Islamic scholarship), only one true religion (*al-dīn* [a word which only exists in the singular in the Qur'ān]) exists, and the Abraham's submission was to this religion. Therefore, while a diachronic reading can suggest that the early Muslim community "shared" Abraham and other biblical heroes with other traditions, it did so on its own terms, and could therefore insist that "Abraham was not a Jew, nor yet a Christian." Madigan finds parallels between Pauline and Qur'ānic exclusive claims: "for Muslims the Abraham strategy is a way of claiming a connection with the original covenant of God without having to accept either Torah or Gospel – or membership of Judaism or Christianity"

²⁸ Yee, Gale A. "Sarah" in Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, cf. Gal 4:21ff.

²⁹ Qur'ān 2:133, 136, 140, 22:78

³⁰ Qur'ān 29:27

³¹ Since the rise of Islam, it has been common for Jews and Christians to refer to Muslims using terms such as "Hagarene" (or "Agarene") and "Ishmaelite." For example, the Asturian *Chronicle of Albelda* (c. 883) refers to a Muslim army as "the Ishmaelite host" (Wolf, Kenneth B., trans. "Chronicle of Albelda" in Constable, Olivia Remie, ed. *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources* [Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997] 57). Jews in medieval Iberia debated the relative merits of the yoke of the

represent the religious Other. If Abraham is the spiritual grandfather, then Isaac (for the *'ummah*) and Ishmael (for Israel and the Church) are spiritual uncles, kinsfolk to whom the nieces and nephews do not have exclusive claim. Because each tradition venerates its spiritual uncle, and because the story of Isaac and Ishmael is the story of brothers who have been forced cycles of enmity but who possess both the resources and the desire to be reconciled, Abraham's oldest sons may embody the narrative of confraternity which those involved in "Abrahamic dialogue" seek to recover.

Spiritual Uncles

The Genesis text tells the story of separation between Isaac and Ishmael.³² Abraham's wife Sarah is barren and advanced in years, so she instructs Abraham to lie with her slave Hagar in order to sire a child.³³ Ten years after this request, Abraham weds Hagar, who conceives. While pregnant, Hagar "looks with contempt on her mistress;" Hagar's insults prompt Sarah's anger and Abraham gives his first wife a *carte blanche*: "do to her as you please." Though Sarah is barren by God's design and Hagar is pregnant by Sarah's design, Sarah – as a free woman and Abraham's sister – has greater say than Hagar – a slave with no immediate relationship to Abraham – so the one with power abuses the one without.³⁴ Sarah's harsh treatment forces Hagar to run away. God, however, instructs Hagar to "Return to your mistress and submit to her," and offers a blessing: "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude." When Hagar's son is born, Abraham prays, "O that Ishmael might live in your sight."³⁵ Yet though Sarah's command had catalyzed Ishmael's birth, the former wallows in jealousy regarding the latter. Once Sarah has a son of her own, her jealousy increases.

The final straw comes when Sarah observes Ishmael, "playing with her son Isaac."³⁶ She immediately goes to Abraham and demands, "Cast out this slave

"Ishmaelites" and the "Edomites" (tracing Christianity to Isaac through Esau; Judaism through Jacob). In addition to the geographical description of the territory of the Ishmaelites in Genesis, a source for the identification of Ishmael with the Arab people may be the pseudopigraphal *Book of Jubilees* which speaks of an intermingling between Ishmael's descendants and "the sons of Keturah" which produced a people "called Arabs and Ishmaelites" (*Jubilees* 20:12f. in Charles, Robert H. trans. (revised Chaim Rabin) . "Jubilees" in Sparks, H.F.D. *The Apocryphal Old Testament* [Oxford, UK: Clarendon Paperbacks, 1984] 67)

³² Gen 16 (in which Abraham and Sarah are still named Abram and Sarai) and 21 (in which they have been renamed)

³³ Hagar is an Egyptian: "If the first story about Hagar was written at the time of Hezekiah, Hagar's nationality may veil the author's opposition to Hezekiah's foreign policy." (Knauf, Ernst Axel . "Hagar" in Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*)

³⁴ Yee, "Sarah" in Freedan, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*

³⁵ Gen 17:18

³⁶ The difficulty of translating the Hebrew *məṭā'eq* is especially pronounced for literary critics of the Isaac-Ishmael saga. Typically translated "mocking" or "scoffing" (NIV, NASB, KJV, Luther), "playing" (RSV, NRSV, NJB, Vulgate), or "making sport" (JPS, LXX), the participle derives from the same root (tā'-q) as the word Isaac (*yitā'eq*), so Ge 21:9 is almost certainly meant to recall Sarah's laughter at the announcement that she will conceive in her old age;

woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.” Though Abraham is ambivalent, God assures him that both Isaac and Ishmael will become great nations. Indeed, God miraculously spares Hagar and Ishmael while they are dying of thirst in the wilderness of Beer-sheba, and Ishmael grows up to father twelve princes.

Neither Isaac nor Ishmael did anything active to provoke their separation except play together. Abraham receives an oracle that Ishmael, “shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin.” Again, Ishmael does not choose this isolated lifestyle – it is imposed on him. “Ishmael’s adult behavior as a wild ass, alienated from everyone, is an understandable reaction to the childhood trauma of being placed under the knife on an altar by his father (as in the Qur’ān), or being abandoned to die in the desert by his mother (as in the Bible).”³⁷ Twice Abraham’s generation tries to eliminate Ishmael, but twice God safeguards the boy’s life.³⁸ Genesis continues to tell the story of the polarizing effect of Abraham’s generation on its descendents: when Joseph’s brothers attempt to commit fratricide, it is Abraham’s descendents alternately through Hagar and Keturah (his third wife) who transport and sell Joseph to the Egyptians.³⁹ Perhaps it is not surprising that the three traditions in the “Abrahamic family” have used their common ancestor as a dividing wedge – the Genesis narrative, too, implicates Abraham and his wives in the rift that develops between their children.

While Genesis describes the division between Isaac and Ishmael, it does not implicate them.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the few interactions that circumstances afford them offer great promise for cooperation between their descendents. Those who call Isaac and Ishmael their spiritual uncles need not accept that the narrative of competition is the only viable reading of the interactions between their traditions. Even through circumstances beyond – and to be sure, within – their control have pitted many contemporary Jews, Christians, and Muslims competitively against one another, they retain the ability to narrate each other as cousins.

In order for Isaac (to Islam) or Ishmael (to Judaism and Christianity) to represent the religious Other, the scriptures must allow each tradition to interpret its own spiritual uncle as the spiritual father of the Other. For example, Genesis must leave room for Jews to read Ishmael as patriarch of

the root itself typically connotes joking, either in the sense of playfulness or in the sense of insult. Whether Ishmael was making merry with his brother or at his brother’s expense is crucial for the narrative paradigm of Isaac and Ishmael; relying on the NRSV, this paper assumes that the boys shared a jovial moment together.

³⁷ Brown, *Noah’s Other Son*, 88

³⁸ Kuschel, *Abraham*, 133

³⁹ Hess, “Ishmael;” Knauf, Ernst Axel. “Keturah” in Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*

⁴⁰ For the possibility that Sarah’s expulsion of Ishmael was provoked by the latter’s condescension, cf. n. 34 above.

the Muslims. This is not difficult. The terms “Ishmael” and “Ishmaelite” in the Hebrew Bible, “are synonyms for wilderness dwellers and Bedouin.”⁴¹ Similarly, the Meccan sūrahs recognize Isaac as a Jewish patriarch, and by the time the Prophet immigrates to Medina Ishmael emerges from an “isolated and shadowy existence” to become identified as the father of the Arab peoples.⁴² Thus for contemporary Judaism and Christianity Ishmael represents the Other – specifically, the Muslim – while for Islam Isaac represents *ahl al-kitāb*.

Establishing that each tradition’s scriptures narrate the stories of the Other’s patriarch is important. Equally important for the work of constructive interreligious dialogue is establishing that the scriptures have reverence for the typological Other. The Hebrew Bible venerates Ishmael. Abraham and Ishmael are circumcised together, years before Isaac: “By preserving this history, Israel itself has accepted the statement that before Ishmael, later to be the ancestor of the Arabian tribes, was cast out, by God’s will he bore the sign of God’s covenant”⁴³ Unlike Abraham’s six sons by Keturah, Ishmael in Genesis receives a special inheritance: “Ishmael occupies a strange hybrid position: he is neither like Isaac, the son of Abraham, nor is he like one of Abraham’s sons by Keturah. Something special seems to have happened in his case. Evidently God still has special plans for him.”⁴⁴ While the biblical texts have a certain respect for Ishmael, the Qur’ānic texts hold Isaac in the highest regard. Islam considers him prophet (*nabī*), placing him in a select group of some twenty-five people. The Qur’ān celebrates Isaac as, “among the righteous,” “verily of the elect,” “a wise son,” and a vessel through whom God “established the prophethood and the Scripture.”⁴⁵ The Hebrew Bible recognizes Ishmael as an heir to God’s blessing outside the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the Qur’ān regards Isaac as the prototypical Judeo-Christian and a righteous patriarch.⁴⁶

Fraternal Parallels

The scriptures use the parents as dividing figures, but Isaac and Ishmael serve literarily to embody unity in at least two ways. First, significant biographical parallels exist in the scriptural treatments of the brothers.

⁴¹ Kuschel, *Abraham*, 136 cf. Hess, “Ishmael” in Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*

⁴² Kuschel, *Abraham*, 151; for more on the problem of dating Qur’ānic material, see Neuwirth, Angelika. “Structure and the Emergence of Community” in Rippin, Andrew, ed. *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur’ān* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006) 147ff.

⁴³ *ibid.* 132

⁴⁴ *ibid.* 135; for more on Ishmael’s paradoxical role in Genesis cf. 133: “How can God accede to Hagar’s and Ishmael’s expulsion and at the same time have great plans for the future of them both?”

⁴⁵ Qur’ān 29:27, 38:47, 51:28

⁴⁶ The New Testament never mentions Ishmael by name, and Paul’s polemic against him in Gal 4:21ff. uses Sarah and Hagar, rather than Isaac and Ishmael, as the determinative characters for the election of the Church and the reprobation of Israel.

Second, the brothers function as agents of reconciliation in their scriptural interactions. It is not unlikely that the redactors of Genesis included the obscure references to Keturah's sons, "to stand in stark contrast with the importance of the descendents of Isaac [and] Ishmael."⁴⁷ Unlike the sons of Keturah, Isaac and Ishmael partner together in burying Abraham in the family tomb.⁴⁸ God's providence extends to the two oldest sons: both Isaac and Ishmael are spared providentially from early death far from home.⁴⁹ Abraham's old age at the birth of his sons is a sign of divine blessing, an inference that the Qur'ān makes explicit.⁵⁰ Both boys become the father of twelve powerful clans (Isaac is grandfather to Jacob's sons; Ishmael's twelve sons, whom Genesis describes as "princes," each represent a well-known Arab tribes of the post-exilic period).⁵¹ While the Qur'ān includes very little narrative, it shares with Genesis two stories about Abraham's children (the *Aqedah* and the strangers' announcement of Isaac's birth which incites Sarah's scoffing reaction).⁵²

Isaac and Jacob are etiologically linked to four sacred geographical locations. Beer-lahai-roi, which Hagar names after receiving a vision announcing the importance of Ishmael's birth, becomes the settling place from which Isaac travels when he meets Rebekah and to which he moves immediately after receiving Abraham's deathbed blessing.⁵³ Beer-sheba is the site where God miraculously spares Ishmael and his mother and where Isaac moves (with his father) immediately after God miraculously spares the boy's life on Mount Moriah; later the adult Isaac receives God's promise through a late-night epiphany in Beer-sheba.⁵⁴ The brothers are linked transcendentally to the holiest sites in Judeo-Christianity and Islam respectively. In the case of the former, the Temple Mount serves as the spot where Jewish and Christian traditions claim Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice. In the case of the latter, the Ka'ba functions as the spot where Islamic tradition claims Abraham offered to sacrifice Ishmael (though the Qur'ānic account of the *Aqedah* mentions only Abraham's "gentle son," to whom the father says, "I have seen in a dream that I must sacrifice thee," Islamic tradition has long held that this son was Ishmael).⁵⁵

⁴⁷ Hess, "Ishmael;" Knauf, "Keturah" in Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*

⁴⁸ Gen 25:9

⁴⁹ Kuschel, *Abraham*, 134; cf. Gen 21:19, 22:13

⁵⁰ Qur'ān 14:39

⁵¹ Knauf, "Hagar;" in Freedom, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*; Gen 25:13=1Ch1:29f.

⁵² 37:101ff., 11:71, 51:24ff

⁵³ Gen 16:13f., 24:62, 25:11

⁵⁴ Gen 21:14, 22:19, 26:23; both Genesis and Qur'an teach that God spared Ishmael through Hagar's discovery of a well, unnamed in Gen 21:19 but called Zamzam in Islamic tradition, which still waters pilgrims on their way to the Ka'ba (Aslan, Reza . *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* [New York: Random House, 2006] 4)

⁵⁵ Gen 22:2, Q2:126, 37:101f.

The scriptures unite Isaac and Ishmael through parallel biography and shared etiology. They also depict the brothers partnering together. The first incidence of their interaction in Genesis, and the one that prompts Sarah's paranoia, is the two boys playing together.⁵⁶ The next time that they are collocated, Isaac and Ishmael are burying their father.⁵⁷ Later, when Esau (Isaac's favorite son) causes his father grief by marrying two Hittites, Ishmael reemerges – Esau marries Ishmael's daughter Mahalath.⁵⁸

Islam teaches that Isaac and Ishmael lived in conciliation. The Qur'ān repeatedly praises the brothers in the same breath.⁵⁹ The Shi'a believe that Isaac and Ishmael jointly functioned as Abraham's Imams and fulfilled his covenant.⁶⁰ The unity that Islam ascribes to Isaac and Ishmael is also desired for their descendents. In one of Islam's most remarkable statements of interreligious hope, the Qur'ān attests that God gave Abraham "Isaac and Jacob...and Ismail," and reserves "favour above the nations" for "their fathers, and progeny and brethren."⁶¹ According to this sentiment, God has elected all of Abraham's spiritual heirs – not just Muslims – for mutual existence within an inclusive matrix of devotion. The parents quarreled and the sons were divided, but the sacred texts hint at transcendent unity between Isaac and Ishmael: this overcoming of division through divinely engendered relationship, which does not sacrifice particularity or reduce to sameness, can serve as a paradigm for interreligious interaction in a way that the figure of Abraham cannot.

Contemporary Mandates

European Islamophobia, Israeli fear of an Arab conspiracy, Muslim suspicion of a Christian war on Islam, current unrest in Nigeria, Palestine, Chechnya, Kosovo, Timor-Leste, Cyprus, France, Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Chad, histories of Crusade, Umayyad conquest, Reconquista, Inquisition, Intifada – clearly many Jews, Christians, and Muslims are in positions to consider one another competitors or enemies rather than partners and siblings. Yet while their theological heritages certainly allow room for them to narrate each other as religious adversaries, another paradigm – the paradigm of fraternity through difference – is possible.

The fraternity between Isaac and Ishmael – though unfortunately strained by circumstances beyond their control and tried by centuries of warfare between Abraham's descendents – transcends the historical and contemporary divisions between their spiritual progeny. When Isaac's favorite son marries Ishmael's only named daughter, reconciliation takes on

⁵⁶ Gen 21:9

⁵⁷ Gen 25:9

⁵⁸ Gen 26:34f., 28:9

⁵⁹ Qur'ān 3:84, 4:163, 14:39

⁶⁰ Aslan, *No god but God*, 182

⁶¹ Qur'ān 6:84, 86f.

a grand dimension.⁶² Not only is Isaac relieved after his first two daughters-in-law “made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah,” but the union between these two tribes produces remarkable offspring.⁶³ Together Isaac’s son and Ishmael’s daughter produce a tribe of “breeders of small stock *par excellence*,” which Ernst Axel Knauf believes intentionally harkens back to the shepherd Abel, with his righteousness and innocence.⁶⁴ Ishmael does not disappear from the biblical narrative with the expulsion of Hagar, and to his descendents God grants the blessing of abundance.

The question of abundance – whether there is enough to go around – catalyzes the division in the first place. Genesis portrays Sarah coveting her husband’s inheritance on behalf of Isaac, seemingly as skeptical that there is abundance available for both boys as she was that she could conceive a child in the first place. When her son cooperates with his half-brother, she finds this playful innocence alarmingly threatening. Rather than embrace her son’s embrace, Sarah seeks to eliminate the Other.⁶⁵ Scarcity contributes directly to expulsion and schism, but in the biblical narrative God remains committed to providing for all. In Genesis, “[Isaac’s] property, due to divine protection, comes to surpass every measure.”⁶⁶ When God promises Isaac, “I will be with you and will bless you,” Isaac discovers that he has more than enough: “Isaac sowed seed in that land, and in the same year reaped a hundredfold.”⁶⁷ When he moves to Gerar, Isaac is tempted – to borrow a pair of colloquialisms – to trade this “theology of abundance” for a “theology of scarcity.” In Gerar he digs two wells, but both times the indigenous herdsmen claim, “the water is ours;” rather than resign to a life of competition, however, Isaac pursues abundance through cooperation.⁶⁸ Genesis describes this scene: “He moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he called it Rehoboth, saying, ‘Now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land.’”⁶⁹

There is room for all to be fruitful through the abundant provision of Abraham’s prodigal God. In a globalized world in which industrial and agricultural production far surpasses the basic needs of every human, yet in which the chasm between rich and poor is the highest it has ever been and in which people die daily by the thousands of both deprivation and excess, it is difficult not to think that the Sarahs of the world will always take from the Hagar of the world. But the Genesis narrative reminds its readers that God hears the weeping of Hagar’s child and leaves open the possibility that Isaac

⁶² Gen 26:34f., 28:9

⁶³ Gen 26:35

⁶⁴ Knauf, “Ishmael” in Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*; cf. Isa 60:7

⁶⁵ Gen 21:9

⁶⁶ Martin-Achard, “Isaac” in Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*

⁶⁷ Gen 26:3, 12

⁶⁸ Gen 26:17ff.

⁶⁹ Gen 26:22

and Ishmael can always overcome divisive circumstances to play, grieve, and celebrate together. By rightly remembering and responsibly highlighting these details in the foundational text, those interested in creative theological interfaith engagement can find in Isaac and Ishmael a paradigm for dialogue.⁷⁰

Engaging the Other

Violence has been singled out seldom for special consideration [because] no one questions or examines what is obvious to all. – Hannah Arendt⁷¹

Nieces and Nephews of Isaac and Ishmael

The specific challenges facing contemporary religious adherents require scholars and practitioners to question long-held assumptions, as Arendt does with the long-held belief that violence is inevitable and this paper seeks to do with the idea that Jewish-Christian-Muslim engagement should be founded on the unity found in Abraham. In a newly globalized world, members of the “Abrahamic family” are capable of – and often incentivized to – reframing their communal narrative. The West, having witnessed the massive twentieth-century failure of secularism to put an end to war and oppression, is rediscovering the value of rich religious traditions. The Islamic world, grappling with industrialization, enlightenment, and modernity, is in the midst of an “epistemological crisis.”⁷² My own Christian tradition historically has often used a religious exclusivism to justify imperialistic impositions, a system which a narrative theology of Isaac and Ishmael can challenge. The resilient fraternity between Isaac and Ishmael can serve as a paradigm for religious unity. “There can really be no doubt that the Hebrew Bible made significant statements about Ishmael – not only biographical but above all also theological. In the interest of an Abrahamic ecumene these theological statements urgently need evaluation.”⁷³ The scriptures speak of God’s attention to the religious Other, to the spiritual uncle. In the midst of the triangulation and infighting by the three parents of Isaac and Ishmael, Abraham takes time to pray for his second son.⁷⁴ In Genesis Ishmael is the only post-Abrahamic centenarian outside of Jacob’s direct lineage – since long life is a sign of blessing in the Hebrew Bible, Ishmael is thus one of the most highly regarded gentiles in the Hebrew scriptures.⁷⁵ The Qur’ān, too, offers hope for Abrahamic unity while denouncing the competitiveness that leads to division:

⁷⁰ Volf, Miroslav. *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 27f., 30ff., 32f.

⁷¹ Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence* (San Diego, CA: Harvest Books, 1970), 8

⁷² Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 40

⁷³ Kuschel, *Abraham*, 131

⁷⁴ Gen 17:18

⁷⁵ Gen 25:17: Ishmael lived to be 137 years old

He hath ordained for you *that religion which He commended unto Noah, and that which We inspire in thee (Muhammad), and that which We commended unto Abraham and Moses and Jesus, saying: Establish the religion, and be not divided therein.* Dreadful for the idolaters is that unto which thou callest them. Allah chooseth for Himself whom He will, and guideth unto Himself him who turneth (toward Him). And *they were not divided until after the knowledge came unto them, through rivalry among themselves;* and had it not been for a Word that had already gone forth from thy Lord for an appointed term, it surely had been judged between them. And those who were made to inherit the Scripture after them are verily in hopeless doubt concerning it.⁷⁶

Need for Particularity

Not all pleas for Abrahamic unity are calls for the disillusion of particularity. Calling Jews, Christians, and Muslims “children of Abraham” is helpful, but such naming must be joined to the distinct labels, “children of Isaac” and “children of Ishmael.”⁷⁷ Each tradition has a nuanced comprehensive scheme and a rich tradition of embodied theology. While Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share much in common, they do not need to move from interreligious to ecumenical language in their interactions in order to engage one another constructively and theologically.⁷⁸ Yet while dialogue requires the distinctiveness of each party involved, it also requires a common starting point. Isaac and Ishmael, ever distinct but ever akin, might be just this starting point. The brothers, who together play as children, mourn as they bury their father, and celebrate as their children are united in marriage is a story that transcends two ancient literary characters. Jews, Christians, and Muslims – long assumed to be linked typologically to Isaac and Ishmael – have at their disposal the ability to embody their ancestors’ ability to inhabit the ambiguous space of historically-driven enmity and to play, mourn, and celebrate in the midst of such ambiguity.

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⁷⁶ Qur’ān 42:13f., *emphasis added*

⁷⁷ Hess, “Seth” in Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*; further distinction is necessary to differentiate Judaism from Christianity

⁷⁸ For a nuanced analysis of St. John of Damascus’s classification of Islam as a Christian heresy and its implications for ecumenism, see Griffith, Sydney H. *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 42f. and Sahas, Daniel J. *John of Damascus on Islam: The “Heresy of the Ishmaelites”* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Publishers, 1972)

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