

The Relevance of Islamic Theology

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ISLAM IS AND WILL CONTINUE TO BE one of Christianity's greatest challenges.¹ Certainly there are other pressing issues. Regardless of how one prioritizes them, though, Islam should remain high on the list. The reasons for this are many. Demographics, economics, and geopolitics all play a significant part;² but for all the problems they raise there is a deeper one that is only beginning to rear its ugly head: Islamic theology.

This may sound extravagant or alarmist, but consider this: Islam is being marketed as a peaceful inclusive religion that is underpinned by a natural and rational theology. Moreover, it is increasingly asserting itself as a corrective to the excesses and innovations introduced into Christianity. Very recently Muslim apologists have been citing Western scholarship—from Walter Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* to Bart Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus*—to back up these claims. Hence, as Abdul Saleeb puts it,

Muslims . . . feel a great sense of intellectual justification for their rejection of orthodox Christianity. They can point to the fact that the theological challenges that they have brought against Christianity for most of their history have been echoed by Western liberal tradition in biblical studies for at least the past two hundred years.³

It is imperative in preparing for inevitable encounters with Islam to be acquainted with its underlying theology. Failure to do so, wrote Robert W. Yarbrough, "is a strategic error," for it will guarantee a wholly inadequate and, at best, flaccid response on the part of Christians as they face a "religious future to some extent already with us." Yarbrough adds, writing nearly two decades ago, that this future may be "one which may see an attempt to reduplicate the Arab conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries."⁴

Recent events suggest Yarbrough's words were prescient. This is not to suggest that there is currently an organized attempt on the part of some sovereign Muslim state to overrun the United States. This is no re-creation of the burgeoning Arab empire of the four caliphs (632–661) and Umayyads (661–750).

There are, though, certainly violent non-state actors—Al-Qaeda being the most notorious—who have this as a long-term goal.⁵ There are also others within the United States itself who

seek, through nonviolent means, the gradual Islamization of America.⁶ But the point is this: Islam and its theology are with us to stay.

Demographic facts alone indicate this. Just twenty years ago when Yarbrough urged Christian awareness of Islamic theology, there were about 500 million Muslims in the world. Today, there are over 1.3 billion. In the United States, where there were thirty mosques fewer than twenty years ago, there are now over two thousand. In Canada there are now more Muslim teenagers than there are Protestant. In light of all this, the theology of Islam must be taken seriously as it has become extremely relevant.

So what is Islam? The term itself is derived from the Arabic root *salam*, and literally means submission to Allah the eternal, uncreated, and singular (in essence and in person) creator (*Qur'an* 112:1–4). A person or entity in a state of submission or

1. C. George Fry, "The Witness of the Cross and the Islamic Crescent," in *The Theology of the Cross for the Twenty-First Century: Signposts for a Multicultural Witness*, ed. Alberto L. Garcia and A. R. Victor Raj (St. Louis: Concordia, 2002), 83–102.
2. See, for example, Mark Steyn's *America Alone: The End of the World as We Know It* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2006). One will, however, want to compare his provocative argument with Philip Jenkins's *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) as well as Richard John Neuhaus's "The Much Exaggerated Death of Europe," *First Things*, no. 173 (May 2007): 32–38.
3. Abdul Saleeb, "Islam," in *To Everyone an Answer: A Case for the Christian Worldview*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith et al. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 354. See Saleeb (with R. C. Sproul), *The Dark Side of Islam* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003), 9–14. For recent examples see especially the work of Louay Fatoohi: *The Mystery of the Historical Jesus* (Birmingham: Luna Plena, 2007) and *The Mystery of the Crucifixion* (Birmingham: Luna Plena, 2008). For the historical origins and early precedents of this relatively new turn in Muslim apologetic strategies, see Christine Schirrmacher's *Mit den Waffen des Gegners: Christlich-Muslimische Kontroversen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert, dargestellt am Beispiel der Auseinandersetzung um Karl Gottlieb Pfanders 'Mizân al-haqq' und Rahmatullâh ibn Halîl al-'Utmânî al-Kairânawîs 'Izhâr al-haqq' und der Diskussion über das Barnabasevangelium* (Berlin: K. Schwarz Verlag, 1992).
4. Robert W. Yarbrough, "New Testament Christology and the Jesus of Islam," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 14 (1990): 125.
5. See especially Steven Emerson, *Jihad Incorporated: A Guide to Militant Islam in the US* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2006).
6. See Robert Spencer, *Stealth Jihad: How Radical Islam is Subverting America without Guns or Bombs* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2008).

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obedience to him is, according to the participle form of *salam*, a Muslim.

While these terms do not appear in the historical record until the seventh century,⁷ Muslims do not see their religion as one born only then in Arabia. They do not consider their faith, as most encyclopedic descriptions put it, as the youngest of the monotheistic religions. Muslims believe that Islam, a religious disposition characterized by submission to the creator, has therefore existed from the beginning of creation. In fact, it is often described as a natural religion.⁸

Islam's chief concern is the submission of human beings to Allah.

For Muslims it is *the* natural religion (*din al-fitra*): the religion that was woven by Allah into creation. The influential Muslim ideologue Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi (1903–1979) boldly claimed that all of nature bore witness to this fact. He wrote:

Everyone can see that the universe we live in is an orderly universe. There is law and order among all the units that comprise this universe. Everything is assigned a place in a grand scheme which is working in a magnificent and superb way. . . .

This powerful, all-pervasive law, which governs all that comprises the universe, from the tiniest specks of dust to the magnificent galaxies in high heavens, is the law of God, the Creator and Ruler of the universe. As the entire creation obeys the law of God, the whole universe, therefore literally follows the religion of Islam—for Islam signifies nothing but obedience and submission to Allah, the Lord of the universe.⁹

This is precisely what the *Qur'an* claims. Allah reveals himself through evidences or signs (*ayat*), which, in addition to testifying to his existence, “manifest all we need to know about

God and about our rightful place in relationship to God.”¹⁰ Islam's chief concern, then, is the submission of human beings to Allah.

The problem with human beings is that unlike the rest of creation men and women have a limited free will. Most of creation, perforce, submits to the laws of the universe and therefore submits to God. Humans, however, have “been given freedom of thought, choice, and action,”¹¹ but for whatever reasons the signs of God have by themselves “mostly failed to elicit the appropriate response from human beings.”¹² This is not the result of a depraved moral state inherent in humanity, for there is no concept of original sin in Islam.¹³

There is a fall, but it is a literal fall from heaven to earth. The story goes as follows: During Allah's act of creating the cosmos, which occurred over the course of six days (*Qur'an* 7:54), a row emerged after he informed the angels of his intention to create humankind as his representative authority—his *khalifa* (from which the term caliph is derived)—on earth. The angels questioned the wisdom of this and asked him why he would hand over his authority to humans knowing they would, by virtue of their free will coupled with their fallibility, be prone to corruption and the shedding of blood. But Allah's mind was made up, and his response to the angels was curt: “I know that which you do not know” (2:30).

Allah vested humanity with more than just *earthly* authority. He also commanded that the angels bow down before Adam and Eve. They, having no free will, followed Allah's decree, though they did not like it.

But a *jinn* (a bodiless creature with free will) who had been welcomed in the company of angels rebelled, arguing that he should be considered of higher stature than human beings (7:11–12). The *jinn*'s name was Iblis. After his fall from Allah's favor, he was given the title of Satan, but not before Allah described him as the one who would work to deceive humanity (17:61–65).

And deceive humanity he would. The *Qur'an* explains that, after the creation of Adam and Eve, Allah placed them in a garden and forbade them from one thing: eating the fruit from a certain tree. But Satan began to entice them, telling them the only reason Allah forbade them from eating from it was because he wanted to keep them from becoming immortal like the angels. Trusting in the lies of Satan, they ate and “brought about their fall.”

7. Some historians have noted that the terms “Islam” and “Muslim” cannot be found in any text until a century-and-a-half after Muhammad's death. This indicates, at least for the revisionists, that the traditional narrative (perhaps the *Qur'an* itself) may have been, and was probably to some degree, invented after the Arab conquest of Syria, Palestine, and North Africa. See, for example, Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State* (Amherst: Prometheus Press, 2003).

8. See, for example, Abdul Wahid Hamid, *Islam the Natural Way* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2004).

9. Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi, *Towards Understanding Islam*, 22nd ed. (Lahore: Idara Tarjuman-ul-Quran Ltd., 1995), 2–3.

10. Daniel A. Madigan, “Themes and Topics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 83. For a thorough treatment of this theme, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

11. Maududi, *Towards Understanding Islam*, 4.

12. Madigan, “Themes and Topics,” 84.

13. George Anawati, “La Notion de ‘Péché Originel’ existe-t-elle dans l'Islam?” *Studia Islamica* 31 (1970): 29–40; Johan Bouman, *Gott und Mensch im Koran* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977).

Afterwards, Allah confronted Adam and Eve, asking them why they fell to the temptation of Satan. The couple responded, “Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves. If you do not forgive us or grant us mercy, we will be lost.” Allah countered, saying, “Get down from here. . . . You will dwell on earth and your means of subsistence, for a time. . . . There you will live, die, and be raised” (17:19–25).

There is an implicit promise of eternal life here. Adam and Eve were told that, even though they had disobeyed Allah, they would be raised from the dead as would their descendants. How will this be accomplished? Allah explains: “restraint from evil” (17:26).

To enlighten human minds, help them from falling into evil, and dissuade them from infidelity, the *Qur’an* teaches that Allah has sent prophets and messengers to warn humankind, to tell them of the consequences of such unfaithfulness, and to clarify the signs of Allah in nature. The first of these prophets was Adam. After being expelled from the garden, Allah absolved him and revealed to him what the *Qur’an* calls “guidance” (2:37–38). “This guidance,” explains Tariq Ramadan, “is the series of Revelations that came throughout human history.”¹⁴ It provides the requisite information one needs to submit wholly to Allah and thereby overcome evil.

One of the key motifs of Islamic prophetology is the belief that the message of Islam has been transmitted from the time of Adam through Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and a whole host of other prophets up until the time of Muhammad. Each was called to confirm, complete and, if the message of the previous prophet had been tampered with, to correct and restore it to its pure state.

The *Qur’an’s* message, it must be stressed, is not that there are three successive monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and then Islam—but that every prophet preached the same religion throughout the history of humanity. Thus, according to Islam, Muhammad merely “renewed the teachings of Adam, Noah, Moses, Aaron, [and] Jesus” while, at the same time, giving “further detail to them.”¹⁵

Thus, one of the most influential classical Muslim scholars, Ibn Taymiyya, wrote in his polemic against Christianity, *Al-Jawab al-Sahih*, “Muslims are those who follow the religion of Christ, Moses, Abraham, and the rest of the messengers.”¹⁶ Christianity and Judaism are seen, in traditional Muslim theol-

ogy, not as legitimate theological predecessors but as theological deviations of Islam.¹⁷

This theme of a continuous and perpetual theology is prominent in the *Qur’an*. It even ascribes to some of these prophets books that are, at least in name, familiar to us. For example, *Qur’an* 3:3–4 reads: “It is he who has sent down the Book [the *Qur’an*] to you with truth, confirming what came before it. And he sent down the Torah and the Gospel, beforehand, as guidance for mankind.”

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This and other passages which address the relationship of the *Qur’an* to the Judeo-Christian Scriptures has forced Muslim apologists to develop theories accounting for the differences between them. One view asserts that the Torah and Gospels are essentially lost books and are not identical to the Torah and Gospels of the Old and New Testaments. A second theory advances the position that the *Qur’an* confirms what is in the Torah and the Gospels, but alleges that Jews and Christians have derived unnatural meanings from the text. For example, Deuteronomy 18:18 has, they claim, been falsely attributed to Jesus when, in fact, it refers to Muhammad, as does the promise of the Paraclete in the Gospel of John. The third and most popular theory is that the Torah and Gospels have been textually altered.¹⁸

Had they not been altered they would have taught the core content of Muslim doctrine. A passage from the *Qur’an* reads: “He is Allah, the one necessary being. He begets not; nor was he begotten, and there is none equal or comparable to him” (112:1–4). This unitarian doctrine of God—known as *tawhîd*—is more than just a general profession of monotheism. To understand Islam and its view of God one needs to understand not just what the doctrine of *tawhîd* asserts, but also what it rejects.

The Muslim doctrine of God asserts that Allah is one and that he revealed himself in the act of creation; *but* he is not associated *with* creation in any way. We might call this transcendent monotheism, but the god of Islam is not like the watchmaker

14. Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 202.

15. F. E. Peters, ed., *A Reader on Classical Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 160. Muslim theologians make a distinction between religion (*din*) and law (*shari’a*). Whereas the religion of the prophets is one, the divine law changes over time in accordance with the context in which it is revealed. On this, see Maududi, *Towards Understanding Islam*, 142–43; Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), 17–74.

16. Thomas F. Michel, ed. and trans., *A Muslim Theologian’s Response to Christianity: Ibn Taymiyya’s Al-Jawab al-Sahih* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1985), 249.

17. See Muhammad Azizan Sabjan and Noor Shakirah Mat Akhir, “The Misconception of the Revealed Religion,” *The Islamic Quarterly* 52 (2008): 65–78.

18. For the issue of the “corruption” (*tahrif*) of the Bible, see Joseph M. Mutei, “The Bible: Classical and Contemporary Muslim Attitudes and Exegesis,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 31 (2007): 207–20; Abdullah Saleeb, “The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures,” *Muslim World* 92 (2002): 419–36.

of the Enlightenment deists. Rather, he reveals himself especially in the *Qur'an* not in temporal or mutable words, but in speech spoken from all eternity. It is in the inscription of his word—and only there—that Allah becomes immanent in the spatio-temporal world.

This explains the extreme reverence Muslims have for the *Qur'an*. It also explains Islam's disdain for the doctrine of the incarnation. Not only does Allah "not beget," but it is impossible, according to *Qur'an* 6:100–101 and other similar passages (for example, 19:35, 92; 72:3) for him to have a son because he has no female consort. It concludes that such an assertion, that Christ was and is the Son of God or the Word of God incarnate, is irrational and "a terrible evil thing" (*Qur'an* 19:89) and, moreover, damnable (9:30).

This blatant rejection of the cornerstone of Christian theology originates in the *Qur'an's* warning to avoid *shirk*. *Shirk* is the failure to maintain the absolute oneness, transcendence, and inimitability of Allah by attributing partners or associates to him. For example, polytheism, as *shirk* is often rendered in English, is perhaps the crassest form. However, included in the list of those guilty of ascribing partners to God (called *mushrikun*) are Christians who say that Jesus is the Son of God. The *Qur'an* thus warns Christians:

O people of the book do not exceed the limits in your religion, nor speak anything of Allah except what is true. Jesus the messiah, the son of Mary, was no more than a messenger of Allah. . . . Believe in Allah and his Messengers. Do not confess, "God is triune!" Cease! It will be better for you, for Allah is one God; he is far too exalted to have a son (4:171).

When Muhammad pronounced this in seventh-century Arabia, this warning had not just theological but also political implications. The Muslim forces were (and perhaps are still) instructed to "kill the *mushrikun* wherever you find them, and capture them and besiege them, and lie in wait for them in an ambush" (9:5). The "final ruling" on how the Muslim community was (and is) to relate to Christianity (and Judaism) is to struggle against them not until they convert to Islam—for as *Qur'an* 2:256 says there is no compulsion in religion—but until they submit to Islamic rule and law.¹⁹

This struggle (*jihad*) to advance the cause of Islam is found throughout the *Qur'an*. It is a religious and moral obligation. "Fighting has been prescribed for you," reads *Qur'an* 2:216. It is not a temporal injunction either; *Qur'an* 8:39, 9:5 and 29 make it clear that Christians, Jews, and other non-Muslims are to be fought "until there is no more division and all religion is for Allah."

This was, according to one of the earliest historical sources on the emergence of Islam, the mission of Muhammad. In the final sermon that he delivered to the first generation of

Muslims, he announced that he had been commanded by Allah to make war against all people until they acknowledged that there was no god but Allah.²⁰ This is certainly how the growth of Islam was accomplished in the seventh and eighth centuries. It also provided the impetus for further imperial expansion later on,²¹ and it still remains a religious obligation today.

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Still, it may not always take a physically aggressive appearance. It can take the form of theological polemics and apologetics, political activism, or cultural intrusions. Regardless, its goal is the advancement of Islam.²² There will be no end to this struggle. "The *jihad*," Muhammad claimed (and Islamic jurisprudence affirms), "will remain perpetual until the day of judgment."²³

The blatant political agenda of Islam should make it clear that this is not simply a "religion" as conceived of in the post-Enlightenment and postmodern West. It is an all-encompassing worldview and political theology through which Muslims see the world as composed of two spheres: the sphere of Islam (*dar al-Islam*) and the sphere of war (*dar al-harb*).

The sphere of Islam is the geographical space in which governments and legal systems are at least informed by, but, according to most, based solely on the *Qur'an* and tradition.²⁴ The sphere of war comprises the non-Muslim territories, especially areas where Muslims "are neither protected nor able to live in peace."²⁵ Although there is, in classical Islamic thought, some grey area, for the majority of Muslims today

20. Muhammad ibn Umar al-Waqidi, *Kitab al-Maghazi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 3:113.

21. See Efraim Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Andrew Bostom, *The Legacy of Jihad: Islamic Holy War and the Fate of Non-Muslims* (Amherst: Prometheus Press, 2005).

22. The best scholarly source on *jihad* is David Cook's *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

23. Abu Dawud al-Sijistani, *Sunan Abu Dawud*, trans. Ahmad Hasan (Lahore: Ashraf Press, 1984), 2:702. Cf. Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2003), 207.

24. See Patricia Crone, *God's Rule: Government and Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

25. See Ramadan, *Western Muslims*, 65. Also see Yahya Michot, *Muslims under Non-Muslim Rule* (Oxford: Interface Publications, 2006).

19. Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol. 9, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*, trans. and ed. Adil Salahi (Leicestershire: The Islamic Foundation, 2003), 101–2.

and throughout history the world is and has been viewed through these lenses.²⁶

Tariq Ramadan argues that this “does not necessarily mean that a state of war exists between the opposing ‘abodes.’”²⁷ That may be true if one takes into account the wide array of classic Muslim texts on the subject. However, if Muslims are to bring about changes whether by physical force or political/legal changes, it does mean that there is and will be “permanent conflict.” At the very least it can be said that there will be ideological and theological encounters of some sort between Islam and the world.²⁸ This is what one would expect from a universal ideology designed to restore the world to its original order.²⁹

26. Ramadan has called for Muslims to rethink this tradition (*Western Muslims*, 62–101).

27. Ramadan, *Western Muslims*, 65.

28. Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism*, 63–83.

29. The only way to avoid this, according to the Muslim scholar Basam Tibi, is the depoliticizing of Islam. See his *Islam between Culture and Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001). One could argue, however, that Islam depoliticized is not Islam.

The interesting thing in all this is that while Muslim organizations dress up Islam in modern Western clothes, most are clear about its universal designs. The Muslim Student Association, for example, explains Islam as “the only true way of life revealed from the Creator. The scope of this way of life is vast enough that it transcends the traditional notion of ‘religion.’ Islam includes submitting to Allah in the realm of politics, economics, law, etc.”³⁰ Even Ramadan, often heralded as the great Western Muslim innovator, asserts that the theological principles given in the *Qur’an* and other sacred traditions of Islam (such as the *hadith*) were “given for the universe . . . for all times and across all frontiers.”³¹ This means that they are applicable for Christians in America, too, and it is time that it be exposed and, in due time and with careful preparation, encountered. **LOGIA**

30. “Compendium of Muslim Texts,” MSA West, <http://www.msawest.net/islam/> (accessed 29 June 2009).

31. Ramadan, *Western Muslims*, 63.

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