

A VIEW FROM THE MIDDLE EAST  
by Winfried Corduan, Ph.D.

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ISLAMIC THEISM

*There is no God but Allah  
and Muhammad is the Prophet of God.*

MUSLIM DECLARATION OF FAITH

Events of the past thirty years have brought on stage in North America and Europe a worldview that to that point had been very much alive and well from North Africa across the globe east to Indonesia, but had been treated as only a quaint aberration in contrast to the “real” struggle between Communism and capitalism. Though the Western world had never been able to ignore it in foreign policy, the general populace even in Europe could largely discount its contribution to modern thought. In the Middle Ages, of course, its scholars had contributed to Western thought by preserving, commenting on and advancing the philosophical thought of the ancient Greeks. But this intellectual influence on Europe and subsequently on the New World largely disappeared by the seventeenth century. Politically, of course, the Middle East posed a continued challenge to the West, but it did not seriously threaten the Western worldviews of Christianity, deism, naturalism and existentialism. However, in 1979 radical Muslims in Iran took over the American embassy, followed shortly

by skirmishes with other Muslims in Lebanon and Libya. Then as the twenty-first century was just dawning, two commercial planes flown by Middle-Eastern terrorists crashed into the World Trade Center in New York. The worldview of Islam could no longer be ignored.

There has indeed been renewed interest in Islam, both in general and in particular with regard to specific groups, such as the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Unfortunately, popular descriptions of Islam are frequently driven by polemics, and one may find many conflicting descriptions of the religion and the worldview it entails. Thus, it is important to provide a careful discussion of Islamic theism.

To do so, however, brings up an obvious question: Since theism has already been treated in this book, does it really make sense to retread the same material again? The answer to that question would be a clear “no” if all forms of theism were alike and if we would simply be repeating the identical information. But there are no *generic* worldviews, and there is no such thing as *generic* theism in real life. Nobody holds to “just theism,” or, for that matter, to any other worldview without bringing in matters of heritage and environment. Worldviews always occur in a specific context and are susceptible to various forms of expression depending on the culture of origin and the culture in which they are practiced. Consequently, it should be no surprise that there are important differences between Christian theism and Islamic theism.

A Christian writer undertaking this description can easily err by going in one of two directions. One is to point to the differences between Christian theism and Islamic theism with the implicit agenda of demonstrating that in all such cases simply being different from Christianity is a flaw in Islam. Such an inference is unwarranted, even for a committed Christian, since not all points of difference are issues of truth and falsehood. The other direction into which one can stray is to make Islam look more like Christianity than it actually is, maybe by overemphasizing superficial commonalities or perhaps by letting a minority group stand for the broader consensus. Ultimately, that attitude reveals the same prejudice, namely that the worth of Islam as a religion is dependent on its similarity to Christianity. On the other hand, if Islamic theism turns out to entail a difficulty that would be resolved by Christian theism, it appears to me to be legitimate to point out the Christian version as a potential resolution.

I will attempt to let Islam speak for itself as much as possible by hold-

ing myself to the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith. Where there are differences among various Islamic groups, I will make my best attempt to represent what I take to be the more widely held interpretation and, if that's not realistic, give some priority to the more literal reading of the Qur'an. If doing so seems to be a limitation, let me point out why it is actually an asset. Since the Islamic groups that have dominated the news, and about whom we are curious, are also among the more conservative ones, by using this approach we may actually receive a clearer picture of their worldview than if we gave all factions equal coverage.<sup>1</sup>

## BASIC ISLAMIC THEISM

**1. Worldview Question 1:** *The fundamental reality of Islam is God (Allah), described as monotheistic, infinite, personal, transcendent, immanent, omniscient, sovereign and good. Of these attributes Islam emphasizes his oneness, transcendence and sovereignty. There has been debate as to what extent the Qur'an should be included in the category of fundamental reality.*

The word *Allah* is simply the Arabic word for "God" or, to be completely literal, a contraction of *al-ilāh*, *the God*.<sup>2</sup> It is technically not a proper name, but it is used generically, just as "God" is in English. Normally, when Christians or others refer to the God of the Bible in Arabic, the best option is to use the word *Allah*. Consequently, by itself, to say that the fundamental reality in the Islamic version of theism is Allah is not to say anything distinctive about its theism. We need to look closer at the descriptions of Allah to see if there is any difference between

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<sup>1</sup>More technically, there are four schools of Islamic law (*shari'a*), of which the most conservative is the Hanbalite school, named after its founder Ibn-Hanbal, who lived around A.D.800. About a hundred years after his death, his approach was pushed to the forefront by Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari, whose followers are known as Ash'arites. This conservative strain was revived in Saudi Arabia in the eighteenth century by the very strict reformer Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Wahhabite Islam became the only acceptable school of Islam in Saudi Arabia and eventually gave birth to the Taliban in Afghanistan. To some extent, it also stands in the background of Al-Qaeda because its leader, Osama bin Laden has personal roots in Wahhabism. Since I am taking an intentionally conservative approach in my account, it will mirror the Hanbalite and Ash'arite beliefs most closely. But it is precisely this conservative form of Islam that has been held by the groups creating the most interest of late, so we can hardly go wrong if our description of the teachings of the Qur'an sheds light on their understanding of the religion.

<sup>2</sup>Frederick Mathewson Denny, *An Introduction to Islam*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1994), p. 387.

Christian theism and Islamic theism in this regard.<sup>3</sup>

Now, to approach the study of Allah and Islam on a comparative basis is not to do it an injustice. A great amount of the content of the Qur'an consists of demonstrating that Islam is better than any other religion, and that God, as portrayed in Islam, is greater than any other deity that human beings may have imagined. Islam arose in the context of rivalry. Muhammad was proclaiming monotheism as he understood it against the polytheism that dominated Mecca in his day, the monotheism of Judaism, which he considered to be hypocritical, and the trinitarian monotheism of Christianity, which he censured as both idolatrous and absurd. Islam did not so much define itself internally as externally against the other existing options.

O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion: Nor say of God aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) an apostle of God, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in God and His apostles. Say not "Trinity": desist: it will be better for you: for God is one God: Glory be to Him: (far exalted is He) above having a son. To Him belong all things in the heavens and on earth. And enough is God as a Disposer of affairs. (4:171)<sup>4</sup>

The comparative impulse in Islam comes out in one of the most well-known phrases associated with Islam: *Allahu akbar*. It is a part of the call to prayer repeated five times a day, and faithful believers may use it as an

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<sup>3</sup>I shall use *God* and *Allah* interchangeably, partly for the sake of variety in style (if I were to write extensively on the biblical God I would use such synonyms as *the Lord* or *Yahweh*) and partly to keep us alert to the fact that there are both similarities and differences between Christian theism and Islamic theism.

<sup>4</sup>All quotations from the Qur'an come from the translation by Yusuf Ali, which is now available in many editions as well as in multiple locations on the Internet. Islam holds that the Qur'an is only the Qur'an in its original Arabic form because any translation must interpret, and to interpret is potentially to distort. There is much debate as to which translation/interpretation is more accurate than others. Yusuf Ali's version has come in for some criticism, but it continues to be the one that is handed out by mosques and Islamic centers to visitors, and thus it is a fair inference that it must be accurate enough to represent their faith. Furthermore, Yusuf Ali was a devout Muslim, whose study notes reflect a commonly accepted conservative approach, and it can thus be trusted to represent a sound Islamic view in its phrasing and teachings.

However, one must be aware of Yusuf Ali's manner of translation. When moving from one language to another, sometimes a single word needs to be translated by several words, or a short phrase by a longer one. Usually translators just make these adjustments automatically and expect readers to be aware of such things. Yusuf Ali puts such words or phrases in parentheses, even though they are clearly an integral part of the meaning conveyed. Furthermore, his use of capitalization is somewhat unusual.

exclamation in response to anything out of the ordinary, whether good or ill. It is usually translated simply as “God is great.” What is notable about this expression is that *akbar* does not actually mean “great” in the straightforward sense. “Great” by itself would simply be *kabir*. In order to get closer to its meaning, one has to translate it as either “greater” (the comparative degree) or “the greatest” (the superlative degree).

But even those two options do not do complete justice to the way that *akbar* is used in this context. After all, something can be greater without being greatest, and language allows that there could be two or more beings that share a superlative, such as two greatest beings. To use a simple English illustration, George may run faster than Fred (comparative), but that doesn’t mean that he is the fastest runner (superlative), and if both Michael and Stephen share the record, they are both the fastest runners, and therefore they both partake of the superlative. In Arabic there is another grammatical form, called the *elative*, which, as used in this context<sup>5</sup>, that is, as applied to Allah, raises the degree of an adjective above all other applications. Thus, *Allahu akbar* actually implies “God is greater than all others,” or “God is the one and only supreme being.” We see, then, that at the very foundation of Islam is the conviction that Allah’s greatness is understood by way of contrast to all other inferior beings.

This mindset makes itself felt wherever Islam presents itself. In the Qur’an there are very few places where the praise of Allah is not immediately connected to statements simultaneously condemning either false views of God or the people who hold them. Certainly insofar as the scriptures of other religions show awareness of other faiths, they, too, are likely to make contrasts, but they do not do so as constantly as the Qur’an does.

The unequaled greatness of Allah becomes the linchpin of all further considerations of his nature. Anything that could conceivably be construed as detracting from his greatness must be considered to be false, or even offensive. The worst sin in Islam is *shirk*, which is commonly translated as “idolatry,” but literally means “association” and thus implies far more than the common understanding of idolatry, such as worshiping statues of deities. *Shirk* means to conjoin Allah with any of his creatures, to ascribe a partner to him, or to understand him to possess limitations

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<sup>5</sup>Please note that, strictly grammatically, in other settings the elative may carry no more force than the comparative or superlative degrees, but that, on this point at least, it includes the exclusivist meaning.

that are characteristic of his creatures but not of him.

Not only does this prohibition rule out notions such as an incarnation or any direct revelation of God himself in any humanly apprehensible form, but it also means that whatever attributes God has revealed about himself cannot be measured by human standards. For example, Allah is just, but if we come up with a definition of justice and then think that, therefore, we can understand what it means for Allah to be just, we are overstepping the bounds of what is allowable. Similarly, Allah is merciful, gracious and forgiving, but knowing these truths about Allah does not give us any warrant for drawing implications concerning how he should be expected to act toward any specific person. Allah is not unknowable, but it would be presumptuous for us to infer from his attributes specifically how he would manifest them in any particular cases.

An integral part of any theism is that God is both transcendent (beyond the world) and immanent (present and active within the world). In the case of Islamic theism, God's transcendence far outweighs his immanence. Any notion of a possible relationship with Allah must respect this boundary. God and a human person can never meet on the same plane. In the (perhaps slightly overstated) words of Isam'il Ragi al Faruqi,

Islam is transcendentalist. It repudiates all forms of immanentism. It holds that reality is of two generic kinds—transcendent and spatiotemporal, creator and creature, value and fact—which are metaphysically, ontologically unlike as different from each other. These two realms of being constitute different objects of two modes of human knowledge, namely, the a priori and the empirical. Consciousness of this duality of being is as old as man; but it has never been absolutely free of confusion, absolutely clear of itself, as in Islam. . . . Islam takes its distinguishing mark among the world religions precisely by insisting on an absolute metaphysical separation of transcendent from the spatiotemporal.<sup>6</sup>

We saw earlier in this book that in Christian theism there is no direct contradiction between God's transcendence and our finitude. In fact, Christians maintain that an important aspect of what it means to be human is to have the capacity for an intimate relationship with God, namely to know him as we would know our brother or father. Even though the Qur'an allows us to know of Allah's presence and to recognize his guid-

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<sup>6</sup>Isam'il Ragi al Faruqi, "Islam," in *The Great Asian Religions*, ed. by Wing-tsit Chan, Isam'il Ragi al Faruqi, Joseph M. Kitagawa and P. T. Raju (Indianapolis: Macmillan, 1969), p. 309.

ance, his availability and his kindness, it keeps a much wider gap between a person's relationship with Allah compared to Christian theism. In Christian theism one could say that, because of God's indwelling of us through his Spirit (Jn 14:17, 19; Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 6:16), we have an even more intimate relationship with God than with other people; such a statement would be impossible in the Qur'an. Even though Allah is immanent insofar as he acts in the world, the Christian notions of God's incarnation in a human being (Christ) or his direct indwelling of all who believe in him would bring him too far down to the level of creatures for Islamic theism.

Of course, we need to be clear on the fact that the Qur'an does state that God is close to us, but we also need to recognize what this means.

When My servants ask thee concerning Me, I am indeed close (to them): I listen to the prayer of every suppliant when he calleth on Me: Let them also, with a will, Listen to My call, and believe in Me: That they may walk in the right way. (2:186)

Hammudah Abdalati asserts on the basis of this verse.

God is High and Supreme, but He is very near to the pious thoughtful people; He answers their prayers and helps them. He loves the people who love Him and forgives their sins. . . . Because He is so Good and Loving, He recommends and accepts only the good and right things. The door of His mercy is always open to any who sincerely seek His support and protection.<sup>7</sup>

This verse is considered to be of great comfort to Muslims in the struggles of everyday life, and, thus, must be considered to contribute to the total Islamic worldview. Nevertheless, we may also take cognizance of its context and its overall intent. The verse occurs in the midst of various rules concerning the observance of Ramadan. Its immediate predecessor enjoins fasting during Ramadan and allows for those who are sick or on a journey to make up their obligation later. It is followed by the instructions not to have sexual relations during fasting hours and not to overindulge oneself during the times when eating is permitted. In short, even though the verse carries reassurance of God's presence, in its setting its primary purpose seems to be to provide conditions under which believers' prayers will be heard during Ramadan. Thus, it is a word of com-

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<sup>7</sup>Hammudah Abdalati, *Islam in Focus* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1975), p. 5.

fort, but it is also bound up with an exhortation to obedience.

To provide an even more drastic example, Muslim apologists to Western Christians sometimes attempt to counter the perception of distance between God and people by quoting a part of a verse from the Qur'an (50:16): "We are nearer to him than (his) jugular vein," where "We" is Allah speaking using the "royal we." This statement certainly seems to imply an intimate personal relationship. However, a look at the immediate context shows that what might by itself look like an assurance of God's comforting presence is actually a threat. Let us quote the entire verse and the two that follow it,

It was We Who created man, and We know what dark suggestions his soul makes to him: for We are nearer to him than (his) jugular vein. Behold, two (guardian angels) appointed to learn (his doings) learn (and noted them), one sitting on the right and one on the left. Not a word does he utter but there is a sentinel by him, ready (to note it). (50:16-18)

Not only does this verse not teach anything like an intimate personal relationship, God's presence as depicted in this passage is also not immediate, but mediated by two angels.

A possible exception to this apparent lack of an intimate relationship with Allah is provided by Sufism, the mystical side of Islam. Sufi teachings have had a profound influence on Islam as a whole by going far beyond the Qur'an in emphasizing a loving relationship between God and his believers. It even teaches that a person can attain a direct vision of Allah. But this is not something that is simply given to every Muslim. It is an outcome that requires a lot of labor and is not an experience that one can attain simply by deciding to do so. It takes many years of following the strict Sufi rule to get to this point.<sup>8</sup> One must not only follow all of the normal rules for Islam, but one must also reach and maintain a state of absolute purity. Then it may be possible to attain a moment of being directly in the presence of God. But even so, Sufism does not supply an exception to the emphasis on God's transcendence because its goal is not for God to move downward in order to be closer to the human being, but for the Sufi monk to rise up in his spiritual state until he finally attains the height sufficient to experience God.

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<sup>8</sup>Menahem Milson, trans. and ed., *A Sufi Rule for Novices* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975).

But of course despite al-Faruqi's statement above, Islam does not do away completely with the immanence of God. As we shall see below, even from afar he regulates the events of the universe, and he has consistently revealed himself throughout human history. The most important revelation from Allah is the Qur'an, but Islam even allows for a certain amount of general revelation.

Behold! in the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of the night and the day; in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of mankind; in the rain which God Sends down from the skies, and the life which He gives therewith to an earth that is dead; in the beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds, and the clouds which they Trail like their slaves between the sky and the earth;—(Here) indeed are Signs for a people that are wise. (2:164)

Note that the perception of these divine clues is already limited to those "people that are wise," which is just another way of saying "people who believe in Allah already." In fact, what follows this verse immediately is a condemnation of anyone else who may see the signs, but winds up worshiping them rather than Allah.

Still, the fact of revelation shuts the door on the idea that because of God's transcendence we must be agnostic concerning God's attributes. We can know some things about Allah. However, at all times we must acknowledge that this knowledge is only general. We can know *that* God is merciful, but we should in no way pretend that we comprehend what this means sufficiently to draw implications from it.

Having seen all of the above concerning the exclusive nature of Allah, you may be surprised to learn that we need to add one other item to our exploration of what constitutes fundamental reality in Islam, at least as an issue that is debated among Muslims. Our answer so far consists of the fact that God is the ultimate reality, that God in himself is quite remote from us, and that God has revealed himself to us through the Qur'an. It is the nature of the Qur'an that has raised another puzzle. It is generally accepted that the Qur'an is eternal. In its true form it exists in heaven as the *Mother of the Book* (*Umm-al-kitab*). When Gabriel first commissioned Muhammad, the angel presented him with excerpts out of the *Umm-al-kitab* and commanded him to read and subsequently recite these portions (sura 96). This order seriously perplexed Muhammad at first because he was illiterate. The angel reassured him that the same

God who creates people out of a mere clot of blood (i.e., the fertilized ovum), would also give him the ability to read the book and to repeat its content with complete precision. This is one of the reasons why Muslims refer to the Qur'an as a miracle (the other one being its perceived perfection in form and content). At the same time, the nature of the book-behind-the-book, the true Qur'an in heaven, has caused a lot of discussion among Muslims.

The major contenders in this debate historically were known as the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites.<sup>9</sup> We cannot possibly do justice to the entire debate in this chapter and must content ourselves with assessment by John L. Esposito that "in time the [the Ash'arites] came to be regarded as the dominant school of Sunni theology,"<sup>10</sup> and thus focus on their point of view. The conundrum of the *Umm-al-Kitab*, as already alluded to, concerns its eternity. If it really is an eternal book, then we could actually have two foundational realities, namely both Allah and the Qur'an, and the latter would then detract from Allah's greatness. The easiest way of dealing with this unwanted outcome would be to say that the Qur'an is created and, therefore, temporal, which was the position of the Mu'tazilites. But the notion of the *Umm-al-Kitab* as eternal had become so engrained in Islamic thought that to deny it reduced the authority of the book in Muslim eyes. The most commonly accepted solution, which is the Ash'arite position, is to say that the Qur'an is indeed eternal, though not as an independent reality. Rather, the words of the Qur'an are the thoughts of Allah himself, and so it has existed as long as there has been God, which makes the Qur'an eternal, but does not stipulate the book as a second reality.

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<sup>9</sup>The Mu'tazilites arose in the early eighth century A.D. among philosophically literate converts to Islam, who attempted to make a rational case (*kalām*) for Islam. They took uncommon stances on two issues: the eternity of the Qur'an and the freedom of individual persons (to which we will come later in this chapter). Concerning the Qur'an, the Mu'tazilites asserted that the Qur'an was created. They were opposed by the Ash'arites (see note 1 above), who advocated the understanding that the Qur'an was eternal, but only as the thoughts of God, not as a separately existing reality. Although the Ash'arites managed to have the Mu'tazilites eventually declared to be heretics, Mu'tazilite ideas have been revived to a certain extent by contemporary Muslims. Nevertheless, it does not make much sense to consider either the Mu'tazilites or Ash'arites to have "solved" the problem for Islam, though the Ash'arite view has been the more enduring one. The debate is still ongoing. David S. Noss, *A History of the World's Religions* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2008), pp. 569-72.

<sup>10</sup>John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 73.

Given this point of view, the Qur'an not only contains God's thoughts, but it also mediates God's thoughts to us. Consequently, one has to think of the Qur'an on two levels, distinguishing between it as the content of

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The place of the Qur'an in the life of the Muslims is only in limited ways like that of the Bible in the lives of Jews and Christians. Scholars have observed that in relation to Christianity, the Qur'an may be usefully compared with Christ, in that it is believed to be God's Word that has miraculously come down into the world in history and humankind. If in Christianity the "Word became flesh," in Islam it became a book. And the book is properly appropriated and applied only where it is recited live in a context of belief and obedience.

**FREDERICK MATHEWSON DENNY, *An Introduction to Islam***

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the mind of God (which is never accessible to us) and as divine revelation (which is the only way to have accurate knowledge about God).

It is not necessary for us to take sides in this debate among Muslim scholars, but it is important for us, when we try to identify what constitutes fundamental reality in Islam, that we may need to include the Qur'an as expressive of the mind of God for some schools of Islam.

**2. Worldview Question 2:** *God (Allah) created the universe ex nihilo, and all creatures are responsible to him. However, the world is a closed system insofar as nothing happens in the world outside of his divine decrees.*

The magnificence of Allah's greatness is brought out clearly in the miracle of his creation of the universe.

Men who celebrate the praises of Allah, standing, sitting, and lying down on their sides, and contemplate the (wonders of) creation in the heavens and the earth, (With the thought): "Our Lord! not for naught Hast Thou created (all) this! Glory to Thee! Give us salvation from the penalty of the Fire." (3:191)

His creation is not just limited to material things. In the very first sura,

God is praised as “the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds” (1:2), and Richard C. Martin points out that “the plural, worlds, does not refer to other planets and stars as we think of them, but rather to other sacred realms of angels and unseen spiritual beings.”<sup>11</sup> Prior to the creation of humans, God already had brought angels and *jinn* into existence. The latter are malicious spirits of relatively limited power, but sufficiently strong to ruin someone’s life if left unchecked.

Allah’s method of creation is simply to speak a thing into existence. This understanding is illustrated in two verses in the Qur’an. Thus, we read concerning the creation of Adam,

He created him from dust, then said to him: ‘Be.’ And he was. (3:59)<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, when the angel announced to Mary that she would bear Jesus even though she was a virgin, Mary was understandably puzzled. The angel reproved her skepticism by saying,

Even so: Allah createth what He willeth: When He hath decreed a plan, He but saith to it, ‘Be,’ and it is! (3:47)

Since Allah has created the universe, he has absolute discretion over it. Think of a child who has built a sandcastle at the beach. She may decorate it with sea shells, protect it from the water, add to it, or she may trample it, let the water wash it away or preserve half of it but let the other half stand. The decision is entirely hers, and she owes nothing to the sandcastle, but the structure owes everything to her. Insofar as she does take care of it, it is purely a matter of her good nature, which she is not obligated to maintain. Such is the relationship between God and his creation.

God is the creator and owner of the universe, and nothing happens within it that would be outside of his plan. This doctrine is called *Qadr*, which literally means “power.” In this case it refers to God’s power to know and govern the universe. There are no surprises for Allah. This much is given, but there are multiple ways of understanding this concept,

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<sup>11</sup>Richard C. Martin, *Islam: A Cultural Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1982), p. 92.

<sup>12</sup>Please note that here and in several other places, the Qur’an goes along with the biblical notion that Adam was created from dust or clay. The statement in sura 96 that God created man from a clot of blood does not refer to the creation of Adam, but to the miracle of each human being from the fertilized ovum, which initially appears to be nothing more than a clot of blood.

and Muslim scholars have debated its implications right from its first century of existence up to the present moment. Again, historically, the two main contenders were the Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites, and again, without wanting to minimize the significance of the Mu'tazilite position, we need to note that the Ash'arite view became dominant and is, therefore, more representative of the whole. And, once again, for our purposes, we need not take sides in this discussion about who is right. Furthermore, it would take an entire book just to describe all of the variations in its interpretation.

Allah's providence begins with his exhaustive knowledge of every last detail about the universe. All of this knowledge is maintained in a permanent data bank.

Not a leaf doth fall but with His knowledge: there is not a grain in the darkness (or depths) of the earth, nor anything fresh or dry (green or withered), but is (inscribed) in a record clear (to those who can read). (6:59b)

But knowledge for God is never just his taking cognizance of certain states of affairs or holding all correct propositions to be true. With him, to know a thing or an event is to control it.

No misfortune can happen on earth or in your souls but is recorded in a decree before We bring it into existence: That is truly easy for Allah. In order that ye may not despair over matters that pass you by, nor exult over favours bestowed upon you. For Allah loveth not any vainglorious boasters. (57:22-23)

Mahmoud Murad defends a fairly strict interpretation of *Qadr* and insists that the acceptance of this doctrine entails:

That the knowledge of Allah encompasses all things, and that nothing escapes His knowledge, be it in the heavens or on the earth. Allah has known His creatures before he brought them into existence. He reassigns their provisions, term of life, utterances, deeds, actions, movements, their internal and external affairs, and who of them is assigned for Jannah [paradise], and which of them is doomed to Hell.

That Allah has pre-decreed what [is] to come into existence. This in turn requires believing in the Pen which records all the divine decrees, and in the Preserved Tablet on which the decrees are recorded.

That the will of Allah is effective and His capacity is inexhaustible and inclusive. Doubtlessly, whatever Allah wills does take place, and whatever

He does not will does not take place due not to incapacity rather to His infinite wisdom. There is nothing that frustrates the capacity of Allah.<sup>13</sup>

Other interpretations are scaled back from this description, but we must keep in mind that the further away we get from this interpretation, the further we are distancing ourselves from what appears to be the most widely held conservative Sunni position.

Thus, a picture emerges that may seem paradoxical but is actually quite rational. On the one hand, we cannot go too far in stressing Allah's transcendence. He is not to be associated with any finite being in the world. On the other hand it is also clear that God not only sees every detail of the world, he also does not permit anything to happen outside of his specific plan. The latter statement leads many Muslims to believe that God directly manages all events.

Here then, is an important distinction to Christian theism. We stated earlier in the book that Christian theism is an open worldview. God has created a universe that incorporates uniform laws, and he has endowed human beings with the opportunity to exercise genuine creativity within the world that he created. Islamic theism, on the other hand, adds another restriction beyond the limits intrinsic to the universe. Whatever creativity creatures may possess, they can exercise it only insofar as Allah permits it according to his inscrutable will. Thus, Islamic theism on the whole leaves us ultimately in a closed universe in which God's will sets the boundary for what any creature can do as a causal agent.

We shall need to come back to the doctrine of *Qadr* in the context of the fifth worldview question, which concerns human knowledge.

**3. Worldview Question 3:** *Human beings are the pinnacle of God's creation. They have been given abilities of which other creatures, such as angels and jinn, are not capable. However, their high standing also brings with it the responsibility to live up to God's standards.*

The fact that we have emphasized the absolute greatness of Allah in Islam should not mislead us into thinking that therefore Islam has a low view of human beings. The following account follows the events as nar-

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<sup>13</sup>Mahmoud Murad, *This Message Is for You*, <[www.scribd.com/doc/295593/This-Message-is-for-You](http://www.scribd.com/doc/295593/This-Message-is-for-You)>.

rated in sura 2 and repeated in other places. According to the Qur'an, when God set out to create Adam, he called a general meeting of all of the spiritual beings he had created heretofore and announced what he was about to do. When the angels learned of his intention, they were offended and actually questioned Allah's wisdom. After all, they claimed, they had been praising God faithfully all along. Why would he now put another creature above them, particularly one who would be prone to mischief?

Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: "I will create  
A viceregent on earth." They said:  
"Wilt Thou place therein one who will make  
Mischief therein and shed blood?—  
Whilst we do celebrate Thy praises  
And glorify Thy holy (name)?"  
He said: "I know what ye know not." (2:30)

Allah's mysterious reply that he knew something of which the angels were ignorant would soon take on concrete meaning. God personally educated Adam in how to identify the many creatures on earth (presumably plants, animals and objects in nature). He then called another meeting in which he challenged the angels to give the proper labels to various items in creation, but they failed miserably at this task. Then God brought out Adam, and to their amazement, he was able to do the very thing that they could not bring off. They took back their criticism and acknowledged that Allah had not made a mistake in creating such a wonderful being. In order to drive home this point, Allah commanded all of the angels to bow down before Adam.

And behold, We said to the angels:  
"Bow down to Adam:" and they bowed down:  
Not so Iblîs: he refused and was haughty:  
He was of those who reject Faith. (2:34)

Iblîs<sup>14</sup> thus became Satan or *Shaytan*. Note, then, that in Islam, just as in Judaism and Christianity, the devil is a fallen spiritual being (though in this case a jinn, one of the lower order), who would not obey God. It is significant for our understanding of the position of human beings in Islam that the specific occasion for his rebellion actually occurred not in

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<sup>14</sup>If you look at the "bl" combination of letters in *Iblîs*, it may make sense to you that this name shares the same linguistic root as our word *diabolical*.

rebellious against God's superiority per se, but in refusing to demonstrate the superiority of human beings over him.

Let us pursue this story just a little further, and then we will be able to draw some important conclusions. God now placed Adam and his wife (her name is not mentioned in this sura) into a garden and gave the familiar command not to eat of a certain tree. In a manner that is not specified, Satan was able to persuade them into disobedience, and they were expelled from the garden and deprived of their happiness.

But this version of the story has a relatively quick happy ending.

Then learnt Adam from his Lord  
Words of inspiration, and his Lord  
Turned towards him; for He  
Is Oft-Returning, Most Merciful. (2:37)

Even while Adam was out of favor with God, he received instructions from Allah, and upon proper penitence, God restored him to fellowship. Thus, there was no permanent curse, Adam did not remain a fallen creature, and humankind was not beset with heritable "original sin."

We have, then, the following preliminary picture of what Islam teaches concerning who we are as humans. We are God's representatives on earth, higher than any other living creatures and (in contrast to Christian belief) with a nature that is not corrupted by Adam's fall. Consequently, we are born in a state of purity and innocence, a fact that implies that any newborn comes into the world as a Muslim.

However, it now becomes our obligation to live up to our standing. To be born pure does not guarantee that we shall remain pure. The Qur'an enjoins,

O ye people!  
Adore your Guardian-Lord,  
Who created you  
And those who came before you,  
That ye may have the chance  
To learn righteousness.

Privilege implies responsibility, and the stakes are immeasurably high. In the simplest of terms, Islam sees each human being spending a lifetime on probation. It is one thing to acknowledge God as the greatest with mere words, even if they are meant sincerely, it is quite another to live

one's entire life in submission to him, and the latter requirement is the test for whether a person will qualify for salvation. To quote John L. Esposito,

Faith places the Muslim on the straight path; acts demonstrate commitment and faithfulness. In Islam, the purpose of life is not simply to affirm but to actualize; not simply to profess a belief in God but to realize God's will—to spread the message and law of Islam. Faith without works is empty, without merit; indeed, it is the Book of Deeds that will be the basis for divine judgment.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, we need to add one important amendment to the above summary of what it means to be human. We have been given the rank as the second-highest being in the universe, we have been born in the state of purity, we may even have the advantage of living in a culture where Islam is taught and practiced. Nevertheless, none of that means anything unless we devote our lives to the service of Allah and the teachings of Muhammad. If we do not pass the test, then our destination will be hell.

**4. Worldview Question 4:** *Death is a time of transition between this life and our eternal state, which will consist of either paradise or hell.*

Thus we can make an easy segue to the next topic, which is about what happens to a person at death. If we take this question completely literally, there are two answers, one concerning a person's physical remains and one concerning the soul. However, the two are interrelated. Proper observance of burial customs contributes to the fate of the soul after death. Some time in the future, the deceased will face an interrogation by the two angels Munkar and Nakir,<sup>16</sup> and anything that the survivors can do in order to help the deceased give the proper answers will increase their chances of entering paradise. Therefore it is a good thing to encourage a person right before he dies to say the confession one last time: "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the prophet of God." If this is no longer possible, those who are gathered at the funeral will repeat it on behalf of the deceased. The corpse must be washed and transformed into a state of ritual purity. Finally, he or she must be buried lying on the right side, facing in the direction of Mecca.

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<sup>15</sup>Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>16</sup>Denny, *Introduction*, p. 289.

These outward physical measures have their purpose in guiding the soul into being fully prepared for the upcoming judgment at the end of time. Everyone agrees that eventually there will be the last day on which all the dead will be raised in order to face judgment. In the meantime, what happens in the interval immediately after death and before the resurrection and the judgment is a matter of debate. Some Muslims hold that the soul will simply sleep peacefully until that time; others believe that between death and resurrection there will be a period of spiritual purgation in which postmortem suffering will purify the soul so as to become fit for heaven.<sup>17</sup>

Regardless of these speculations, there is no question of what will happen when the resurrection takes place. All human beings will be called to stand before the divine tribunal, and all of their beliefs and attitudes as well as the record of every last little action that they have performed during their lifetime will become the basis for judgment. Every human being will have accumulated a book of their deeds, both good and evil, during their mortal lives. No one can be fully sure that they have enough good to outweigh any bad, and so be assured of going to paradise. The three notable exceptions to this are martyrs, children before puberty and those who are mentally impaired, the latter two because they are not fully accountable for their actions. For anyone else, one may think that one has a good chance, but, to repeat our earlier observation, to claim assurance for salvation implies that one can dictate to Allah what he must do, and this attitude is considered to be inappropriate. Suzanne Haneef asserts that

no Muslim, even the best among them, imagines that he is guaranteed Paradise; on the contrary the more conscientious and God-fearing one is, the more he is aware of his own shortcomings and weaknesses. Therefore the Muslim, knowing that God alone controls life and death, and that death may come to him at any time, tries to send on ahead for his future existence such deeds as will merit the pleasure of his Lord, so that he can look forward to it with hope for His mercy and grace.<sup>18</sup>

Still, once the last day arrives, there will no longer be any ambivalence. As

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Suzanne Haneef, *What Everyone Should Know About Islam and Muslims* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1979), p. 37. As we shall point out further below, the word “grace” here is far removed from what Christians mean by the term because in the Islamic context what Haneef calls “grace” is based on our works.

soon as Allah has established his verdict, one of the angels will come up to the person and hand him the book of his deeds. Without having to be told anything, the human being will recognize his fate by the hand in which the angel places the book. If he puts it into his right hand, he knows that he has experienced Allah's mercy and will be allowed to enter Paradise. In the unfortunate event that the angel places the book into a person's left hand, the time will have come for him to reconcile himself to living in hell from now on (69:13-37).

Keeping in mind the origin of these beliefs in the desert culture of Arabia, the tortures of hell are described as something that a desert nomad would think of as being immeasurably horrible. What would be a worse torture than being in a desert without water? The answer is to be in the desert and come across a well and think that you will be refreshed, but then realizing that the water is so polluted that it is impossible for a human being even to take a little sip of it. In the Qur'anic description, hell is first of all a place of hot, odiferous, poisonous water in which the unbeliever will have to endure numerous tortures.

Heaven, on the other hand, is depicted as a desert nomad's ideal place of delight. Picture a beautiful oasis with fresh water, luscious green plants, handsome boys serving all the best to eat and drink, and the beautiful *huri*, the enticing, dark-eyed virgins, whose services are perennially available. Now, there is no question that the description of heaven given in the Qur'an is one that is utterly geared to men. Nonetheless, one should not infer that women will not be eligible for heaven. The Qur'an says of the faithful believers that they are headed for

gardens of perpetual bliss: they shall enter there, as well as the righteous among their fathers, *their spouses*, and their offspring: and angels shall enter unto them from every gate (with the salutation): "Peace unto you for that ye persevered in patience! Now how excellent is the final home!" (13:23, emphasis mine)

Thus, even though the descriptions in the Qur'an are very definitely oriented toward male desires, there is no intent of excluding women. Presumably women will receive whatever would be the counterpart of bliss for their sex.

**5. Worldview Question 5:** *Allah has endowed human beings with the capability of knowledge by means of reason and the senses. Thereby, they*

*can also know God's revelation. However, God's sovereign decrees limit human knowledge.*

We saw earlier in connection with the creation of Adam that humans have greater intelligence than angels and jinn. God has created human beings in such a way that their senses will be reliable sources of information and their reasoning skills are trustworthy. Al-Faruqi goes so far as to begin his entire description of Islam with the statement that “first, Islam is rationalistic.”<sup>19</sup> He bases this conclusion on the verse in the Qur’an that forbids conversion by force:

Let there be no compulsion in religion: *Truth stands out clear from Error*: whoever rejects evil and believes in God hath grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold, that never breaks. And God heareth and knoweth all things. (2:256, emphasis mine)

Human reason is sufficient to discern truth from falsehood. We are capable of a rational approach to the world around us, and we need not abdicate our rationality when it comes to matters of religion. This is a very good thing because, as we saw, we need to utilize all of our potential to prove our devotion to Allah by living up to his standards, and the stakes are extremely high: eternal bliss or eternal torment.

Of course, our reasoning ability, no matter how sharp, would be useless if we did not have the necessary information to apply it, but this is where divine revelation helps us out. Around the globe, every group of people has had one or more messengers from God who taught them the same precepts as Muhammad did. There is no definitive list of all of the prophets prior to Muhammad, but the various listings include numerous Old Testament figures, such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Lot, David and Jonah, as well as both Isaac and Ishmael, to mention just a few. The prophet with the highest standing other than Muhammad himself is Abraham, followed very closely in importance by Jesus. Although the Qur’an denies both his crucifixion and his divine nature, it vigorously affirms his virgin birth as well as his teaching, healings and miracles. Furthermore, in sura 11, the Qur’an also mentions prophets outside of the Bible, whom God sent to their people in their day: Hud to the A’ad, Salih to the Thamud, and Shu’yeb to the Midianites. Thus, whatever should be known could be known easily by simply listening to the prophets.

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<sup>19</sup>Al-Faruqi, “Islam,” p. 308.

However, human beings are prone to give in to temptations and to fall into unbelief. Sadly, each of the previous prophets encountered that same obstacle. Even though it turned out to be to their own detriment, the people mocked them and rejected them. Every day that Noah spent building the ark, his contemporaries, who should have repented of their sin, mocked him instead. What could be a clearer warning sign than that, along with his words, Noah was publicly building a huge ship, which would be the only escape from the flood? Nevertheless, the people resisted him. Thus the prophets were a clear source of knowledge, and the fact that the people nevertheless did not submit to Allah is due to their evil, not to a lack of sufficient information.

Furthermore, among the prophets were a few who were even more distinguished. These were the “messengers,” who also left books of their teachings for posterity: Moses brought the Law, David brought the Psalms, and Jesus brought the Gospel. But the same unbelieving people who did not listen to them in person corrupted their writings in order to suit their idolatrous preferences. As a result, the clear messages from God, which might have survived in writing even if their original bearers had been rejected, became distorted in their written forms as well.<sup>20</sup>

All of that should have changed with the coming of Muhammad. He was considered to be the “seal of the prophets,” and what distinguishes him in Islamic eyes is the belief that his message, as recorded in the Qur’an, was preserved free from error or human interference. There is thus no need for any further prophets, and however much the message may have been obscured previously, it should now be clear and accessible to everyone. Therefore Jews and Christians receive special encouragement:

O People of the Book! Now hath come unto you, making (things) clear unto you, Our Apostle, after the break in (the series of) our apostles, lest ye should say: “There came unto us no bringer of glad tidings and no warner (from evil).” (5:19)

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<sup>20</sup>Contemporary Muslims have received much aid in this contention by the practice of textual criticism of the Bible, in which even Christians expose the many variants in the biblical manuscripts. However, the claim that the text of the Bible had been altered goes back to the time of Muhammad himself, long before this scholarly discipline emerged. For a Christian response on this issue see Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press), pp. 81-82, 108.

The particular evidence for the authority of the Qur'an is the Qur'an itself. People who already believe in Islam consider the Qur'an to be self-authenticating:

Say: "What thing is most weighty in evidence?" Say: "God is witness between me and you; This Qur'an hath been revealed to me by inspiration, that I may warn you and all whom it reaches." (6:19a)

On the other hand, those who reject the prophet Muhammad and claim that the Qur'an is nothing but a forgery are challenged by the nature of the Qur'an itself.

They say He hath invented it. Say: Then bring ten surahs, the like thereof, invented, and call on everyone ye can beside Allah, if ye are truthful! (11:13)

The message has been delivered, and there should be no excuse not to accept it.

Nevertheless, clear revelation does not imply automatic acceptance of the revelation. In order to make the following point as clear as possible, I shall provide some quotations from the Qur'an, but leave out some phrases that are a part of those verses. Then I will restore the missing pieces, and you will see my point. These verses teach that those who are committed to unbelief will not change their minds, no matter how strong the evidence may be.

Of them there are some who (pretend to) listen to thee; . . . [elision 1]. . . So they understand it not, and deafness in their ears; if they saw every one of the signs, not they will believe in them; in so much that when they come to thee, they (but) dispute with thee; the Unbelievers say: "These are nothing but tales of the ancients." (6:25)

Supernatural indicators would do no good for those confirmed in their unbelief.

If their spurning is hard on thy mind, yet if thou wert able to seek a tunnel in the ground or a ladder to the skies and bring them a sign,- (what good?) . . . [elision 2] . . . (6:35)

and

Those who reject our signs are deaf and dumb,- in the midst of darkness profound. . . . [elision 3] . . . (6:39)

In short, those who do not believe are attached to their unbelief and would not believe if they could. They have only themselves to blame for the consequences of their unbelief. These conclusions are correct, and their truth is not altered by restoring the elisions. Nevertheless, putting back the missing parts certainly complicates the picture.

These are the parts that I left out of the above quotes:

*Elision 1:* but We have thrown veils on their hearts;

*Elision 2:* If it were God's will, He could gather them together unto true guidance;

*Elision 3:* whom God willeth, He leaveth to wander: whom He willeth, He placeth on the way that is straight.

So, now we see that those who do not recognize the truth will also be kept from doing so by God. Here is another verse from the same sura that makes the point that belief and unbelief ultimately depend on God's will.

Those whom God (in His plan) willeth to guide,- He openeth their breast to Islam; those whom He willeth to leave straying,- He maketh their breast close and constricted, as if they had to climb up to the skies: thus doth God (heap) the penalty on those who refuse to believe. (6:125)

We can know the truth—dependent on our will and God's. If our will is disinclined to believe God's revelation, we can expect little help from God. Allah may be merciful at his preference (as he was to Adam), but as a general rule,

Even if We did send unto them angels, and the dead did speak unto them, and We gathered together all things before their very eyes, they are not the ones to believe, unless it is in God's plan. But most of them ignore (the truth). (6:111)

Now we can see more directly how *Qadr*, God's predestination, affects human beings. Although human beings have a choice whether to obey Allah or not, the choice is not open-ended. It appears that God classifies each person into one of two groups: those who are believers and those who are his enemies. Once people have fallen into the second category, God will not only refuse to aid them, he will use his power to make sure that they remain deluded in their unbelief.

It is helpful at this point to elaborate on this aspect of Islam by making a distinction to Christianity. In Romans 5:10 the apostle Paul exults:

For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, [then how] much more, having been reconciled, will we be saved by His life! (Holman Christian Standard Version)

Even though we already were enemies of God due to our fallen nature, God loved us and made peace with us because of Christ's death on the cross. On the other hand, in the Qur'an we read,

Lo! God is an enemy to those who reject Faith. (2:98b)

Regardless of how much agency we ascribe to God's creatures, all of their actions are bracketed by his will. As a matter of fact, the Qur'an promises occasions in which God will intentionally provide opportunities for believers to demonstrate that they accept his plans as final.

Be sure we shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods or lives or the fruits (of your toil), but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere, Who say, when afflicted with calamity: "To God We belong, and to Him is our return": They are those on whom (Descend) blessings from God, and Mercy, and they are the ones that receive guidance. (2:155-57)

**6. Worldview Question 6:** *Right and wrong are based on the teachings of the Qur'an, as amplified by the Hadith and interpreted by the schools of law, the shari'a.*

Thus, there is nothing left for us to do than to try our best to follow all of God's commandments. There is no point in speculating on God's will. Rather than search for God's purposes, we should accept whatever he sends our way *bilā kayf*, which means "without asking why."<sup>21</sup> Any statement of intentions on our part should be accompanied by the phrase "*inshallah*"—"if God wills" (18:24), a phrase that can express genuine reliance on God (and is also taught for Christians in James 4:15), but in popular usage can also become either a formula of resignation or a mantra to ward off evil. Our obligation is not to out-think Allah but to do his will.

The source of knowledge about what is right or wrong, as already indicated, is the Qur'an. In case there should be some ambiguity concerning how a particular commandment should be interpreted, one can consult

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<sup>21</sup>Martin, *Islam*, p. 100.

the hadiths, which are several collections of sayings and actions by Muhammad, as allegedly<sup>22</sup> remembered by those who knew him well. For example, quite a few of these recollections are attributed to Aïsha, his very young wife who turned into a spunky young widow and was not above disputing with the caliphs themselves. Even though it is accepted practice to use the expression *Hadith* in the singular, there is no single authoritative collection, and the various components are of uneven authority. Consequently, there developed among Sunni Muslims four schools of Islamic Law (*shari'a*) that advocated different degrees of strictness in applying the rules of the Qur'an and their relationship to the Hadith. Of the four, the one that adheres most strictly to the most literal applications of the Qur'an is the Hanbalite school. Among its heritage is the Wahhabite reform movement, which, in turn, gave rise to the Taliban in Afghanistan, one of the so-called fundamentalist movements of Islam.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>There are several collections of hadiths, and they are considered of uneven reliability, even among Muslims. A representative collection is provided by Maulana Muhammad Ali, *A Manual of Hadith* (Lahore, Pakistan: The Ahmadiyya Anjuman Ishaat Islam, 1944), easily accessible at <<http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/hadith/index.htm>>.

<sup>23</sup>The first appearance of a "radical" Islamic group came about in the struggle for the successor (caliph) to Muhammad as leader of the new Islamic community, which pitted Muhammad's own family (his son-in-law Ali ben Talib and his grandsons, al-Hassan and al-Hussein) against the Umayyad clan, who believed they were entitled to the position. A group called the *Kharijites* (which means "dissenters") emerged with the message that the person who is most qualified to be caliph should be whoever was the most devoted to Allah and most exemplary in obeying the Qur'an. Anyone who thought otherwise had lapsed from true Islam and deserved to receive the same treatment as unbelievers who fight against Islam. In fact, the Qur'an considers lapsed Muslims and hypocrites to be worse than unbelievers: "They swear by Allah that they said nothing (evil), but indeed they uttered blasphemy, and they did it after accepting Islam; and they meditated a plot which they were unable to carry out: this revenge of theirs was (their) only return for the bounty with which Allah and His Messenger had enriched them! If they repent, it will be best for them; but if they turn back (to their evil ways), Allah will punish them with a grievous penalty in this life and in the Hereafter: They shall have none on earth to protect or help them" (9:74). Furthermore, "The Hypocrites will be in the lowest depths of the Fire: no helper will you find for them" (4:145).

There is a remarkable phenomenon occurring in contemporary scholarship in the social sciences with regard to explaining the nature of "fundamentalism" in its various manifestations, which are usually considered to be Christian fundamentalism, radical Islam and Hasidic Judaism. The underlying question is what these "fundamentalists" have in common and what similar influences they might have in their respective settings. Needless to say, there are many conflicting opinions. See, for example, Bruce Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against the Modern Age* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989). I would like to suggest that the problem is that these groups have little in common other than that they represent conservatism in their individual contexts. Observers have taken a term that is only appropriate to Christianity, applied it arbitrarily to other religions, and are now trying to explain a phenomenon that they themselves created by their own unreflective use of terminology. In the case of Islam, for example, if groups like the Taliban need to receive a

The obligations for a Muslim begin with the five pillars: to recite the confession (there is no God but Allah), to pray five times a day, to fast during the month of Ramadan, to give the annual contribution for the poor, and to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime. But this is only the beginning. Muslim life is strictly regulated. There are three fundamental categories of actions: those that are directly commanded (*fard*), those that are permitted (*halal*), and those that are prohibited (*haram*). Of course, any violation of *halal* is *haram*, and not to carry out the obligations that are *fard* is also *haram*. I am mentioning this logical truism because a negative mindset is the most common result among human beings who believe that their eternal destiny is based on keeping rules. When everything is riding on one's actions, and when there is no assurance of God's indulgence, let alone any grace, avoiding the potentially negative consequences of any sin is bound to become the primary incentive for one's actions rather than the positive motivation of keeping the rules out of gratitude.

**7. Worldview Question 7:** *Human history has significance in demonstrating the absolute sovereignty of God but, even more so, as the opportunity for people to demonstrate their submission to him.*

Human history is the world's longest final exam, and the test starts right along with the lectures. On a less ultimate level, the goal of history is to subsume the entire world under the *umma*, the Islamic community, which is as much a political entity as a congregation of believers. The significance of this statement can be clarified by drawing another point of contrast. Many religions anticipate a time in which their beliefs and practices will be observed universally around the globe.<sup>24</sup> The question is, what are you expected to do in the meantime? For example, in Christianity believers are exhorted to submit to rulers, even if they are pagan, and even though many Christians look forward to Christ's actual govern-

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general label beyond Wahhabite and Hanbalite, the best term would not be "fundamentalist" but "neo-Kharijite." Their preferred self-designation is Salafi, which means "those who follow the prophet."

<sup>24</sup>Judaism looks forward to the Messianic age, Christians wait for the second coming of Christ (frequently along with the expectation of a millennium), and Zoroastrians are counting on Saoshyant to set the world right. Even among the religions where history is a never-ending cycle, Hindus expect Kalki, Buddhists Maitreya, and Jains another whole set of twenty-four Tirthankaras. See Winfried Corduan, *A Tapestry of Faiths: Common Threads Among the World's Religions* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 171-94.

ment on earth during the “millennium,” only God himself will bring about this end.<sup>25</sup> Until then, we should do what we can to promote justice and peace while we wait for God to bring things to a conclusion by his own power. Islam, on the other hand, comes with the mandate to set up Islamic governments, and it is never fully implemented unless there is an Islamic state.

Thus have We made of you an *Ummat* justly balanced,  
That ye might be witnesses  
Over the nations. (2:143)

Yusuf Ali explains in his commentary on this and the preceding verse that the *umma* is a new nation, “an independent people with laws and rituals of their own.” In this state there will be no idolatry permitted, but the “people of the book,” Jews and Christians, will be tolerated, as long as “they pay the Jizya with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued” (9:27). The *jizya* is a compensation required of Christians and Jews for enjoying the benefits of living in a Muslim community without contributing to it.

Many Muslims believe that shortly prior to the last judgment, the Mahdi will appear. There are several conflicting traditions concerning this figure. In Shi’ite Islam he is the twelfth Imam, who, as a five-year-old child in A.D. 878, went into seclusion in a remote cave, where he has been living ever since, until the time will come for him to disclose himself again. In other divisions his identity is less specific. Many Muslims also believe in the second coming of Christ; specifically that he will descend on the Mosque of the Umayyads in Damascus, Syria. Some believe that Christ is the Mahdi, while others believe that Jesus and the Mahdi are two distinct persons.<sup>26</sup> Still others do not have much use for the idea of a

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<sup>25</sup>Just as I have been doing with Islam all along, I am here referring to Christianity in what I consider its more representative form and relying more literally on the Bible. The fact that there have been Christians who have attempted to establish God’s kingdom on earth by their own power, sometimes even by physical force, does not mean that this perspective is of equal standing with the more biblical view that I am addressing in the text.

<sup>26</sup>An interesting sidelight is provided by the Pakistani group (now actually two groups), called the Ahmadiyya sect. This sect was started in the nineteenth century by Ghulam Ahmad of Qadiyan, who claimed to be the Mahdi, the second coming of Christ, and the fulfillment of Hindu hopes for the return of Krishna (though not, as frequently misrepresented, Krishna himself). Ahmadiyya Islam is consistently pacifistic, and it has now divided into two sub-groups, named after the towns of their headquarters. The Qadiyan branch says that Ghulam was only a reformer, whereas the Lahore branch takes the unorthodox view that he was a

Mahdi at all since Muhammad is the final prophet. I am mentioning this debate because it illustrates the fact that Muslim expectations for the end times are not at all unanimous. How history ends is not all that crucial considering that the all-important last judgment follows immediately.

**8. Worldview Question 8:** *A devout Muslim is grateful to Allah for providing the opportunity to serve him and will strive to follow the divine instructions in even the smallest part of life.*

Obviously, we find among Muslim people the same distribution of degrees of commitment as in all other religions. So, let us focus on the person who is serious in devotion to Allah. Such a man or woman will frequently express gratitude that Allah has provided the chance to enter Paradise. Muslims refer to the teachings of the Qur'an as "good news." Christians may be surprised at this use of the term, which is, of course, synonymous with "gospel," because among Christians the idea of the gospel is tied to our fallen state and our utter inability to improve our standing with God in our own power, and God's grace that saves us apart from our good works. Islam has neither the doctrine of original sin by which all human beings are condemned from birth on, nor is there a doctrine of salvation by grace according to which our works are not instrumental in contributing to our salvation. In fact, Muslims tend to find the idea of free salvation irresponsible, and even without a notion of original sin, they are sufficiently convinced of human sinfulness that they consider any chance at salvation at all to be a true act of mercy on God's part. All but one of the suras (number 9) of the Qur'an begins with the expression "in the name of Allah, the most gracious and most merciful." They see the fact that they must live up to divine standards in order to receive salvation not as a burden but as an opportunity.

Still, Islam demands of the person nothing less than everything. The standards for a truly acceptable life are high and become extremely detailed the more one seeks to implement them according to the Hadith. To mention just a few obvious ones, there are restrictions on food, of course, such as avoiding pork, blood or strangled meat. Not only women but also men must follow principles of clothing and personal decoration on clothing. To be more specific, men must have their limbs covered at least as far

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prophet as well. Consequently, the latter form of Ahmadiyya Islam is not officially recognized as true Islam in Pakistan.

as their elbows and knees and may not wear gold or garments made entirely of silk. There are rules for every aspect of a normal day, including how to perform common actions and what prayers or formulas to speak alongside them.<sup>27</sup> The earnest Muslim will not chafe at these requirements, but follow them with gratitude to Allah for giving him this chance to demonstrate his allegiance.

Nevertheless, gratitude and hope are not the same things as joy and grace. The weight of the obligations and their consequences are too profound to induce automatic rejoicing (though there are, of course, happy Muslims). On an extreme end, Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of the Wahhabite movement in Saudi Arabia, prohibited music, a rule that was eventually relaxed in its country of origin but was revived by its offspring, the Taliban. But what really makes the picture so poignant is that, all the compliance by a human being notwithstanding, the will of Allah can always override all the good works a person may have accumulated. It is easy to believe that God has it in his power to forgive a person's sins without the need for any atonement. But, as Colin Chapman observes,

This understanding of forgiveness, however, leaves us open to a frightening uncertainty, since we can never have any assurance about God's verdict for each individual on the day of judgment.<sup>28</sup>

Chapman follows this statement with a reference to the feelings of terror expressed by the first two caliphs (who are considered to be exemplary in their lives, as expressed by the term "rightly guided") on their deathbeds, since even they did not know whether they would be accepted by God.

The true Muslim must assert that God is all-caring, all-forgiving and all-merciful, but he may not draw the implication that therefore God will definitely grant him access to paradise. He has been taught to dismiss the

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<sup>27</sup>To underscore this point, allow me to extend it a little further, not because it may look exaggerated to non-Muslims, but because it illustrates the reality that I am addressing. The Hadith even includes the proper means of sanitation and which prayers to utter before and after one performs biological acts of necessity. Furthermore, it does so clearly and openly without violating any sensitivities, which are more likely to be the product of Western "Christian" scruples than Islamic attitudes. Maulana Muhammad Ali, *A Manual of Hadith*, chapter 4, section 1: "Natural Evacuations" <<http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/hadith/had07.htm>>.

<sup>28</sup>Colin Chapman, *The Cross and the Crescent: Responding to the Challenge of Islam* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 259-60.

Christian belief in the atonement, but he may not understand that it is precisely because the atonement is the work of God, and not of a human being, that the Christian is able to express assurance of salvation. So, our

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**Mecca Death Toll Is Confirmed; King Calls It Fate**

The Saudi Interior Minister, Prince Nayef, said today that 1,426 Muslim pilgrims died in a stampede in a pedestrian tunnel linking this city with a tent camp for pilgrims. Prince Nayef said the stampede was caused when seven pilgrims fell from an overhead bridge near the tunnel. Other officials said a power failure caused the air-conditioning in the 1,500-foot-long, 60-foot-wide tunnel to switch off in 112-degree heat on Monday, setting off the stampede. "It was God's will, which is above everything," King Fahd said of the disaster. "It was fate."

AP News Report, published by the *New York Times*, July 4, 1990

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Muslim neighbor is glad to do all he can in order to measure up on the last day, and he knows that Allah is good, but he cannot erase the question mark that always hangs over him when it comes to his eternal destiny. I have heard more than one Muslim tell me that he is sure to go to heaven—as long as he remains conscious of God and his commandments every second of his life. The qualification takes all the certainty out of the stated assurance.

Nevertheless, for millions of people Islam has provided stability. They are convinced that, any uncertainty notwithstanding, they are on the right side. "*Allahu akbar*" is a victory shout over any competing religions. But our look at Islamic theism has revealed a worldview that seems uneven: it is ultimately a closed system that puts humans in a bind between personal accountability and divine determinism. Allah appears to oscillate between mercy and nothing short of hatred toward unbelievers.

But perhaps, to come to a better understanding of the positive role that Islam plays in the lives of its believers, we should not limit our comparison to the two theisms of Christianity and Islam. Let us keep in mind that Islam arose in what Muslims call "the times of darkness." Muhammad's primary message was directed against idolatry and superstition in a society in which justice and power were synonymous, many people

were treated worse than animals, and infanticide was a common practice. We need to acknowledge the advances that Islam made at its inception over its contemporary culture, which in some important ways (e.g., women's rights) also put it ahead of European culture at that time. Historically, the origins of Islamic theism are tied to a certain amount of influence from Judaism and Christianity, but this new theism established a culture that brought some improvements to society that did not exist at that time in the cultures established under the insignia of the two older forms of theism. Although the debate on whether early Islam was spread by the sword is still continuing, it is a fact that many localities opened their doors happily to Islam and were glad to be relieved of the rampant corruption of the Byzantine empire. Islam had found some truths and made a great contribution by spreading them.

However, Islam simultaneously walled itself off from the two older forms of theism and declared itself to be the final truth, superior over its two fountainheads from its outset. Whereas Judaism has a millennia-long history of development, and Christianity did not begin to settle crucial questions in its councils until hundreds of years after Christ, Islam for the most part closed its door to any further refinements of its theism, in particular foreclosing the possibility that it could learn any further from Judaism and Christianity. To be sure, the schools of shari'a developed, but these were predominantly schools of jurisprudence, not of theological investigation. Potential innovations in theology, such as those proposed by the Mu'tazilites, even if they received a hearing or public endorsement for a while, were most likely greeted with suspicion and, even if they were not eventually declared to be heretical, they would sooner or later be swallowed up by traditional formulations.

Now, none of the remarks above should be considered to be a criticism *per se*. I, too, as an evangelical Christian, am leery of innovations in theology. But my point is that, from my perspective, Islam closed the lines of communication, both external and internal, far too soon. Consequently it incorporated the ambiguities and uncertainties that we mentioned above, that could have been resolved if Islamic theism had allowed itself to keep learning and growing in insights over its first few centuries. Islamic theism certainly is an authentic theism, but it is one that unfortunately became truncated before it could reach full maturity.

## FOLK ISLAM

For virtually any religion, in addition to its various schools, denominations and sects, it is possible to encounter a wide gulf between the “standard” version of the religion, which is the way it is being taught in the books and by its leaders, and the “folk” version of the religion, which is the way that the religion is actually lived out on a day-to-day basis by the common people. For example, it is fairly easy to discern a “folk” Christianity in the U.S. state of Indiana, where I live.<sup>29</sup> Many authors point out that because Islam stresses the transcendence of God so much, it stands out as a religion in which the gulf between the “standard” form and the “folk” version has become particularly wide. Colin Chapman, for example, makes the point that Sufism developed as a way of addressing “the hunger of the heart” for those who “longed for a faith that has reality for the individual,”<sup>30</sup> and that “folk” Islam can be seen as one further step (albeit perhaps a very large one) in speaking to the same felt needs.<sup>31</sup> (Even though the division can be arbitrary at times, I will now continue on without enclosing the two terms in quotation marks.)

Many accounts of folk Islam tend to depict it as genuine Islam, but lived out with a different attitude than one would expect within the standard version. The people carry out the basic duties of the five pillars and observe other Islamic obligations, but their goal is not the worship of Allah for its own sake but to tap into the sources of power and blessing that Islam provides. For example, a common phenomenon is that people who have manifested a great amount of devotion during their lives may be venerated as saints, and those who admire them visit their tombs in order to receive special blessings. Drawing on my experience in India, it is not at all unlikely that one may walk down the streets of, say, Hyderabad and suddenly encounter a little gap between houses and businesses. In that little open area there may be the tomb of a saint, set up as a concrete prism about the size of an oversize coffin and surrounded by a concrete wall, perhaps about three feet tall. The entire little structure is painted and covered by Islamic symbols and perhaps some other decorations specifically associated with the person buried there. People who need particular spiritual help may visit such a site and say prayers there.

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<sup>29</sup>Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>30</sup>Chapman, *Cross and Crescent*, p. 122.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 129.

Life is too large and complicated for individual humans to manage by themselves, and people always look for solutions that will provide immediate aid when the crops fail, relationships are out of kilter, a family member is ill or other problems invade their lives. So-called folk Islam attempts to give such aid. Additionally, practices in Islamic folk religion are frequently geared for spiritual protection from the malicious spirits (the jinn), curses or the “evil eye.” In fact, in some areas, this second aspect is so overwhelming that one could conclude that folk Islam really has no place in a chapter on Islamic theism because it seems to be more of a form of animism than theism.

In many areas of the world, folk Islam goes beyond the description of Islam as addressing felt needs with superstitious practices. If we accept the supposition underlying folk Islam that standard Islam does not meet certain needs, and if the Muslim population happens to live in an area where another religion is thriving, and if it appears that this other religion meets that particular need, the result is often a syncretism in which elements of the other religion are incorporated into Islamic practices.

I have seen folk Islam in many different situations in South Asia and Southeast Asia. For example, about an hour’s boat ride outside of Singapore is a little island called Kusu Island, or “Turtle Island,” which houses a shrine built in honor of a Muslim saint, his wife and his daughter, similar to the tombs mentioned above. In this case, however, the legend holds that they did not die but that in the late nineteenth century they were raptured directly to heaven. Kusu Island is fairly flat, but the devotees built an artificial hill about 100 feet tall on one end of the island. They planted trees on it and erected a wooden shrine, covered with yellow paint, at its summit. There are two different paths, one leading up to the shrine and one leading down, thus enabling an efficient procession of worshipers during the month of October when many Malaysian Muslims observe special days there. But the shrine is always open, and people visit it throughout the year, particularly if they encounter financial problems or are having to deal with wayward children.

As one enters the premises, there is no doubt that it is an Islamic structure, with the crescent moon and star on the signs, the walls and the “tombs.” Furthermore, there is a tapestry depicting the ka’aba in Mecca, and there are wall hangings with verses from the Qur’an. But that is not all that we find in the Islamic shrine on Kusu Island. At the foot of one of

the tombs is a shelf holding the yin-and-yang-shaped blocks used for Chinese fortune telling, and in one corner of the building there is a big oven of the type that is used to burn paper as an offering to the spirits of Chinese religion. And there is more that does not seem to fit in with standard Islam. After having said prayers and undertaken other rituals, a worshiper may take a small plastic shopping bag, fill it with rocks and hang it on one of the trees along the downward path, thereby having created a “sacred object,” which would be a highly questionable action in standard Islam. Then, some time later, when his prayers hopefully have been answered, he will visit the shrine again, express his gratitude and remove the stone-filled bag.

Thus we see that folk Islam is not a somewhat revised version of Islam but, in many places, adapts itself to surrounding non-Muslim cultures and frequently becomes downright syncretistic.

For anyone attempting to learn about the Islamic world and how to encounter Muslims in a real-life setting, it is essential that they learn as much as they possibly can about folk Islam. Still, in many cases, folk Islam is so far removed from standard Islam that, if the goal is to understand Islamic theism and the nature of Islam as it has affected the world in recent years, folk Islam occupies a very different category. Wahhabite Islam, the version of Islam practiced by the Taliban, for example, was founded precisely in order to eliminate the practices of folk Islam. Furthermore, to the best of my knowledge, Muslims in the United States (now close to 7 million strong) are not particularly inclined toward folk Islam. Therefore, it is good to know about it, but it is a different worldview than the one I have attempted to describe in this chapter.