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Mirror of Christendom

“For if anyone is a bearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.”

—The Epistle of James, 1:23-24

Deep in the pit of hell, the pilgrim Dante came across yet another chilling sight—a man walking with his torso split open from chin to groin, so that “his guts spilled out, with the heart / and other vital parts, and the dirty sack / that turns to shit (*merda*) whatever the mouth gulps down.” Like a motorist rubbernecking at an accident, Dante stared in fascinated horror, and the man began to speak:

“See how I tear myself!
See how Mahomet is deformed and torn!
In front of me, and weeping, Ali walks,
his face cleft from his chin to the crown” (*Inferno* 28.22-33).

The surprise in this scene is not the gruesomeness of Mohammed’s punishment. A descendant of Crusaders, Dante would not give a second thought to the sensitivities of Muslims, nor did he regard Muslims as fellow-worshippers of the God of Abraham. The surprise is the place

where this scene occurs, in the ninth Bolgia of Malebolgia, in the subcircle of hell reserved for schismatics. Mohammed is not among the idolaters or the pagans, but among sinners being punished for breaking off from the Christian Church, all of whom, appropriately enough, have their bodies rent as retribution for rending the body of Christ.

In treating Mohammed as a Christian schismatic, Dante was not inventing a new perspective (he rarely did), but presenting views widespread in his time. Many in the Western medieval world believed that Mohammed himself had apostatized from Christianity, and some even believed he had once been a cardinal.¹ Centuries before Dante, John of Damascus (675-749) treated Islam in the final section of his treatise *de Haeresibus*, calling it the “heresy of the Ishmaelites.” John wrote that Mohammed was influenced by an Arian monk named Bahira, who encouraged the spread of Islam by predicting that Mohammed would become a prophet.²

¹ Charles A. Singleton, *The Divine Comedy: Translation and Commentary* (6 vols.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), vol. 2, p. 503.

² Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The “Heresy of the Ishmaelites”* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), p. 73. Sahas discusses the disputed authenticity of the section of John’s treatise devoted to Islam (pp. 60-66), but even if the section was not from John, it was added to his treatise at an early date and thus provides important evidence of early Christian views of Islam.

Peter the Venerable, abbot of the famed abbey of Cluny during the twelfth century, hesitated over whether to call Islam a heresy or a form of paganism, “for I see them, now in the manner of heretics, take certain things from the Christian faith and reject other things; then—a thing which no heresy is described as ever having done—acting as well as teaching according to pagan custom.” Yet, Peter wrote treatises with titles like *Summa totius haeresis Saracenorum* (“Summary of all the heresies of the Saracens”) and *Liber contra sectam sive haeresim Saracenorum* (“A Book against the Sect or Heresy of the Saracens”), and he viewed Islam as a sum of all Christian heresies. According to Peter, Mohammed himself had been taught by a Nestorian monk named Sergius who “made him a Nestorian Christian,” and Mohammed’s teaching was a mish-mash of Sabellianism, Nestorianism, Manicheanism, and Judaism. False teaching was bad enough, but Peter was equally concerned with Muslim practice. Even if, as Peter concedes, the Qur’an records truths about the prophets and Jesus, Muslims reject the sacraments, which is something that “no one besides these heretics ever did.”³

These medieval treatments of Islam find little favor today, even among Christians, yet as a purely historical matter, the medieval accounts have some points in their favor. That Mohammed had contact with a Syrian monk is mentioned in the *hadith*, collections of Mohammed’s words and actions that serve for most Muslims as a second source of authority alongside the Qur’an.⁴ And it is clear that Mohammed had wider contact with Christians. One of the key themes of the Qur’an is a denial of the Trinity, since it is “far from his glory” for Allah “to beget a son” (Sura 4.171; cf. 2.115; 5.73, 116; 6.101; 9.30-31; 18.4-5;

³ James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 129-136, 144-145.

⁴ Sahas, *John of Damascus*, p. 73. As Sahas points out, the monk’s prophecy was frequently used by Muslim apologists to rebut the claim that Mohammed’s prophetic ministry had not been announced. For transliterations of Islamic technical terms, I have relied throughout this paper on Ian Richard Netton, *A Popular Dictionary of Islam* (London: Curzon, 1992).

25.2; 112.3). More generally, Nestorian Christianity had by Mohammed’s time spread through Arabia, Syria, Iraq, Persia, and eastward as far as China,⁵ and Monophysite Christians had founded churches in Syria and Egypt. Prior to the Islamic conquest of the Middle East and North Africa, those areas were predominantly Christian, if often heretically Christian. It is, furthermore, a vast oversimplification to suggest that these Christians submitted to the superior force of the Islamic sword, since many Christians greeted the Arabian conquest as a liberation, and willingly converted to Islam. Whatever the experience of individuals, as a region and as a culture, the Middle East and North Africa became Islamic by abandoning Christendom. The medieval perspective is true to this extent: The Islamic world is not pagan but apostate.

In addition to highlighting important historical factors, the medieval account of Islam also has the virtue of being a theological account. For modern religious scholarship, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Christianity, and all the rest are variations on a *single*, more basic phenomenon called “religion.” But this is worse than useless.⁶ For the Church, Islam cannot be considered another variation on a universal religious impulse but must be understood theologically, and addressed as both a theological and practical challenge. The practical problem is obvious. Over a millennium ago, the Middle East and North Africa were Islamicized and Arabicized, and, though medieval Christians withstood Islam’s advance into Europe, Christianity has made scant progress in the Islamic world. Far from retreating, in recent dec-

⁵ Laurence E. Browne, *The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia: From the Time of Muhammed till the Fourteenth Century* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1967), pp. 5, 50; Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), pp. 22, 40, 55-56; J. Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London: Longman, 1979), pp. 159-162; 280-282.

⁶ For a critique of this view of “religion,” see John Milbank, “The End of Dialogue,” in Gavin d’Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Marynoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), pp. 174-191.

ades Muslims have become a significant minority in Western Europe and the United States, and, of course, the rise of Islamism or radical Islam means that Islam has become a more direct threat to the West than at any time since Lepanto. Political difficulties aside, the practical question for the Church is, What can we do to break through the apparently impenetrable boundary of Islam and ensure that the gospel will be heard and triumph?

The theological problem is equally daunting, and more fundamental. It can be put this way: Islam's account of history has a place for Jesus and Christianity. To be sure, the Jesus of Islam is not the Jesus of the New Testament: He is not the divine Son incarnate, He was not crucified and raised (cf. Sura 4.157), and He is not reigning at the Father's right hand. Still, the prophet Jesus has a place in Muslim "redemptive history," and this poses the challenge to Christians: Has Christian theology been able to locate Islam within *its* history? Luther and Hal Lindsey have little in common, but they have this: Both were able to find Islam in the penumbra of John's Apocalypse. Dispensationalist and historicist views of Revelation fail on many counts, not least because of their marvelous elasticity, their capacity to discover in biblical prophecy explicit references to the Middle East threat *du jour*—everyone from Turks to Saddam Hussein, and no doubt bin Laden and John Walker Lindh as well. The failure of these approaches to prophecy only intensifies the question: Can Christians make theological sense of the persistence of Islam? Can we fit them into our story?

Though Islam does not meet any strict definition of "heresy," the medieval idea of Islam as a Christian heresy or as an apostasy from Christendom provides some clues to answering that question. Following up a few of those clues is the business of this paper.

I.

In this section, I explore two biblical perspectives that throw light on the rise and persistence of Islam. First, Scripture indicates that the Lord judged Israel by raising up parodic versions of Israel to plague Israel. When Yahweh wanted to call Israel to repentance, He held up a pseudo-Is-

rael as a mirror, and by examining herself in the mirror, Israel was supposed to see her blemishes and learn how to go about amending herself.

A key example comes in 1 Kings 11. At the height of his power, riches, and wisdom, Solomon fell into sin. Like Adam, he had been placed on an exalted throne, ruling over the kings of the earth, the lions subdued before him (cf. 1 Kgs. 10:18-20). Also like Adam, he grasped for forbidden fruit, taking wives and concubines from the nations that turned him from Yahweh to other gods (1 Kgs. 11:1-13). Solomon's sins determined the history of Israel for several centuries, but in the short term, Yahweh punished Solomon by raising up a series of adversaries, what the Hebrew Bible calls "satans" (11:14, 23): Hadad the Edomite; Rezon who became king of Aram; and Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who eventually ruled ten of Israel's tribes.

Scripture provides brief biographical portraits of each of these "satans," and each biography is strikingly familiar. Hadad was driven into Egypt during David's conquest of Edom, and there he gained the favor of Pharaoh, who gave him a land and a bride. As soon as he learned that David was dead, Hadad (rather brusquely) demanded that Pharaoh let him go, and he (presumably) returned to Edom, where he was an adversary to Solomon (11:14-22). Jeroboam's story runs along similar lines: Driven out of the land because of Solomon's hostility, Jeroboam fled to Egypt, where he remained until Solomon's death. Upon his return, he led a delegation that asked Rehoboam, Solomon's successor, to lighten the burden of labor on the population of Israel. When Rehoboam refused, ten tribes seceded from the house of David and made Jeroboam their first king. He quickly built shrines at Dan and Bethel, where Yahweh was worshiped through golden calves (11:26-12:33). In both of these cases, the story of the "satan" is a repetition of the story of Israel. Hadad and Jeroboam both fled to Egypt, both were welcomed by Pharaoh, both eventually made an "exodus" from Egypt. Jeroboam eventually became a king, and even built a temple.⁷

⁷ In addition, there are some ironic twists on the exodus story. In 1 Kings 12, Rehoboam fills the role of Pharaoh, a king who burdens the people without

Hovering behind the biographies of Rezon and Jeroboam is another narrative familiar to the original readers of 1 Kings. Rezon was opposed by his master, Hadadezer of Zobah, and fled his homeland. While in exile, he gathered a band of marauders and eventually marched into Damascus, where he began to rule over the Arameans (1 Kgs. 11:23-25). Rezon's story, clearly, is a replication of the story of David, who fled from Saul into the wilderness, gathered the disaffected of the land to him, and eventually established a capital city in Jerusalem.⁸ Jeroboam's story is similar: His promising career was cut short when Solomon learned about Ahijah's prophecy and sought to put Jeroboam to death (11:26-28, 40), and Jeroboam's scene with Ahijah is reminiscent of Samuel's prediction that Saul would yield his place to "your neighbor who is better than you" (1 Kgs. 11:29-39; cf. 1 Sam. 15:24-33). There is even an explicit parallel: Yahweh told Jeroboam that his royal house had the potential to be as long-lasting as the house of David (1 Kgs. 11:38).

In part, the point of these parallels is to pass implicit judgment on the sins of Solomon and Rehoboam. If Jeroboam's move from Egypt to Israel was an exodus and conquest, that casts Solomon and Rehoboam in the role of Canaanite kings—not surprisingly, since they had begun to worship like Canaanites (1 Kgs. 11:1-8; 14:21-24). But the text also gives some insight into the ironic justice of God's judgments. When the house of David fell into idolatry, Yahweh raised up another "David" and promised to establish his house. We may generalize: Still today, one of the ways Yahweh judges His people is by raising up a pseudo-people as a parody and mirror.⁹

relief, and Jeroboam is a new Moses, who leads ten tribes out of the "Egypt" of Solomon's kingdom. See Ian Provan, *1 and 2 Kings* (New International Bible Commentary #7; Hendrickson, 1995), pp. 103-108.

⁸ David's story is also a variation on the story of the nation; see my *A Son for Me: A Christian Commentary on the Book of Samuel* (Moscow: Canon, forthcoming).

⁹ Solomon's adversaries are not the only biblical examples of this pattern. David's sins were punished when Yahweh raised up Absalom, whose rise to the throne was a parody of David's own (for details, see again, *A Son for Me*). When Israel rejected the word of

There is a keen-edged justice to this, but Jeroboam's rise was also an object lesson for the house of David. Jeroboam proved himself a false David; he was not "complete with Yahweh" as David had been. Instead, Jeroboam established an unauthorized system of worship, an unauthorized priesthood, and an unauthorized festival calendar (1 Kgs. 12:25-33). His rebellion, however, should have alerted Rehoboam to his own failings. Not only did Rehoboam promote a more flagrant idolatry than Jeroboam, but he pursued religious policies that were as damaging as Jeroboam's, if not more so. Jeroboam, after all, saw that Israel had to be united in worship (1 Kgs. 12:26-27), and he accordingly established central sanctuaries and centralized worship. By contrast, Rehoboam, following his father's lead, promoted liturgical chaos (1 Kgs. 14:21-24), which could only lead to social and political fragmentation. Examining himself in the mirror that was Jeroboam, Rehoboam was supposed to learn, on the one hand, that he should reject Jeroboam's example of idolatry, and that, on the other hand, he should see the wisdom of Jeroboam's policies.

And so we come to the first perspective on Islam: The Lord raised up Islam as a parody or mirror of Christianity, which is designed to expose our failings and to call us to faithfulness.¹⁰ Indeed, Mohammed's life strikingly recapitulates the history of Israel. Called (so he claimed) by Allah, Mohammed led his people out of Mecca to Medina, established his rule in Medina, and then conquered a promised land, which included his

the prophets, Yahweh turned to Nineveh, which repented at the preaching of Jonah (Jonah 3), and when Nineveh later turned from Yahweh, the city is described as an unfaithful bride, language normally reserved for Jerusalem or Samaria (Nahum 3:1-7). This comes to some kind of climax in the New Covenant, when Yahweh definitively fulfills His threat to turn to a "people that is not a people" and make them His people.

¹⁰ In a sense, the thesis advanced here is a theological rendition of the Pirenne thesis, according to which the medieval world was shaped in opposition to the "other" of Islam. See Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (trans. Bernard Miall; New York: Barnes and Noble, repr. 1992).

original hometown of Mecca.¹¹ Within a century after his death, the promised land has expanded to imperial proportions, including Persia, Iraq, and North Africa. In the sixth century, Yahweh tore the robe that was Eastern Christendom, and gave a large swath to Mohammed. Mohammed is wearing it still.

Before we examine more fully how Islam is a parody of Christianity and of Christendom, and what we can learn by examining ourselves in this mirror, we need to explore a second biblical perspective on Islam, namely, that Islam is a global and systematic form of Judaizing. This is not just to say that Islam was shaped by Mohammed's contact with Judaism, though it is true enough that Islam's debt to the Judaism of the Talmud is profound and fundamental. Judaism had had a marked presence in the Arabian Peninsula for centuries before Mohammed, and there was even a Jewish state among the Himyarites in Southwestern Arabia.¹² Further, the Elkasite movement of the second century A.D. combined Jewish and Christian elements into a proto-Islamic system,¹³ though there appears to be no evidence of any direct link with Islam. Scholars who have investigated the sources of the Qur'an have noted similarities between its accounts and Talmudic and apocryphal renditions of biblical events.¹⁴

¹¹ Mormonism is a parody of Christianity in similar ways.

¹² Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last 2000 Years* (New York: Scribner, 1995), p. 45. Lewis writes that in the early sixth century, Arabia was divided between Christians and Jews; Mohammed was probably born around 570.

¹³ For Judaism in Arabia, see Trimmingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs*, pp. 248-251; for the Elkasites, see Cragg, *Arab Christian*, pp. 37-38. Cragg's description indicates that Elkasai 1) produced a book of revelations that bears some similarity to the Qur'an; 2) followed Jewish rites such as circumcision, facing Jerusalem during prayer, and the Sabbath; 3) practiced baptism; and 4) taught that Christ was a "celestial being present in the actual Jesus but frequently born into chosen personalities in the mystery of prophetism."

¹⁴ The first major study of the Jewish sources of Islam was Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islam* (trans. F. M. Young; New York: Ktav, [1896] 1970). See also Alfred Guillaume, "The Influence of Judaism on Islam," in

What unites Islam is not doctrine so much as ritual, and ritually, Islam has a number of affinities with the ancient Israelite religion and with later Judaism. Though circumcision is not prescribed by the Qur'an, Muslims practice it,¹⁵ and the high point of the *hajj* (pilgrimage) is the "Great Sacrifice" (*'Id-al-adha*), which occurs annually and requires every Muslim male to sacrifice a goat (on sacrifice, cf. Sura 5:97; 22:33-34).¹⁶

Edwyn R. Bevan and Charles Singer, eds., *The Legacy of Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), pp. 129-171; Abraham Katsh, *Judaism in Islam: Biblical and Talmudic Backgrounds of the Koran and Its Commentaries: Suras II and III* (New York: NYU Press, 1954); Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

¹⁵ According to medieval Byzantine critics of Islam, Muslims took circumcision over directly from Judaism. See Adel-Theodore Khoury, *Polemique Byzantine contra l'Islam (VIIIe-XIIIe)* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), pp. 226-229.

¹⁶ M. E. Combs-Schilling, *Sacred Performances: Islam, Sexuality, and Sacrifice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), explores the centrality of shed blood in Moroccan concepts of sanctity and sex and describes the rites of the "great sacrifice" (on Mohammed's reenactment of Abraham's sacrifice of a ram, see pp. 56-58). See also the important article by J. Bottum, "What Violence is For," *First Things* (December 2001), who applies René Girard's theories about sacrifice to radical Islam, suggesting that the movement revives itself constantly by shedding blood. And note the suggestive comments of Kenneth Cragg, who raises the question of whether Islam "captured and fulfilled the Arab spirit," especially in its affirmation of the right of retaliation: "family and clan loyalty and the pattern of the feud, with their claim on male prowess, were basic assumptions of life. Islam related to them by fulfilling the will to sacrifice and the valor of combat in a larger cause" (*Arab Christian*, p. 33). Putting all this together, we might surmise that Islamic terrorism, though most immediately arising from the eighteenth-century Wahhabi movement and therefore a divergent stream of Islam, is in continuity with Islam as a whole. Islamic terrorists who seek renewal by blood are simply following an extreme form of Islam, which renews itself annually with the blood of goats. At least, Islam as a whole cries out for a Girardian analysis; perhaps it has already been done.

The Qur'an, further, proscribes certain meats ("Forbidden you is carrion and blood, and the flesh of the swine, and whatsoever has been killed in the name of some other God," Sura 5.3; cf. Sura 23.51; Lev. 11), and prescribes ritual washings before worship ("O believers, when you stand up for the service of prayer wash your face and hands up to the elbows, and also wipe your heads, and wash your feet up to the ankles. If you are in a state of seminal pollution, then bathe and purify yourself well," Sura 5.6; cf. Lev. 15). M. E. Combs-Schilling description of the ritual life of early Islam is worthy of full quotation:

Early Madinan [i.e., in Medina] preachings and ritual enactments stressed the lines of unity between Islam and the other monotheisms. For instance, Muhammed instituted a fast for Muslims on 'Ashura', the tenth day of Muharram, in echo of the Jewish fast celebrated on the Day of Atonement, the tenth of Tishri. In Makka [Mecca], Muslims had prayed only twice a day, but in Madina, Muhammed instituted another prayer, so that Muslims prayed three times a day, as did Jews. . . . And, at first, Muhammed enjoined Muslims to conduct these prayers like Jews, facing Jerusalem, a city all three monotheisms regard as holy.

Yet when it became clear that there were not going to be mass conversions of Jews and Christians, Muhammed began to use rituals to distinguish Islam, to mark off its sacred boundaries. He dramatically altered the direction of prayer, calling upon Muslims to turn around, to no longer face Jerusalem, which lay to Madina's north, but rather to pray facing Makka, a city which lay in the opposite direction, to Madina's south. Makka was a city that was distinctly Islam's own. The number of prayers was eventually changed so that Muslims were called upon to pray five times a day rather than three. Muhammed instituted a whole month of fasting from dawn to dusk, Ramadan. He distinguished Muslims through the style of

prayer. Whereas Christians were summoned by bells and Jews by trumpets, Muslims were summoned by the sound of the human voice crying out "Allah Akbar," God is great. Furthermore, Muhammed settled upon Friday as the Muslim sabbath.¹⁷

Place yourself in the position of a Syrian or Egyptian Christian of the seventh century, and it will be clear that conversion to Islam would mean nothing less than a return to life in bondage under the "elements of the world" (Gal. 4:1-11). That is, converting to Islam meant becoming a Judaizer. Peter the Venerable was right: Islam shows itself as apostasy most clearly in its rejection of Christian rites and its embrace of archaic "sacraments."

For many Protestants, first-century Judaizers are seen mainly as advocates of works-righteousness, late medieval Catholics before their time. Though ideas of meritorious righteousness were circulating in first-century Judaism (see Phil. 3:1-11), the basic thrust of Judaizers lay elsewhere. A Judaizer might be a perfectly sound Lutheran, might believe that Jesus was the eternal Son incarnate, and might believe that salvation was

¹⁷ *Sacred Performances*, pp. 53-54. As this shows, Islam is not solely a Judaizing movement, and even shares a number of ritual/structural features with Christianity. For example, unlike ancient Israel, Islam has no sacred order of clergy and no centralized sanctuary (though the *Ka'ba* in Mecca is something like a locus of sanctity, since it is the focus of daily prayer and the center of the celebrations of the *hajj*; it is described as the "sacred house" in Sura 5.97). Yet, as Daniel Pipes has pointed out, Islam is a thorough rejection of Paul: "From the Islamic viewpoint, Jesus' mission was valid but misunderstood by his disciples. Paul and the others distorted his message, worshiping the man instead of heeding the revelation. In Muslim eyes, Paul's entire teaching is nonsense. Rejecting Paul means discarding righteousness through faith and return to sacred law" (*In the Path of God: Islam and Political Power* [New York: Basic Books, 1983], p. 35). One last semi-random observation: Separation of the teaching of Jesus and Paul is one of the pillars of modern biblical criticism, which makes Mohammed perhaps the first higher critic. Is it any accident that Spinoza came from heavily Islamicized Spain?

through the cross. What the Judaizer would not admit was that the cross and resurrection marked the beginning of a new world, a world radically different from that which died on Golgotha (see Gal. 1:3-4; 5:11-16). Yes, the Judaizer would say, Jesus was the Messiah, crucified for the sins of the world; but still, we must keep Torah, avoid contamination from Gentiles, be careful about who is sitting next to us at meals, and practice circumcision. Judaizers denied the present reality of the new creation. Judaizing denied that the gospel is an eschatological message, that it is a message about an ending and a beginning.

In this sense Islam is fundamentally a Judaizing movement. To be sure, Islam teaches, far more emphatically than first-century Judaism, salvation through works (Sura 9.4: "God loves those who take heed for themselves"). But the most important heresy of Islam is the denial that Jesus brought in a new creation. Islam has a place for Jesus and the Qur'an even speaks of Jesus' "gospel," but the Islamic Jesus was no more than a prophet, and after his non-crucifixion and non-resurrection, the world went trundling on as it had since creation. Even Mohammed did not bring in a new creation. He saw himself as a messenger from the one God, another in the line of prophets from Noah to Jesus, sent to call Jews and Christians from their various errors back to the monotheistic faith of Abraham (Sura 2.135). He was emphatically not the proclaimer of a new faith, much less a new creation. James Kritzeck puts it well: "Islam was seen not as a new covenant but as an urgently needed restoration of the old."¹⁸ When Muslims look to Ishmael as their forebear, they are more Pauline than they realize, for Ishmael is the symbolic Judaizer (Gal. 4:21-31).¹⁹ Medieval Christians were strictly correct to speak of the "heresy of the Ishmaelites" or the "religion of the Hagarenes."

Combining the two biblical perspectives discussed above, we have these clues for understanding Islam's place in Christian history: Islam is a parody of Christianity, and, more particularly,

Islam is a Judaizing parody of Christianity. If we want to be more responsive than Rehoboam, we have to take a good look at the face in the mirror, and not ignore the warts.

II.

One premise of the above analysis is that Islam, which conquered some of the most vibrant areas of early Christianity, was and is a judgment of God, and therefore that Christians must recognize that Islam's rise and continuing success results from the failures of the Church. Laurence E. Browne concluded that the "eclipse of Christianity in Asia" was due to the "feebleness" of the Church's faith and witness. It will not do, he points out, to say that Christianity failed to make headway because of the power of the scimitar: "persecution to the death does not stop a real Christian movement."²⁰ The footprints that we traced back to the criminal's hideout turn out to be our own.

The exact nature of our crime, however, is not so obvious. It has been suggested that Islam is a judgment on Eastern Christianity's attraction to icons, and will continue until the unbiblical decision of the so-called seventh ecumenical council is reversed. Though this might account for the persistence of Islam in Eastern Christendom, it fails to explain Islam's resurgence in the modern West. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy offered the intriguing hypothesis that Islam was a judgment on the Church for her inability to agree about the date of Easter, since without a unified holiday the Church had no unified time.²¹

The circumstances of Islam's rise are of less significance than the fact that it continues to function as a parody of Christianity, a distorting mirror that exposes by exaggerating the blemishes of Christendom. Ultimately, these blemishes

¹⁸ *Peter the Venerable*, pp. 136-137.

¹⁹ With Shi'a Islam, leadership is tied with genealogy, a link with the geneologically-based priesthood of the Old Covenant (cf. Heb. 7).

²⁰ Browne, *Eclipse of Christianity*, p. 63.

²¹ The Council of Nicea met to discuss two issues: Arianism and the date of Easter. The Council agreed on a Christological formula, and thus brought intellectual and doctrinal unity to the Church; but it refused to establish a uniform celebration for Easter. Still laboring under the Greek idea that thought is superior to action, they placed too little emphasis on unity of practice.

all boil down to the Church's failure to live and proclaim the gospel, our unwillingness to stake our lives on the wager that we have entered a new creation. In general, this failure is in two directions: On the one hand, we are faced with a Judaizing parody of the Church because we have become a Judaizing parody of the Church; on the other hand and somewhat paradoxically, we are faced with a Judaizing parody of the Church because we are not nearly Jewish enough.²² Our simultaneous Judaizing and de-Judaizing of Christian faith is evident in four areas: Christological, ecclesiological, sacramental, and political.²³ We will examine each of these in turn, and each will provide both a richer theological perspective on Islam and an insight into what it will take for Christianity to respond fully to Islam.

First, as noted above, Islam arose in a region of Christendom plagued by Christological heresy, of both Nestorian and Monophysite varieties,²⁴ and such Christological confusion is both Judaizing and unHebraic. It is Judaizing because it implicitly denies what Nicea was designed to safeguard, namely, the gospel announcement that Jesus brings final and full redemption. Nicea determined that the unsurpassable gospel of the New Testament depended on the fact that Jesus was the eternal Son of God incarnate as man. As T. F. Torrance has put it, "If God himself has not come to be one with us in the incarnation, then the love of God finally falls short of coming all the way to be one with us, and is not ultimately

love."²⁵ Both sides of that formula are equally crucial: For the gospel to be good news, *God* must come down to us, and God must come down *to be one with us*. Both Nestorianism and Monophysitism teach a truncated gospel because they present a truncated Christ—Nestorianism because God doesn't quite become one with us, and Monophysitism because God makes us one of Him.

Early Christological heresies are unHebraic (or, to say the same thing, Hellenic) in the same way that all early heresies were unHebraic. From Arius to Apollinaris to Nestorius, all Christological heresies arose from a sniffy Greek disdain for any God who lowered Himself to come into close contact with time and created reality, a God who mucks Himself up with flesh and blood and clay and spittle. Had they taken their fundamental theology from the Pentateuch rather than from Plato, they would have discerned that the God of Israel has been moving within time since the first ray of light, that He has been mixing it up with tyrants and arrogant despots for centuries, that it would be the most natural thing in the world for Him to become man. They would have realized that God's hands were dirty before man had hands.

From this angle, Islam parodies Christianity's pallid confession of the incarnation, which appeared and continues to appear not only in Christological heresy (Arianism is rampant in modern Christianity) but also in our inability to articulate a fully Trinitarian gospel. Too often, Christian apologetics to and polemics toward Islam have worked from a basically Islamic unitarianism, a theology that blurs the antithesis at the very point where the antithesis must be least blurry. At the very point where Christianity should drive Islam from the field, Christian apologetics has turned apologetic. Mohammed likely never heard a clear proclamation of who Jesus is, and, consequently, of who the Christian God is. It is likely that Islam still has not.

Point one on the Church's to-do list: Begin to preach, teach, and live a fully Trinitarian Christianity.

²² In a sense, Islam, with its exalted, inaccessible, monadic God is a parody of the Church's Hellenization as well. The influence of Islamic theology proper on the development of Christian theology is a point well worth pursuing, but that cannot unfortunately be done here.

²³ Though the following comments are framed as historical observations, my main concern is not with the origins of Islam but with its import for the contemporary Church. From the premise, "Islam is a rebuke to Christianity" I move on to ask, "How?"

²⁴ Islam is more Ebionite than Nestorian or Monophysite; like the early Ebionite heretics, it simply denies that Jesus is or claimed to be God. But the fact that Mohammed was surrounded by Christological confusion is not a minor point.

²⁵*The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), p. 7.

Second, when Islam first began to conquer the Arabian Peninsula, Arabia had long been a dispensable pawn in conflicts between Byzantium and Persia, and when the Byzantines retreated, you could almost hear the swoosh as Christians from Ethiopia rushed into the vacuum to take their place.²⁶ During those periods when Arabia was not useful to the Byzantines, it was simply ignored. Christianity thus entered Arabia not as good news but as a sporadically invading, sporadically indifferent, but always alien political power. Arabs might have been excused if they came away with the impression that the interests and agenda of the Byzantine empire were identical with the interests and agenda of the Christian Church.

Many seventh-century Christians embraced Islam because it represented a liberation from the overbearing lordship of Byzantium. Christians converted and fought alongside Mohammed in some of the early Muslim conquests, and former Christians married into the families of the early caliphs. For Arabs, Islam was more evangelical than Christianity.²⁷ Modern missionaries to Islamic nations continue to be seen as imperial invaders, and as a result have had little impact. There is black humor in the fact that during the nineteenth century, Protestant Christian mission-

²⁶ See the summary of these developments in Lewis, *The Middle East*, ch. 2.

²⁷ Cf. Browne, *Eclipse of Christianity*, p. 39: "For the Monophysites of Syria the predominant feeling at the Muslim invasion appears to have been a sense of relief that they were now able to practice their religion unhindered by the persecution of the Romans." Browne goes on to quote Michael the Syrian, a Monophysite twelfth-century Patriarch of Antioch, who claimed that "the God of vengeance" raised up "from the region of the south the Children of Ishmael to deliver us from the hands of the Romans." Ditto for the Nestorians: "Nestorian tradition has it that the Christians were glad at the Arab invasion" (p. 40). In Egypt, the Monophysites also rejoiced at the Arab invasion; a thirteenth-century work records that "Christians suffered great persecution" from the Byzantine emperors, until "the Hanifite nation appeared, and humbled the Romans [Byzantines], and slew many of them, and took possession of the whole land of Egypt. Thus the Jacobite [Monophysite] Christians were freed from the tyranny" (p. 40).

aries to Islam "converted" far more Christians than Muslims.²⁸

Further, in the sixth century the Church in the Middle East was deeply divided. Byzantine Melkites, Nestorian, and Monophysite (Jacobite) Christians contended with one another, but according to later writers, the contention had little to do with the purity of the faith. In 893, Eliyya Jauhari, a Nestorian eventually consecrated bishop of Damascus, reported on the strife between Byzantines and Nestorians:

whereas they differ in word they agree in meaning; and although they contradict one another outwardly they agree inwardly. And all of them follow one faith, and believe in one Lord, and serve one Lord. There is no difference between them in that, nor any distinction except from the point of view of party feelings and strife.²⁹

Petty bickering was unlikely to attract converts, and, more fundamentally, division of this sort was a denial of the gospel that announced the union of Jew and Greek into "one new man," a contradiction of baptism that proclaimed the end of ancient divisions by union of all in Christ (Gal. 3:28; Eph 2:11-22).

Again, the early history of Islam exposes our Judaizing, the Church's failure to live according to the Spirit and our preference for the "fleshly" strife of the old creation.³⁰ And it exposes our inadequate Hebraism as well. Islam's unity should not be exaggerated; it is divided between Sunni and Shi'ite, and subdivided further within those two large camps. Yet, even with its divisions Islam provides an overarching structure that transcends national and ethnic boundaries. In the main, Islamic nations recognize that they are part

²⁸ For the difficulties of Western missions in Islamic countries, see H. B. Dehqai-Tafti, *The Hard Awakening* (London: SPCK, 1981), ch. 2; Antonie Wessels, *Arab and Christian? Christians in the Middle East* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995), pp. 165-187.

²⁹ Quoted in Browne, *Eclipse of Christianity*, p. 8.

³⁰ Note the connection of "fleshly" behavior and Judaizing in Galatians

of a larger whole, and the individual Muslim has a sense of being part of a “people of God” that is not confined to one locale, but embraces the globe. In this way, Islam appears more Christian than the Church, especially the modern churches, which can hardly see beyond their denominational or national boundaries. The Church does not see herself as a global nation; in short, we do not recognize that we are the new Israel.

Point two: Don’t forget that we are Christians and churchmen, not agents of American foreign policy. Pursue the visible and global unity of the Church.

Third, in the early centuries the Christianity of North Africa, and especially of Syria, was radically ascetic. Pillar-sitting Simon Stylites was a Syrian monk, and Eastern monasticism as a whole began with Anthony’s retreat into the blistering sands of the Egyptian desert.³¹ Ascetic monasticism undermined the gospel in two ways. First, to retreat into the desert meant giving up the obligations of life in community and the obligations of culture-building. To be a holy man, a true and profound Christian, meant to retreat from culture. But this was an implicit denial of Christ’s Lordship over all things, which is the basic confession of the apostolic Church. Second, Eastern monasticism suppressed the joy that the gospel released. When God decided to save the world, He sent Jesus to eat and drink, but the followers of Jesus introduced inhuman fasts, isolation, silence, and self-affliction. Ascetics were as tin-eared to the festive music of the gospel as the Pharisees of first-century Jerusalem.

Islam was in part a reaction to and in part an extension of these trends within Arabian, Syrian, and Egyptian Christianity. It was a reaction in the sense that Islam has always been not merely a religion but a civilization. Though Islam has its holy

men and sages, its ascetics and mendicants, it has always been emphasized that one can be a good Muslim without living at the top of a pillar. As many Muslim apologists point out, the faithful Muslim serves Allah in his daily life, as he submits to Allah in his eating and drinking, in his marriage and raising children, in work and in worship. Sura 107 pronounces woes on anyone who devotes himself to prayer and neglects acts of mercy, and among the targets of this prophetic warning were Christian monks who abandoned their fellowmen (cf. 57.27). On the other hand, Islam perpetuates the asceticism of Eastern Christianity. At the center of the Church’s life is a table filled with bread and wine, but the fast of Ramadan is much more central in Islam. Looking in the mirror should, again, make us wince, for the Church has for centuries been celebrating the Supper as if it were Ramadan. This is not just a minor issue of liturgical tone; it is a denial of the gospel; it raises a Judaizing doubt about the Bridegroom’s arrival.

Point three: Put the feast at the center of the Church’s life, and do the Supper the way it was meant to be done—often, and joyously.

Finally, Islam, as noted just above, has always understood itself not merely as a religion but as a politics and a civilization, and this vision has been especially prominent in modern Islam and Islamism. “Islam” does not refer merely to a set of practices and beliefs, but to that portion of the world that has been subdued to Allah; it is a contraction of “House of Islam,” the “*Dar al-Islam*,” which is opposed in Islamic jurisprudence to the “*Dar al-Harb*,” the “house of war.” Allah, the Muslim believer says, will not be satisfied until the world has entered the *Dar al-Islam*, until every nation adopts the *shari’a* as its standard of righteousness, until every ruler gives ear to the judgments of the *ulama*, until every child memorizes and recites the Qur’an from his earliest years. The Muslim, in short, believes that in his religion inheres an all-embracing politics, intellectual culture, and nurture.³²

³¹ Browne, *Eclipse of Christianity*, pp. 66-87. For a brilliant evocation of early monasticism, see the early chapters of Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*. Kenneth Cragg suggests that Qur’an, Sura 24, actually alludes to Arabian Christian monks when it refers to “men whom neither trading nor merchandizing diverts from the remembrance of God nor from the performance of the prayer-rite” (*The Arab Christian*, p. 42).

³² In V. S. Naipaul’s account of his travels “among the believers,” he frequently records his visits to Islamic colleges, seminaries, and universities. The amount of money and effort devoted to Islamic scholarship is staggering.

And this vision is not purely theoretical. In a number of Muslim nations, an Islamic civilization has been erected in the face of expansive Western secularism, and this is a most impressive achievement.³³ In fact, the specific threat to the United States can be traced to precisely this achievement. Members of the Taliban were trained in the schools of Wahhabi Islam, an eighteenth-century “Puritan” movement that has long been promoted by the Saudis.³⁴ And in Iran, to take another example, Islam continues to shape political life. This is not to say that such Islamic civilization is always agreeable to the people who live within it. Many Iranians chafe under the rule of the clerics, and Iran has in any case always divided its loyalties between its ancient Persian heritage and its Islamic identity. Yet, Islam is a threat to the West today precisely because it is a civilization, a politics and a paideia, and not merely a “religion.”

This helps us understand something of the power that Islam has to hold its adherents. Sociologists of knowledge talk about social orders as “plausibility structures,” by which they mean social and political arrangements that reinforce certain beliefs and discourage or exclude others. Liberal democracy, for example, encourages a certain kind of world view and a certain style of public engagement (“nice” and “tolerant”), which is different from the world view and style promoted by medieval Christendom. Sociologically, Islam is an all-embracing plausibility structure. Everything that surrounds a Muslim in the *Dar al-Islam* reinforces his faith: Calls to prayer ring out

publicly five times daily, his education includes learning and recitation of the Qur’an, universities seek to understand the whole of human knowledge from the perspective of Islam, and (in a total repudiation of First Amendment restrictions) political and legal practices are shaped by the *shari’a*. Until this plausibility structure is damaged or destroyed, it seems unlikely that the Church will be able to make much progress in Islam.

Several trends suggest that there is some hope for progress. The fact that millions of Muslims are now living in the West gives Christians an unprecedented opportunity for mission, since we now deal with Muslims outside the reinforcing cultural and political apparatus of Islam. We no longer need to enter *Dar al-Islam* to encounter them; they have invaded the *Dar al-Harb*, where we can engage them more readily. Whatever the fortunes of the “war on terrorism,” American military power could have the positive effect of weakening the hold that Islam has on cultural and political life in the Middle East world. And for all the evils of Western pop culture, perhaps the Lord will use its global spread in a similar way. We may someday have to deal with cheerful Arab nihilists rather than grim Arab terrorists, in other words, with Arabs who are more like our unbelieving neighbors.

Islam’s all-embracing vision is a rebuke to modern Christianity. Once upon a time, Christians saw their faith as equally all-embracing. Whatever the failures of medieval Christianity, retreating pietism was not one of them. Theologians attempted to make sense of the latest scientific and philosophical findings from the viewpoint of Christian faith; kings and leaders were as power-hungry as they are today, but they recognized at least that there was a King to whom they were accountable; even monks were adventurers and builders of cities. That vision all but evaporated in modern Christianity. “Religious” wars gave a pretext to politicians to eliminate theology from politics, and to pursue politics as a science and practice of pure power. Scientific advances were believed to undermine the biblical picture of the world, and intellectual life gradually moved away from its moorings in theology and Scripture. Monks, and not just monks, gave up building cities and became

³³ To see how impressive it is, take a moment to think of a similar achievement in modern Christianity. Hint: There aren’t any.

³⁴ In a PBS interview, Bernard Lewis of Princeton pointed out that the money that funds the “seminaries” that train Muslim radicals comes from American gas pumps. Not for the first time, we are funding our worst enemies. For the theological background of the Taliban, see M. J. Gohari, *The Taliban: Ascent to Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. pp. 26-43. The role of Wahhabi ideology in the rise of Saudi Arabia is recounted in Alexei Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia* (Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 2000), Part One.

monks indeed. Whatever plausibility structure Christendom provided has crumbled, and millions of people now grow up in the former nations of Christendom without the slightest exposure to Christianity in any form.³⁵ Christendom shed its Hebraic attachment to culture.

This too is a Judaizing denial of the gospel. At the heart of the gospel is the announcement that Jesus, the Crucified One, has been raised to be Lord of all. If that has happened, then, as Oliver O'Donovan has argued at length, we should expect the nations to become worshipers of this Lord.³⁶ But Christians have largely given up this expectation, and have certainly given up the demand that the nations bow before the Son. We act as if the cross and resurrection left the world unchanged.

Point four on the to-do list: Revive Christendom.

III.

This model has led to a simple four-point program for resisting Islam—simple, but impossible. Or, rather, impossible if the gospel is not true. But the gospel is true, Jesus did die and rise again, the bridegroom has come, He is enthroned in the heavenlies, and what now matters is a new creation. Given that, it is not impossible but inevitable. The great lesson to

³⁵ Legal scholarship illustrates the point with particular clarity. Islamic scholarship is at one time legal and theological, and some of the main school divisions among Islamic intellectuals have less to do with theology in the Western sense than with different modes of legal interpretation. Though Christians never did, and never could, treat legal issues in the same manner as Islam, it is still true that from the Church fathers to the modern period, Christians sought to bring theology to bear on legal and political questions. Modern Christianity's hostility to casuistry, and to law generally, is another flaw highlighted by the Islamic "mirror of Christendom." For the development of Islamic views of law, religion, and politics, see Lewis, *The Middle East*, chs. 8, 12-13. Daniel Pipes, *In the Path of God*, examines the public and political dimensions of Islam in the modern world.

³⁶ *Desire of Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. ch. 6.

learn from Islam is the one that Luther suggested. When he attacked the Crusades in the Ninety-Five Theses, he explained, he "did not mean that we are not to fight against the Turk." Instead, "we should first mend our ways and cause God to be gracious to us."³⁷

Still, there's a lot to do. So, Let's Roll.

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³⁷ Quoted by J. Paul Rajashekar, "Luther and the Challenge of Islam," available online at http://www.ltsp.edu/news_events/2001-2002/010911tragedy/luther_islam_printable.html. Rajashekar quotes from *Luther's Works*, 32:90.