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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear friends

This year has been another riotous year in the Arab World. It is awful to see how the lands we love so much are facing so many problems, so much bloodshed, and so much injustice.

In the midst of these problems, the Church of Christ seems to be suffering a bit extra. Especially in Syria, the situation is grim. It is also worrying, to put it mildly, that Arab Christians continue to emigrate in vast numbers.

As missionaries in the Arab World we can encourage the Church that it is not alone; that the world does not forget its fate. We are also called to encourage Christians in the Arab World to follow Jesus Christ and live for him. This entails witnessing about Him to all people.

We as an editorial team hope that this issue of St Francis Magazine is helpful to your work of presenting Jesus Christ to the nations. He is Emanuel, God with us, irrespective of our circumstances.

God bless you!

Rev Dr John Stringer

EVANGELISM THROUGH THE EYES OF JESUS IN LUKE 5:1-11 AND HOLISTIC EVANGELISM FOR THE 21ST CENTURY: TOWARDS LIFE, JUSTICE AND EQUALITY... BUT NOT AS WE KNOW IT

By John Baxter-Brown

On July 6th 1980 at about 7:45 pm, a life was transformed, or at least that process began. It was the moment a troubled and self-destructive teenager consciously became a follower of a subsistence manual worker from Palestine, Jesus Christ. The young man regards that moment as the point at which he was ‘converted.’ It was a dramatic experience, in a moment changing the orientation of a life, transforming his frame of reference from destruction towards life. Of course, the experience was the culmination of one process and the start of a much longer one. For the young man, becoming a follower included a clear and definite call to evangelism for it was simply not possible to separate becoming a follower himself from inviting other people to follow Jesus with him. The two go together.

Another dimension to this story is the failure of the Church that took 17 years to reach the youth. The Christian’s call to evangelism is also a call to the Church – it is a reminder that the most sacred ministry of incarnating Jesus in word and deed and of reconciling people and all of creation to God needs to be at the centre of the work of the people of God. If it is not, the Church has lost its vocation and its reason for being. It has lost its taste like the salt in Matt. 5 and ‘it is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.’

This article looks at another story of Jesus and his impact on people, specifically on a small group of fishermen in Palestine. As we explore the story we will see that Jesus offered them the same invita-

tion to follow him as he did the young man referred to above. The same vocation also continues to be requested and demanded. To appreciate this story we need to explore the background to it, particularly about the fishing industry and tax system of the time, as well as a couple of cultural aspects hidden within the text. As we explore the text we find that through it God still has an agenda for the Church, one that calls the Church towards life, justice and equality, but this is radical vocation. It is the call to *holistic evangelism* and not some insipid christianised version of a secular human rights narrative: it is far more radical than that.

We will start by setting the scene in three distinct ways: the global geo-political context of the time, the local situation and then the culture of the text itself.

1 Setting the Scene: the big picture in Luke 5:1-11

Jesus began his formal ministry when he was about thirty years old (Luke 3:23) with his baptism by John. Luke takes some care to tell us when this was (3:1). John began his own ministry: (1) in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, (2) when Pilate was Governor of Judea, (3) when Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, (4) Philip, one of Herod's brothers, tetrarch of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and (5) Lysanias, another brother, tetrarch of Abilene, and (6) during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. There are six pointers here that can give a reasonable time frame¹.

- 1) Tiberius became Emperor in 14 AD, implying that John started his own ministry in 29 AD.

¹ These dates are drawn from *The New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd edn, FF Bruce, *New Testament History*, Drane, *Introduction to the New Testament*

- 2) Pilate was governor (prefect) of Judea between 26 and 36 AD. He was promoted under the influence of Sejanus², a one time favourite of Tiberius. But Sejanus fell from grace in 31 AD and this placed Pilate in a weaker political position.
- 3) Herod Antipas was tetrarch from 4 BC until his death in 39 AD.
- 4) Philip was tetrarch from 4 BC until his death in about 34 AD.
- 5) Little is known of Lysanius, other than that there is an inscription which places him as tetrarch of Abilene definitely sometime between 14 AD and 29 AD, but does not rule out a longer tenure of office.
- 6) Caiaphas was high priest between 18 AD and 37 AD; Annas was High Priest between 6 AD and 15AD, when he was deposed but he retained a high level of religious and political power, exercised by his son-in-law, one Caiaphas.

The ministries of both John and Jesus are therefore placed in an historical context by Luke, embracing the whole of the then-known world. This embrace includes the military and political context of the Roman Empire as well as the religious one within Palestine. Both ministries were begun and ended under a brutal military occupation. Jesus' religious context is further emphasised by the genealogy at the end of Luke 3.

John the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. What this means in terms of behaviour is spelt out in terms of the crowds (3:10, 11), tax collectors (3:12, 13) and soldiers (3:14). The people were in a state of expectation (3:15) and wondered if John was the Christ. To this, John points to the 'One' who is mightier than he. In these ways, he 'preached the gospel to the people'. The

² FF Bruce, *New Testament History*, Pickering & Inglis: London, Third Revised edn (1982). pg. 33

word used is *euaggelizo*, so a more literal translation would be, 'he evangelised the people.' In due course, Jesus came to John and was baptised, and this was followed by the temptation in the wilderness (4:1-13). This was followed by the beginning of Jesus' *public* ministry.

2 Setting the Scene: the local picture

2.1 *The Start of the Public Ministry*

Very quickly Jesus' fame spread, and He began teaching in the local synagogues of Galilee (14, 15). The geography here is important.

Galilee was a region containing mainly villages and small towns. It was known as Galilee of the Gentiles³ as it had so often been under foreign occupation throughout history. Between the 8th and 2nd centuries BC it was controlled successively by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Macedonians, Egyptians and Seleucids and the area experienced continual immigration. By the time of Jesus, Galileans had their own distinctive accent which was used as the basis for the accusation made against Simon Peter in Mt 26:73. The Jewish population was a minority among a Gentile majority⁴.

Nazareth is up in the hills, away from the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is not mentioned in the Old Testament. It was settled during the 2nd century BC and is known to have remained an all-Jewish town until the 4th century. Indeed after the fall of Jerusalem one of the courses of priests from Jerusalem settled there⁵.

Down in the valleys, Jesus fame is rising and news is spreading. Up in the hills he gets a different reception. The two reactions to Jesus are noted by Luke (4:28, 29 compared with 31, 32). It is also clear that there is some relationship with Simon's family (4:38, 39). Jesus' fame

³ Mt 4:15, quoting Is 9:1.

⁴ www.welcometohosanna.com

⁵ 2008, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* Kenneth E Bailey London: SPCK, p. 152

spreads and his reputation grows. It is against this background that the story is set.

2.2 The Galilean Fishing Industry⁶

The fishing industry, like most industries in a context of foreign occupation, was ultimately controlled by the ruling elite with the aim of maximising tax revenues. We are not talking here of a free enterprise state such as Britain was and the USA is: instead we are talking of imperialism. The fishing rights were sold by the ruling elite (Herod) to intermediaries (*telōnai*) often translated as ‘tax collectors’. These are the people who had direct and contractual arrangements with the local fishermen, and the fishermen had one source of capitalization – the broker. The power relationship was very much one-way.

However, fishermen did cooperate with each other. In 1986 a boat was discovered in the mud along the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, just north of ancient Magdala (from whence Mary Magdalene came). It is 26.5 feet long, 7.5 feet wide and 4.5 feet deep. It is primarily made of cedar and oak, but other woods were used as well. It has been dated to between 40 BC and 70 AD, so is a contemporary of the boats used at the time of Jesus’ ministry. The boat had a sail and places for four rowers and one tiller and could accommodate a load of about one ton (five crew and their catch or crew and about ten passengers). Fish was processed and exported (even Pliny the Elder makes reference to Judean processed fish).

The fishermen were also dependent upon others in the business: they had suppliers (timber, sail cloth, net flax from farmers, stonemasons for their stone anchors), on occasion hired labourers, and processors and distributors. The whole system was regulated by the interests

⁶ *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts*, Hanson KC and Oakman Douglas E. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 2nd edn. No date given. Ch. 4, ‘The Denarius Stops Here, esp. pgs. 99-103

of the elite, most notably through taxation, and any ‘surplus’ most likely went to the brokers, not the fishermen. The fishermen were kept at the level of subsistence, as were the other local peasants. The peasant society was mainly controlled through ties of kinship and the religious institutions – synagogues, scribes, priests and the like.

2.3 Following your Rabbi

By the age of thirteen most boys would have finished their formal education and been apprenticed to a trade. Only the most talented would have stayed on for further training at the *bet midrash* (house of interpretation), and only the most talented of *those* would have gone on to train under a rabbi. The fishermen in the story would not have been considered among the most talented, because they were fishermen, not rabbis-in-training. They were subsistence-level agricultural workers and not among the powerful, the rulers, the rich. They were not numbered among those who could change the world.

3 Setting the Scene: the text of Luke 5:1-11⁷

The text follows a standard rhetorical device, sometimes called the ‘prophetic rhetorical template’ and consists of seven inverted stanzas (or scenes) within the narrative. This is important because of the cultural framework we tend to follow when engaging with texts. The Western approach is to see things in a linear manner, with a beginning, a middle and an end. In this approach, it is the *end* which is given the emphasis and therefore seen as the most important part of the narrative. For example, we develop a story or plot or paper to arrive at conclusions or endings⁸. The ancient Jews, however, used the

⁷ I draw from Kenneth E Bailey’s *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*, London: SPCK 2008, ch. 11 ‘The Call of Peter’

⁸ It is worth noting that this may now be changing with the invention of the Internet which by its nature is non-linear: the consumer of information has a high level of

inverted stanza approach to vary the emphasis within a text. The seven stanzas are:

- 1 The boat goes out (Jesus teaches)
- 2 Jesus speaks to Peter (catch fish!)
- 3 Peter speaks to Jesus (in arrogance)
- 4 Dramatic catch of fish (nature miracle)
- 5 Peter speaks to Jesus (in repentance)
- 6 Jesus speaks to Peter (catch people)
- 7 The boat returns (they follow Jesus)

So in 1 and 7 the boat goes out and comes back; in 2 and 6 Jesus speaks to Peter; in 3 and 5 Peter speaks to Jesus and in 4 there is the amazing catch of fish. There is an extra note in 5b (v 9) which breaks the smooth flow of the stanzas: it is quite possible that Luke added this explanatory note, in which case the original text (before Luke recorded it) was just the seven stanzas and may give us a glimpse of how the earliest oral Gospel texts were memorized. Here is the text of the passage:

¹ Now it happened that while the crowd was pressing around Him and listening to the word of God, He was standing by the lake of Gennesaret; ² and He saw two boats lying at the edge of the lake; but the fishermen had gotten out of them and were washing their nets.

³ And He got into one of the boats, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little way from the land. And He sat down and began teaching the people from the boat.

⁴ When He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

⁵ Simon answered and said, "Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but I will do as You say and let down the nets."

control over the way information is accessed and appropriated (for example, following different threads through hyperlinks).

⁶When they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish, and their nets began to break;

⁷so they signalled to their partners in the other boat for them to come and help them. And they came and filled both of the boats, so that they began to sink.

⁸But when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

⁹For amazement had seized him and all his companions because of the catch of fish which they had taken;

¹⁰and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men."

¹¹When they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him.

In Western cultures we tend towards a linear approach to narratives. We do use literary techniques to power the plot forwards, adding twists and sub-plots to keep the narrative alive. Other cultures adopt different literary techniques and in this story such a device is being used. The effect is to give the story two main points: the first one is clearly the catch of fish in verse 6, and the second is the disciples leaving everything and following Jesus. The two events are linked not only by chronology but structurally in the way Luke has presented his material. We do well to note such literary devices for they can help shed deeper insight into the narrative.

4 Deeper Insights

4.1 Peter's Story - Following

Fishermen were not regarded as those who had the power or ability to change the world. They had not been selected as rabbis-in-training. They were low-level, subsistence workers and the socio-economic system was designed to keep them that way. They worked hard and of-

ten worked anti-social hours. Their lives were highly structured: fishermen they were and fishermen they would remain. That was their lot in life. They lived in a multi-cultural context: they were exposed to both Jews and Gentiles and at least in this respect, there was some colour leaking in to what was otherwise a monochrome existence. Families were important both in terms of the social fabric of society but also economically and personally. The two sets of brothers in the passage, Simon and Andrew, and James and John, had close-knit family ties. The tax system ensured that they would never be rich and probably never earn enough to break free of the debts they accrued in raising capitalization for their boats. The only source of such capital was the local tax collector.

I remember the first time I visited Rome, one of the most fascinating cities on earth. One evening my colleagues and I went for a walk into the city centre and as we walked under the setting sun, with the ancient ruins, monuments and buildings, I remember being struck by one over-empowering realisation: two men changed not only the city but the entire Roman Empire. Their stories are told and retold through architecture and art. Images of their lives and deaths are portrayed, sometimes very graphically, for they both met their deaths in the Eternal City. The most magnificent building in Rome is named after one of them and his mortal remains, according to some archaeologists, lie under this building to this day. Far from having a monochrome life, Simon Peter had a remarkably colourful one and the turning point – from still-life black and white to a rich and textured techni-colour masterpiece – is recorded in this passage.

The pivot for Simon Peter is the miraculous catch of fish, the first main point of the narrative. In turn, the power behind the story is that of Jesus, the key figure in the Gospel narratives and in Peter's personal story. For the fisherman, the miracle is primarily economic: this subsistence-level carpenter – a carpenter from the mountains, no less!

- clearly has the power to ensure Peter's fishing success. Peter, with Jesus, could break free from the clutches of poverty, providing economic security for them. Interestingly, Peter's response to Jesus is an acknowledgement of his own sinfulness. He is amazed, not only by the huge number of fish but by the power of Jesus. In verse 5 Peter refers to Jesus as 'Master' a respectful term certainly (although he is at pains to point out that in his area of expertise - fishing - he knows his stuff and the fish are simply not biting), but lacking the theological and spiritual depth of the word he now uses in verse 8: 'Lord.' The sweaty, slippery work of hauling in the catch has been the context in which Peter's story is changed. His posture is important: he humbles himself before Jesus, falling down at Jesus' knees, amidst the still floundering fish, and he acknowledges his sinfulness. Note that *Master* opens Peter's first speech to Jesus, but here *Lord* closes his second speech. Simon is aware that he is the presence of a holy person and this forces him to face his own sinfulness. It does not happen within a religious framework, at a synagogue, but in the context of Peter's work. Simon's words are telling: *depart from me*, he tells Jesus. His understanding of Jesus has developed, but he still believes that the unclean can defile the clean and holy: Jesus has a different perspective, namely that forgiveness is available to the unclean from the clean. The dynamic of defilement is reversed in Jesus: he makes the guilty clean by bringing forgiveness, by drawing close, by sharing in Simon's world. Only then can Simon enter into His world of the Kingdom, of technicolour, dancing and life.

The fundamental starting point in Peter becoming a change-agent in this world is in him being changed within his unstable, wet and slippery world. Evangelism is ever the same in this respect: *first* our stories must be transformed as we encounter the story of Jesus. Only then can we truly respond to the primary vocation of all disciples throughout all ages to 'come, follow.' However, the secondary

priority – again of all disciples throughout all ages, which cannot be separated from the first – is evangelism. It is to this we now turn.

4.2 Peter's Story - Catching Men

Luke was a careful historian. He shows the same care in his use of words as he does with historical details. The word he uses in verse 10 is different from the word used in the parallel passages in Matthew and Mark. In Luke we find 'Jesus said to Simon, "Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men"' whereas the other two synoptic authors say that Jesus 'said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men."' The word used is the usual one for fishing, *aleeis*⁹ (Matt. 4:19 and Mark 1:17). Luke chooses to use *zogreo*, which comes from two different words, *zoos* meaning 'alive' (from which we get the English word, 'zoo') and *agreuo*, 'to hunt or catch.' The word is used, for example in Homer, of sparing the lives of captured enemy combatants. Thus, there is a subtle but significant difference: Peter has been fishing and the fish are gutted and eaten: they die. Luke, however, is saying that Peter's future purpose is to catch in order to give life. This places a different emphasis upon the concept of 'catching people' which is a metaphor for evangelism in this passage. Evangelism is intended to be wholesome, positive and life-giving. Consider it this way: natural history museums collect dead animals whereas zoos collect and breed live animals. Is the Christian community that you are part of concerned primarily with life, like zoos, or more like a museum, focused upon things that once were but are no longer alive? Is the message offered by your community one of life for now as well as the hereafter, or does the dust of the ancients clog contemporary vitality?

I am reminded of many examples of Christian communities offering such life to the lost, the least and the last. I offer here one such example, first published on a blog I was running¹⁰ in 2010.

The Salvation Army is growing in Cuba. Much of this growth is simply because the Army gets involved in the messiness of human existence.

Here's Jorge's story. Like Sandy's story below, it begins with dysfunction which led Jorge to develop a destructive dependency on alcohol. His family left him, his friends deserted him. He lost his home, his job, his dignity. He slept by the banks of a river in Camaguey, using cardboard and sack cloth for warmth. His health deteriorated and on January 2nd 2007 he was admitted to hospital for alcoholism and accompanying health problems. It was whilst in hospital that he heard about the Salvation Army's *New Life Project* and realised that he was being offered a chance to turn his life around.

It was a very tough path for him. The struggles towards abstinence led to a nervous breakdown and to self-harm. But he did not give up. The prayers of the Army congregation strengthened and encouraged him. And, slowly, after a long period of detox, with occupational therapy and the spiritual support of the Army, he won. The Good News came to him not only in becoming free of alcohol dependency, but also by accepting Jesus as his Saviour & Lord. This conversion experience gave him renewed determination and strength and he became a Salvation Army soldier in December of 2007.

He was reunited with his family and resumed his roles as husband and father. He continues to support others in the *New Life Project*. And all because the Salvation Army was the Good News for him before simply talking to him about it. So today Jorge is in turn the Good News to others as his life continues to be transformed by Jesus.

¹⁰ Published 2010 on the Evangelism blog at the World Council of Churches website, since removed.

I do not wish to place too much weight upon just one word in the text, although it is reasonable to suppose that Luke – the only Gospel writer to speak and write in Greek as his first language – used the word deliberately. He *did* intend it to carry *some* weight. But it is as we consider the rest of his Gospel that we start to catch glimpses of what Luke is driving at. For example, Luke places an emphasis upon the poor, the marginalized, the weak and the vulnerable (or as a friend of mine puts it, ‘the least, the last and the lost’). There is a legitimate challenge that asks how do we as Christian communities bring life to such people? How do we mimic the ministry of Jesus Himself? What does it mean to bring life? Luke gives answers to these questions, holding up Jesus not only as Saviour, but as an example for us to follow.

We have noted how Peter was captivated by Jesus in this narrative. In the third stanza Peter’s response to Jesus, as *master*, was arrogant, whereas in the fifth he is repentant before the *Lord*. He was caught by Jesus. In other words, Jesus is not only calling Peter to a life of catching people, he is showing him how it is done and this not simply through the preaching to a crowd in verse 3 but through the transformation of one story, Peter’s own story, in verse 8. Peter is not so much assenting to a set of doctrine (although he does) so much as being caught up in a story so much bigger than his own. The subsistence worker, overlooked by both the rabbis and their formal religious structures and the occupying military forces, is being called to be a follower and catcher. This vocation remains true today for everyone who is called to follow Jesus is also called to catch people, bringing them life. If we are not actively and intentionally caught up in bringing life, perhaps we have never been truly caught ourselves.

4.3 Jesus, the source of life

Life in this story is clearly focused upon Jesus, not upon some utopian view of society. The transformation is a complete re-orientating of

Peter's life from subsistence worker to following the Lord. This itself is a political statement for it acknowledges 'Jesus is Lord', the supreme authority even above Caesar. But following Him is first and foremost a personal commitment; the spiritual and political implications are profound and radical, but they flow out of the personal relationship of fisherman to Lord. The primary narrative in all theology and missiology must always be the story of Jesus. Missiology can never be faithful to the Gospel when it draws *primarily* upon social, political or cultural narratives, which has happened too often throughout Church history and continues to this day. Our understanding of life - and justice and equality - must of necessity be drawn first and foremost from the story of Jesus. Otherwise it is simply not Christian.

4.4 The New Community

There is a further point that is of significance and takes us back to the socio-economic conditions mentioned above. It just so happens that we have some information about the broker in Capernaum at this time, the person who was 'one over' the fishermen and most likely was the one who both capitalized the fishermen and to whom they paid taxes. He was called Levi, or Matthew. And he is the next named person that Jesus called to 'follow him.' So among the very earliest followers of Jesus was the beginning of a new community in which existing relationships by necessity was transformed by the strength of character of the person they followed: Jesus. Both social and economic relationships were challenged and transformed:

²⁷ After that He went out and noticed a tax collector named Levi sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, "Follow Me."

²⁸ And he left everything behind, and got up and began to follow Him.

²⁹ And Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax collectors and other people who were reclining at the table with them.

⁸⁰The Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?”

⁸¹And Jesus answered and said to them, “It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. ⁸²I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

There are implications here for contemporary followers of Christ. Jesus instituted a new community, a life-giving and life-sharing community, in which the accepted norms of social and economic relationships were turned upside down. In this community power is redefined so that the least will be the greatest (9:48), the first will be the last and the last, first (13:30) and those who humble themselves will be exalted (14:11). Characteristics of this community include the welcoming of ‘sinners and tax collectors,’ generosity to the poor, compassion for the sick, concern for the lost, commitment to truth and obedience, among many others. Justice and equality are understood in relation to Jesus. They are not isolated concepts, standing apart from the historical person of Jesus Christ. We do not have the liberty of using such concepts to develop missiology apart from the person of Jesus. To do so is to create a travesty of the Gospel.

One example of this practise comes from a recent visit to India, where I attended a national-level consultation in which the caste system was named as ‘evil.’ The system is ancient, dating back thousands of years. It is a form of social control, limiting power to an elite caste whilst the vast majority of people are excluded from social and power structures. The Christian Church should be very different from this; caste should have absolutely no place within the Church. Instead, vocation and gifting should be the foundation upon which the structures of the Church are developed: anything less than this is an offence to the Gospel of Jesus. Sadly, this is yet to be achieved. Other examples include the employment policies adopted by many Christian organisations in which power resides with a (usually self-selecting) few and

can be exercised with a lack of compassion, justice and care; the preferential treatment with which large donors may be treated compared to those who give more sacrificially because their money does not stretch so far; the misogyny which excludes women or the racism that excludes people of the ‘wrong’ ethnicity (as a white male European I have also suffered this).

5 Conclusion

Jesus gives Simon Peter the vocation to follow and the task of pursuing His mission. It is explicit: catch people. It is also modelled. This modelling is the basis upon which we should build our understanding of evangelism, and offers us a simple definition of the term: evangelism is nothing less than ‘catching people’ and holistic evangelism is the methodology Jesus offered by teaching and example.

As for the young man who opened this piece, he has tried to follow the subsistence worker from Palestine, trying to pass on to others what he found on 6th July 1980 – that the life Jesus offers is life in all its fullness. He has tried all sorts of methods: preaching in bars and clubs, in the streets and markets, in churches, schools and universities; caring for individuals broken by life; through hospitality (given and received); talking with people on trains and planes and in automobiles. But the best methodology by far is a life lived well in obedience to Jesus, simply trying to love and be loved and slowly being transformed by God’s love. I am far – very far – from getting it right but I am on the Way.

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TRANSLATING ‘SON OF GOD’: INSIGHTS FROM THE EARLY CHURCH

By Donald Fairbairn

In my article “Jesus’ Relationship to God, from His Words in John 13-17,” I argued that on the basis of Jesus’ Upper Room Discourse and High Priestly Prayer, the eternal relationship between the Son and the Father is central to Christianity. I contend that because of this one needs to allow the uniqueness and centrality of that relationship to shine forth clearly in the translated text of the New Testament. The question I would like to raise in this follow-up article is whether “Son” or “Son of God” must always be translated the same way, or whether it may be translated with different expressions in different passages, so as to render more clearly the contextual meanings it conveys in those different passages. For convenience, I will label and describe what I consider to be the legitimate options as follows:

- a) On the basis of the fact (if it is a fact) that “Son of God” sometimes means something other than “eternal Second Person of the Trinity” (even though the phrase always refers to the eternal Second Person of the Trinity), we could in some cases translate it with a word or phrase other than the common language equivalent.
- b) In spite of the fact (if it is a fact) that “Son of God” sometimes means something other than “eternal Second Person of the Trinity,” we should nevertheless always translate it with the same phrase, so that the reader will understand the phrase in connection with the overarching truth (made clear in many ways in Scripture) that Jesus is God’s eternal Son.

If we state the issue this way, then it appears to be similar to a complexity of issues the church faced early in its history (especially in the fourth century). If we look at the way the church dealt with these issues it may help guide us in our decision making about translation today. We shall see that the overwhelming practice of the church fathers was consistent with option “b” above, and that the reasons grew out three interrelated factors: 1) their fundamental approach to interpretation, 2) their theological insight into the nature of fatherhood and sonship, and 3) their way of linking Jesus’ Sonship to our sonship/daughtership.

1 The Early Church’s Fundamental Approach to Interpretation¹

During the on-going discussions about translating the phrase “Son of God,” it has often been argued (as I have mentioned above) that the phrase sometimes has the meaning of “Messiah” or the like. This fact (again, if it is a fact) has sometimes become the basis for the practice of never rendering the phrase “Son of God” with the common language equivalent. Such a move from the narrow to the more general is characteristic of our contemporary approach to interpreting Scripture but is somewhat at odds with the way the early church interpreted the Bible. I believe that the church fathers’ interpretive approach is one from which we can learn, one that may well be relevant to the question of whether we should always translate “Son of God” the same way.

¹ This portion of the paper is adapted from chapter six of my book *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2009). That chapter is itself closely related to a more detailed treatment of the early Church’s biblical interpretation in my article “Patristic Exegesis and Theology: The Cart and the Horse,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 69 (2007), pp. 1-19.

We contemporary Christians generally believe that the starting point for understanding any Bible passage correctly is the direct context of the passage itself. We look at the historical background to the passage, its literary context, its syntactical structure in the language in which it was written, and the precise usages of the important words in the passage. We study the *immediate* context of the passage as carefully and exhaustively as we can *before* we move out from that passage to take other relevant passages or relevant theological ideas into consideration. We move from the narrow to the broad. And of course, our reason for this is that we believe starting with the broad would lead us to read our own theological ideas into the passage rather than reading the passage's own meaning from its context. We think that it is only by starting with the passage in and of itself that we can be objective and truly grasp what the passage really means. As I have mentioned, the Muslim Idiom Translation discussion (henceforth "MIT") has highlighted this tendency: if "Son of God," considered in light of the background to certain New Testament passages, means "Messiah," then we are likely to assume that it can (or must) mean "Messiah" in other passages, and thus that we are justified in translating it with the equivalent of "Messiah" elsewhere.

At this point, we need to recognize that our contemporary way of trying to ensure accuracy in biblical interpretation is starkly different from the way the early church went about the same task. The church fathers had no qualms whatsoever about reading pre-conceived theological ideas into a given passage, as long as they got those ideas from elsewhere in the Bible. In fact, they regarded any attempt to *avoid* such a reading to be unchristian. To say this another way, the church fathers believed that the *entire* Bible was a book about Christ, and therefore they were determined to read *every* passage of Scripture as being directly or indirectly about Christ, the Christian's relationship to Christ, or the church's relationship to Christ. Note carefully what

is happening here. In interpreting the Bible, we start with the immediate context of the passage in question, and we generally refuse to allow any interpretation of that passage that cannot be drawn *from the passage itself*. In sharp contrast, the church fathers started with the *whole* Bible, with its *entire* message, and they read each passage in light of that entire message. We start from the narrow and work to the broad. The church fathers and we start the process of interpretation from opposite ends of the contextual spectrum. This is part of the reason they see connections between biblical passages that we do not think are there. This fact shows up very clearly in the following citation from Irenaeus, written in the late second century. His purpose here is to refute the biblical interpretation of the Gnostics, second-century heretics who believed that there were two distinct gods, one of the Old Testament and the other of the New Testament.

Their manner of acting is just as if one, when a beautiful image of a king has been constructed by some skillful artist out of precious jewels, should then take this likeness of the man all to pieces, should rearrange the gems, and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or a fox, and even that but poorly executed; and should then maintain and declare that *this* was the beautiful image of the king which the skilled artist constructed... In like manner do these persons patch together old wives' fables, and then endeavour, by violently drawing away from their proper connections, words, expressions, and parables whenever found, to adapt the oracles of God to their baseless fictions.²

Notice that Irenaeus' criticism of the Gnostic style of biblical interpretation is not focused on details; it concentrates on the big picture. The Gnostics get the overall message of the Bible wrong, and so they are wrong on the individual passages as well.

² Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, bk. 1, chap. 8, par. 1 (Ante-Nicene Fathers [available in many printed and electronic editions], vol. 1, p. 326).

In fact, the church fathers worked from the broad to the narrow *consciously* and *deliberately*. In the second century, they coined the phrase “rule of faith,” by which they meant the totality of what the Bible teaches and what the church has said about the Bible. Then they read all passages of Scripture in light of this rule of faith. Irenaeus explains:

All Scripture, which has been given to us by God, shall be found by us perfectly consistent; and the parables shall harmonize with those passages which are perfectly plain; and those statements the meaning of which is clear, shall serve to explain the parables; and through the many diversified utterances [of Scripture] there shall be heard one harmonious melody in us, praising in hymns that God who created all things.³

It should be noticed here that the key to interpreting the parables (which Irenaeus finds to be obscure and therefore difficult) is clearer statements found elsewhere in Scripture, not the context of the individual parables themselves. Similarly, at the end of the fourth century, Augustine writes:

When words used literally cause ambiguity in Scripture, we must first determine whether we have mispunctuated or misconstrued them. When investigation reveals an uncertainty as to how a locution should be pointed or construed, the rule of faith should be consulted as it is found in the more open places of the Scriptures and in the authority of the Church... But if both meanings, or all of them, in the event that there are several, remain ambiguous after the faith has been consulted, then it is necessary to examine the context of the preceding and following parts surrounding the ambiguous place.⁴

³ Ibid., bk. 2, chap. 28, par. 3 (Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1, p. 400).

⁴ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, bk. 3, chap. 2 [Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr., The Library of Liberal Arts (New York, Macmillan, 1958), p. 79].

So, when there is ambiguity in the meaning of a certain passage, Augustine argues that one should *first* consult the rule of faith (which he describes as both the clearer passages of Scripture and the church's authoritative statements about it), and *only if that fails* should one consult the context of the passage.

Irenaeus and Augustine are putting into concrete expression what the entire early church practiced: using the whole Bible and the church's teaching based on the Bible to interpret each individual biblical passage. This does not simply mean that one should consult clearer passages *on the same subject* as the ambiguous passage. In addition, it means that one must clearly see the *whole of Scripture*—the whole picture of the king, in Irenaeus' illustration above—before one can correctly interpret any of the individual passages.

There is another difference between our biblical interpretation and that of the church fathers. We tend to stick to interpretations for a given text that the *human* author of the passage could have meant and the *human* audience could have understood *at the time*. But, as the church fathers drew numerous connections between the Testaments, they relied on their perception of what the Holy Spirit meant, not what the human author could have known or intended.

Of course, if one is going to move from the broad to the narrow, as the early church did, the question becomes urgent: What is the overall message of the Bible? Here again, the church fathers differ from Christians today. In contrast to modern liberals (who might see *no* unifying theme in Scripture because they see the Bible as a disparate set of human testimonies to the human experience of God), and in partial contrast to modern conservatives (who tend to organize Scripture around concepts such as the “covenant” or the “dispensations” which have governed God's dealings with humanity), the church fathers tended to see the unifying theme of Scripture as Christ *himself*. Again, this unifying theme places the emphasis in a rather differ-

ent place than we do. We today often start with *ourselves* and ask how God relates to us. The church fathers started with God, and especially with Christ, and asked how we participate in Christ. In their understanding of this unifying theme, Jesus' relationship to God the Father as *his eternal Son* was absolutely central. The truth that Jesus is God's unique, eternal Son, and the derivative truth that our adopted sonship is based on his unique sonship, were so central to the church fathers' understanding of the Bible that they saw these truths reflected in the whole Bible.

We need to recognize here that each approach carries with it a particular propensity. The church fathers were prone to find the Trinitarian Persons *everywhere* in Scripture. They read the Father-Son relationship and our adoptive sonship into passages where those truths were surely not intended to be present (either by the human author or the Holy Spirit). Contemporary interpreters, in contrast, are prone to *avoid* reading the Trinitarian Persons into individual passages, especially in the Old Testament and in New Testament passages obviously dependent on Old Testament background. The church fathers, for the most part, tended to think that since all of Scripture was about the Father, Son, and Spirit, then the Holy Spirit must have meant us to find the Father, Son, and Spirit in every passage. We tend to think, for the most part, that if the human writer of a given passage could not possibly have been thinking about Father, Son, and Spirit, then the passage is not about the Trinity. We might argue that the church fathers were missing many dimensions of what the individual passages mean because they treated the Bible as a treasure trove into which they dived to find Trinitarian (and especially Christological) riches. Conversely, the church fathers might argue that we are missing what they consider the *main point* of the Bible because we are not looking for the right things as we interpret each passage.

Clearly these interpretive approaches are very different, but what do they have to do with the MIT discussions? Keeping in mind that translation *is* interpretation, we see that these interpretive approaches affect the very concept of what “meaning” entails. In our mind, a given passage’s meaning grows out of its immediate background, and so we tend to think that if that background implies that “Son of God” means “Messiah” or the like, then the phrase should be translated with the receptor language’s closest equivalent to “Messiah.” But in the mind of the church fathers, what a passage means is determined by the way it points to the message of the whole Bible, and especially to the Christ whom the whole Bible proclaims. If the phrase “Son of God” occurs in a given passage, the church fathers believe that since the person to whom that phrase refers is the eternal Son of God, then that is what the phrase “means”. The one to whom the phrase refers becomes the dominant feature of the phrase’s meaning. Therefore, the church fathers would say that any word that refers to Jesus should be translated with a word that makes it clear that it is pointing to Jesus. “Son” should always be rendered with the common language equivalent to “Son” in the receptor language.

Now, the church fathers’ practice is not necessarily normative. We may not agree with them, but even so, we should heed the warning the church fathers give us. The task of Bible interpreters (including Bible translators) is not merely to convey the meaning of individual passages to the reader. It is also to convey to readers the body of truth that the Bible as a whole conveys in its original languages. Part of the way the Bible in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek conveys that body of truth is by associations of ideas and words through the whole of the Bible. If a given passage contains a word such as “Son” that is clearly central to that body of truth, a word whose full significance is impressed upon the reader by associations with different passages throughout the Scriptures, then that passage is part of a broader “concordance” that

builds up the full significance of the word. The church fathers would say that the meaning of the word in a given passage depends on the broader concordance. Even if we disagree with them on that point, we can still argue that the reader deserves to see the word in light of that broader concordance, by seeing that it is the same word as the word used in other significant passages.

Here one may object that I am arguing for a verbal correspondence or formal correspondence theory of translation. Actually, no, I believe that under ordinary circumstances, the same word may be translated with different words in different contexts when its meaning is clearly different. Nevertheless, I believe that the words and phrases that bear the most weight in conveying the central truths of Scripture should be translated uniformly, consistently. This is especially true in some pioneer Bible translation work, when the fruits of our labor may be the *only* translation a group of people will see for a very long time, if not forever. In English, one can easily compare a paraphrase, a dynamic equivalence translation, and a formal equivalence translation. For that matter, one can easily use an electronic concordance to find occurrences of a certain Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic word without knowing those languages. Native speakers of the languages in which translators work may never have such luxuries, although it should be acknowledged that many of these native speakers also know other languages that have Bible translations. The translations we prepare may, in a few cases, be people's *only* access to the Word of God, for the indefinite future. If that is so, would it not be wise to keep in mind the big picture and allow that understanding to inform crucial theological words like "Son"? Should we not let our understanding of the big picture inform the way we render those words in every passage?

2 The Early Church's Theological Insight into the Nature of Fatherhood and Sonship

One of the major factors leading translators to look for translations of “Son of God” other than the common language equivalent is that in human languages the words “father” and “son” normally carry with them the connotation of sexual, biological procreation. Some argue that in languages where the words carry such a connotation, and in Muslim-dominated cultures where people are taught that Allah cannot have a son, the phrase “Son of God” is inevitably misunderstood when rendered with its common language equivalent. It is noteworthy that the church faced a similar linguistic and cultural challenge in the fourth century, and the way the church fathers handled this challenge may be instructive for us today.

In the early centuries of Christianity there were two major connotations of the Greek words “father” and “son” that the church fathers recognized did not apply to God, and it is significant that they chose to continue using the word “Son” as their main way of describing Jesus, in spite of the potential misunderstandings that arose from these connotations. The first was that in the pagan world surrounding the early church, the notions of father and son included sexual, procreative connotations. (One could argue that in every language, these words carry such connotations!) Moreover, the pagan religious systems of the Near East, Africa, Europe, and Asia (and arguably, most pagan religious systems in the world even today) included the notion of sexual activity on the part of the gods. (Indeed, one of the most striking things about Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—from the standpoint of world religions—is that they affirm no female consort for God.) In such an environment, the potential for misunderstanding the Christian affirmation that God has a Son was extremely high. In this respect, the Near East of late antiquity was similar to Muhammad’s Arabia in

the seventh century and to Muslim-dominated regions of the world today. Now, there is doubt about whether very many people in late antiquity actually believed in the gods and goddesses of the Greco-Roman pantheon or approved of the tales of their sexual exploits and multiple children. It may be that the popularity of those stories was more akin to the popularity of television shows and movies that glamorize illicit sex today than it was a reflection of people's actual religious beliefs. But be that as it may, the church took no chances. The church fathers spared no effort in criticizing the pagan gods and the ceremonies connected with their worship. Justin Martyr in the second century, Tertullian in the third, and Augustine in the fifth, were only the most famous of many apologists in the early church who gave the Greco-Roman pantheon a thorough bludgeoning. Significantly, though, the church fathers never seem to have considered the option of moving away from "Father" and "Son" language because of the potential misunderstanding of God that might come from using those words in a pagan context.

The second connotation of the words "father" and "son," one that was much more serious for the church fathers, was that a son begins to exist after his father. Again, one could argue that this connotation would be present with the words for "son" and "father" in *any* language, and it was certainly a major focus of the church's attention, especially in the fourth century. This attention centered around two Greek words, *genētos* and *gennētos*, which were pronounced the same way and were generally considered as synonyms, even though they came from different verbs. (*Genētos* with one nu [equivalent to an "en" in English] is an adjective from the verb *gignomai*, meaning "to become" or "to come into existence", whereas *gennētos* with two nus [equivalent to two "ens"] is an adjective from the verb *gennaō*, meaning "to beget". Thus, *genētos* with one nu means "having come into existence", or in the substantive use of the adjective, "the one who

has come into existence”. On the other hand, *gennētos* with two nus means “having been begotten/born, or in the substantive, “the one who has been begotten/born”.) Around the year 318, Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, argued that since the Son is begotten, he must have come into existence (since he is *gennētos*, he must also be *genētos*), and therefore, he must be a created being. Arius further argued that the defining characteristic of God is that he is *agenētos* or “unoriginate”, never having come into existence because he has always existed. Arius urged the church to affirm God as *agenētos*, rather than as “Father.”

Another factor contributing to this discussion was that in the philosophical thought world of the time (largely Neoplatonic), the idea of God as a Trinity was very common, but the hypostases of the “Neoplatonic trinity” were not equal to one another and were not personal/relational. The first was called “the One” (the form of “one” was neuter, indicating an impersonal supreme god), the second was called “the Word” or “Mind”, and the third was called the “Soul” or “Spirit”. This system created remarkable points of contact with the Christian faith, but it also posed the great danger that people would misconstrue God as an unequal and impersonal trinity. The obvious connotation of a “son” as one who had come into existence and who was therefore chronologically later than his father added to the danger that people would misunderstand God the Son as a lesser being, a different god, than God the Father.

Notice the similarities between the fourth-century situation and the current situation in Muslim-dominated countries. In both cases, the idea that Father/Son language implied procreation lay in the linguistic and cultural background. In both cases there was pressure to move away from Father/Son language, although in the case of the early church the pressure came not from the procreative connotations of those words per se, but from the connotation that a son is chrono-

logically later than his father. In both cases, a seemingly viable alternative way of referring to God was a word that emphasized the utter uniqueness and transcendence of God (“Unoriginate” in the fourth century, and “Allah” today), in lieu of the relational word “Father”. (It should be remembered that in the case of the fourth-century church, this was not a translation issue in most cases. The controversy took place primarily in Greek-speaking areas, so there was no translation involved.) And in both cases, there was a word ready to use in place of “Son” that was present in the Bible and was well known to the broader culture: “Word”, which, of course, John uses in the prologue of his Gospel, and which the Koran uses in its description of the conception of Jesus. Then, as now, there was great pressure to speak of God as “Unoriginate/Allah” and of Jesus primarily as “Word,” the first in order to avoid potential miscommunication and the second in order to build bridges.

In light of this situation, it is worth noting what the fourth-century church actually did. The controversy was long and protracted, but I believe (and my current scholarly research will eventually seek to show) that the reason for the drawn-out controversy was more political than doctrinal, more terminological than substantive. Apart from a small number of “Arians,” there was, I believe, a substantial consensus among the whole church virtually the whole time. That consensus, which admittedly took some 50 years to become universally recognized and clearly articulated, was that as congenial as it was in the Greek thought world to speak of God as “Unoriginate” and of Jesus as “Word,” such language was not acceptable without extensive explanation to counter the mistaken ideas embodied in the Neoplatonic trinity. The overwhelming sentiment was that “Father” was vastly to be preferred to “Unoriginate,” and the biblical word “Word” had to be used hand-in-hand with the biblical word “Son”.

Why? Why did the church make a decision that seemed to handcuff its evangelistic efforts by burning bridges instead of building them? The answer, in short, is that the church fathers believed that Father/Son language was fundamental to the gospel and had to be preserved at all costs. More specifically, the church fathers recognized that being Father was more fundamental to what it meant to be God than being Creator was. For example, although Athanasius of Alexandria often referred to Jesus as the “Word” or “Wisdom” of God (cf. the title of his most famous work, *On the Incarnation of the Word*), his most common way of referring to him was as “Son.” In *Against the Arians* (written in the late 330s as the Arian controversy began to heat up), Athanasius asserts:

It would be more pious and true to indicate God from the Son and to call him Father than to name him from works alone and to say that he is unoriginated. For as I have said, this term individually and collectively indicates all things which have come into existence at the will of God through the Word, but “Father” is indicated and determined only by the Son. The more the Word differs from originated things, so much more would the statement that God is “Father” differ from the statement that he is “unoriginated.”⁵

We see here that the title “Father” is more fundamental to who God is than “unoriginate” precisely because his loving relationship to his Son is prior to and more basic than his general relationship to all that he has made. Shortly after this, Athanasius continues: “‘Unoriginated’ was discovered by the Greeks, who do not know the Son. But

⁵ Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, bk. 1, chap. 34 [William Rusch, ed., *The Trinitarian Controversy*, Sources of Early Christian Thought (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), pp. 96-7. Cf. *Defense of the Nicene Definition*, chaps. 30-1 [Nicene- and Post-Nicene Fathers (available in many printed and electronic editions), second series, vol. 4, p. 171].

‘Father’ was known to our Lord, and he rejoiced in it.”⁶ Then he goes on to quote John 10:30 and 14:9-10, showing Jesus’ use of the word “Father” to refer to God, and Matt. 6:9 and 28:19, indicating that we are to call God “Father” in prayer and to be baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Notice that calling God “Father” preserves not only his unique relationship to his Son, in distinction from all created things, but also the relationship he has with believers, in distinction from the rest of humanity. Jesus is God’s Son in a unique way; we are God’s sons and daughters in a derivative way. In both of these cases, the fact that God is “Father” is more fundamental to who he is than his general role as unoriginate Creator with respect to all originate things.

This reasoning led the church fathers to recognize that Father/Son language could not be revised without compromising the gospel and thus that it had to be retained as the central linguistic rubric for describing God. But with this decision came the urgent need to explain the Father/Son language in a non-procreative, non-temporal way. The church’s solution to this problem was to assert that for God, who is non-sexual and outside of time, begetting is different from the way it is for people. We beget in time through sexual intercourse, but God begets non-physically and eternally. In other words, to say that the Son is eternally begotten from the Father is to say that he has always been in a relationship as Son to Father. There was no time when he did not exist, and no time when he was not in that relationship. Around the year 350, Cyril of Jerusalem explains to candidates for baptism:

There is one God, who is unique, unbegotten, without beginning or change or alteration. He was not begotten by another, and has no one who will succeed to his life. He did not begin his life in time, nor will he

⁶ Ibid.

ever end it.... Though Creator of many beings, he is the eternal Father of one alone, his one, Only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom he made all things, both visible and invisible.... Believe too in God's one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is God begotten by God, Life begotten by Life, Light begotten by Light, like in everything to the one who begot him. He did not begin to be in time, but was begotten by the Father before all ages, eternally and inconceivably. He is God's Wisdom and Power and Justice in substantial form.⁷

Later he explains the begetting of the Son more fully: "Do not conceive the begetting anthropomorphically, as for example Abraham begot Isaac... For God was not originally childless before becoming a father. He always had his Son, for he begot him not after the human fashion, but in a unique way before all ages, begetting him as 'true God'."⁸

In order to make the Son's eternality even clearer, the church fathers also explained that with God, "unbegotten" and "unoriginate" are not synonyms. Father and Son are both unoriginate; both have always existed. Yet of the two, only the Father is unbegotten, because the Son is his *Son*, and thus begotten. Of course, the Holy Spirit is unbegotten as well, since he is Spirit and not Son. The early church spoke of the Spirit's relation to the Father by saying the Spirit "proceeds" from him and thus that the Father "spirates" the Spirit. The Son is not another Father or a brother to God. In the year 380, just before the Second Ecumenical Council that ratified the Nicene Creed, Gregory of Nazianzus explains this most clearly by responding to the question of whether anyone can be a father without beginning to be one. He states:

⁷ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 4, pars. 6-7 [*Cyril of Jerusalem*, trans. Edward Yarnold, *The Early Church Fathers* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 98-9].

⁸ *Ibid*, *Catechesis* 11, par. 8 [Yarnold, p. 132].

Yes, one who did not begin his existence. What begins to exist begins to be a father. *He* did not begin to be Father—he did not begin at all. He is “Father” in the true sense, because he is not a son as well. Just as the Son is “Son” in the true sense, because he is not a father as well.⁹

Here Gregory indicates that the concepts of fatherhood and sonship apply to God and Jesus in a greater way than they do to us, because (in contrast to all human fathers) God is Father without first having been a son, and (in contrast to most human sons) Jesus is Son without ever becoming a father. Since God exists apart from the constraints of time, he does not “become”. (Keep in mind here that we are talking about God’s life in eternity. God’s actions take place in time and space, and the incarnation was an action of God by which the Son began to exist in time, as a human being, while still existing eternally as God’s Son. I’ll write more about this later.) Therefore, the Father is always Father and never becomes Son. Likewise, the Son is always Son and never becomes Father. The eternal relationship of Father to Son is intrinsic to what it means to be God, and indeed human fatherhood and sonship are partial reflections in time and space of the archetypal relationship that has always existed between God and Jesus outside of time and space.

These passages are only a few of *many* illustrations one could bring forth from the fourth-century church to show that the Father-Son relationship is the centerpiece of the Christian understanding of God. Jesus makes this relationship the center of the Upper Room Discourse and the High Priestly Prayer, and the church fathers follow him in making this the center of their understanding of God and the archetype for understanding our relationship to God. As awkward as the concept of “eternal begetting” was, as prone to misunderstanding as it

⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 29*, par. 5 [St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ*, trans. Lionel Wickham, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), p. 73].

may have been, as offensive as it was to the Greek philosophical mind, the early church nevertheless insisted that the language of “Father” and “Son” had to be retained, and thus had to be explained as well as possible.

But once again, we must remember that what the church fathers did and said is not necessarily normative for us. They were not necessarily right, no matter how strongly they felt about this issue or how persuasively they argued their case. In fact, today it is very common in scholarly circles to argue that the church of the fourth century was too philosophical, too “Hellenized,” and thus that its understanding of God departed from the Hebraic roots of the gospel and the Scriptures. This claim was most famously put forth by Adolf van Harnack about 120 years ago, and scholars since Harnack’s time have often expressed concurring opinions. While the question of Hellenic and Hebraic influences on the church fathers is admittedly a complicated one, what I have already written should be enough to show that this interpretation is not accurate. The church’s insistence on Father/Son language certainly did not grow out of a Hellenic philosophical mindset, because such language was an embarrassment to the Neoplatonic philosophers. Likewise, the church’s insistence that the Son is an eternal *person*, in relationship to the Father, was an embarrassment to the philosophical minds of the day, since Greek philosophy’s concept of god was impersonal. If the church had said that the Word, as an impersonal hypostasis or “aspect” of God, was personalized in the man Jesus, that claim would have made much more sense and been much more acceptable to the philosophical minds of the time. Yet even though saying *that* would have made it easier for people in the surrounding culture to accept the church’s message, nevertheless the church resoundingly rejected that view. Instead, the church said that Jesus was and is in an eternal relationship to God as Son to Father.

Why? Because they believed the Scriptures and the Christian message demanded that they say this.

Do the same Scriptures demand that we retain this Father-Son relationship at the heart of our proclamation, however hard this may be for the audiences around us to understand? Do we need to translate the words “Father” and “Son” with their common language equivalents? Are the potential misunderstandings inherent in using such language less severe and more easily corrected than the potential misunderstandings that would come with using words other than the common language equivalents? The practice of the fourth-century church in a situation with some noteworthy parallels to our situation suggests that the answer to these questions should be “yes”.

3 The Early Church’s Linking of Jesus’ Sonship to Our Sonship/Daughtership¹⁰

We have seen that the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son is the archetype and basis for believers’ own relationship to God as his children. In the fourth century, the church fathers thought carefully about and articulated very clearly both the similarities and the differences between Jesus’ sonship and ours. Once again, I could give many illustrations of their reasoning, but on this point I think it would be helpful to follow the argument of a single church father. About the year 350, Cyril of Jerusalem gave a series of catechetical lectures (from which I have already quoted above) to candidates for baptism. In the eleventh and twelfth of these lectures, he focuses on the relationship between Christ and Christians. Cyril declares:

¹⁰ The theological issues I discuss in this section are the subject of my book *Grace and Christology in the Early Church*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: University Press, 2003). That book deals mainly with the fifth century rather than the fourth.

“Once more, when I tell you that he is the Son, do not take this statement to be a mere figure of speech, but understand that he is the Son truly, Son by nature, without beginning, not promoted from the state of slave to that of son, but eternally begotten as Son by an inscrutable and incomprehensible birth.”¹¹

A bit later, he speaks of the way in which those who are about to be baptized are going to be become sons:

You are becoming sons by grace and adoption, according to the scriptural statement: “As many as received him, he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were begotten not of blood or the will of the flesh or the will of man, but of God” (Jn 1.12-13); we are begotten of water and the Spirit (cf. Jn 3.5). But the begetting of Christ by the Father was not like this. For when the Father addressed him at the moment of his baptism, saying: “This is my Son,” he did not say, “This has now become my Son,” but “This is my Son,” because he wanted to show that he was already the Son before he had received the effect of his baptism.¹²

Here we see that Cyril stresses the distinction between being Son by nature and being sons/daughters by grace and adoption. When Cyril and the other church fathers refer to Jesus as “Son by nature”, or “natural Son”, what they mean is not that he was son because of natural processes, that is sexual intercourse, but that he is the Son who shares the same nature as the Father. As I mentioned in my previous article, the divine nature or substance was understood as the set of characteristics that define what it means to be God; omniscience, omnipotence, perfect love, etc. To say that Jesus is Son by nature is to say that he possesses the same set of characteristics, what western theology would later call “attributes”, as the Father, and therefore he is the same God as the Father, even though he is distinct as a different

¹¹ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 11, par. 4 [Yarnold, p. 130].

¹² *Ibid.*, *Catechesis* 11, par. 9 [Yarnold, p. 132]

person. With that background in mind, Cyril's comments make perfect sense: eternity is a characteristic of God, and so for the Son to have the same nature as the Father means, among other things, that he is eternal. Thus, his begetting is eternal, and outside of time: he has always been the Father's Son. In contrast, we *become* sons and daughters of God. We are adopted in time into a participation in the relationship that Jesus has eternally had with his Father.

In the next catechetical lecture, Cyril explains the incarnation as an action of God's Son by which our adopted sonship is made possible. He says to the candidates for baptism:

“Let us celebrate the God who was conceived by the Virgin.... For if Christ were God—as indeed he is—but did not assume humanity, we would be debarred from salvation. So while we adore him as God, let us believe him also to have been made man.”¹³

A bit later, he continues:

For errors of the heretics take many different forms: some flatly deny that he was born of a virgin; others say that he was born not of a virgin but of a woman living with a man; others again say that Christ was not God made man, but a man who became God. For they have dared to say that he was not the pre-existent Word who became man, [but] a man who was promoted and crowned. Remember what we said yesterday [in the previous lecture] about his divinity. You must accept that, being God's Only-begotten Son, he underwent birth again of the Virgin.¹⁴

The phrase “birth again” is disconcerting to us, but it was a crucial phrase for the church fathers. The first birth or first begetting, “begetting” and “birth” are the same word in Greek, was the eternal begetting of the Son outside of time—in other words, the fact that he had always been the Father's Son, as Cyril makes clear. The second birth is the

¹³ Ibid., *Catechesis* 12.1 [Yarnold, p. 140].

¹⁴ Ibid., *Catechesis* 12, par. 3-4 [Yarnold, p. 141].

human birth of the Son, from Mary, in time, in order that he might be fully human. This human birth of the eternal Son is the link between his sonship and ours. After the incarnation, God the Son is now human as well as divine, and he lives in a human way as well as the divine way he has always lived.

The *human life* of God's Son, and especially the human *death* of God's Son, are the means by which he makes believers his adopted brothers and sisters, and thus adopted sons and daughters of his Father. Earlier in the *Catechetical Lectures*, Cyril has explained this:

You must believe too that this Only-begotten Son of God came down from heaven to earth because of our sins, assumed a humanity subject to the same feelings as ours, and was born of the holy Virgin and the Holy Spirit. The humanity he assumed was not an appearance or an illusion, but true. He did not pass through the virgin as if through a pipe, but truly took flesh from her and was truly nourished by her milk. For if the Incarnation was an illusion, so too is our salvation. Christ was twofold: man according to visible appearance, but God according to what was not visible. As man he ate truly as we do, for he had the same fleshly feelings as ourselves; but it was as God that he fed the five thousand from five loaves. As man he truly died; but it was as God that he raised the dead body to life after four days. As man he truly slept on the boat; but it was as God that he walked on the waters.¹⁵

Here, notice how strongly Cyril stresses the genuineness of Jesus' humanity, and equally significant, the fact that this humanity came from Mary herself. His humanity was not a phantom or a bit of cosmic play acting. He was genuinely human and experienced the joys, sorrows, and temptations of human life. But the person who underwent these human experiences (including death) was God the Son. This is the truth that the phrase "double birth of the Son" was designed to emphasize.

¹⁵ Ibid., Catechesis 4, par. 9 [Yarnold, p. 100, translation slightly modified].

In affirming this, the early church was rejecting an understanding of Jesus in which he was a man who was endowed with special grace from God, a man in whom God's power or "word", considered as a quality of God, dwelt so that he could rise up to some sort of "sonship" with God. Instead, the church fathers insisted, he had always been the Son of God, an eternal person in relationship to his Father. Rejecting the view of Jesus as a man who rose up to sonship with God went hand-in-hand with rejecting a view of salvation in which we receive grace from God so that we may follow Jesus in rising up to God. In sharp contrast to such an idea, the way the church read the Bible was to say that we could not rise up to God, so God had to come down to us. Thus, the Son himself became fully human (in effect, becoming our brother in terms of his humanity), so that we could be adopted as his brothers and sisters and thus become children of his Father. As the Nicene Creed so eloquently puts it, Jesus Christ is the one who was "*begotten from the Father before all ages,*" "true God from true God," and "*begotten, not made,*" yet who "for us men and for our salvation *came down* from heaven and was incarnated from the Holy Spirit and Mary the virgin, and was *made man*" (my translation and emphasis).

Once again, we see that as the early church understood it, Father/Son language was central to the entire economy of salvation. But of course, we must recognize yet again that the early church was not necessarily right. Scholars can, and many scholars do, reject some of the central features of the church fathers' theology. But here we should note that modern rejections of the church fathers' thought is not just a matter of our re-connecting with the Hebraic roots of the gospel, in contrast to a distorted "Greek" understanding of it. At heart, much modern interpretation of Scripture has grown out of an overall view of Jesus and of our salvation very similar to what the early church was *fighting*, and thus very different from what the early church was affirming. Modern readings of Scripture, especially in the

nineteenth century, were based on the assumption that the Christ of the church was not the real, historical Jesus, and that the historical Jesus was a man with a special connection to God, who could be our paradigm for our own development of a connection to God, our own march upward toward God. It was and is argued that Jesus was a man who became divine, just as we are men and women who can become divine in some sense. Such a radical shift in the understanding of the big picture required a thorough re-interpretation of the individual passages, and this re-interpretation was forthcoming in some scholarly circles in the 19th and 20th centuries.

As conservative Christians, we reject the overall view of salvation that modern scholarship has adhered to. But because we often work exegetically in the realm of the narrow, we may not always notice the overall framework that undergirds mainstream interpretation of individual passages. Interpretations that grow out of what we insist is a flawed framework may seem plausible when considered in isolation. But the church fathers' steadfast focus on the big picture can help to remind us that we need to remember the big picture as well. At heart, the Bible and the Christian faith are telling us that human beings cannot rise up to God, and so we need a Savior who is more than just a leader showing us the way to God, more than just a Messiah/King to rule over us. We need God himself to come down to us. The persons of the Trinity are co-eternal, co-equal, and in eternal fellowship with one another, and therefore the persons who have come down, the Son at the incarnation and the Spirit at Pentecost, were and are truly divine, truly equal to the Father. The individual passages of Scripture are consistent with this overall message, and therefore, keeping this overall message in mind will help to guide us in our readings of the individual passages. By helping us to see more clearly the overall message of Scripture—the Son's, and the Spirit's, eternal relationship to the Father, and our relationship to God as an image of the Son's rela-

tionship—the fourth-century church can guide our interpretation, and thus prevent us from unwittingly accepting interpretations and translations of individual passages that seem plausible but may undermine this central message.

In our MIT discussions, some have argued that the consensus of conservative biblical scholars is that “Son of God” sometimes means something other than “eternal, unique Son to the Father”. Others have insisted that this is not the consensus at all. Even if this *is* the consensus of conservative biblical scholars, it is still worth raising the question of whether we ever want to render “Son of God” with words other than the common language equivalents. I have already claimed that even when (or if) “Son” does not *mean* “eternal second Person of the Trinity,” the word still refers to the One who is the eternal second Person of the Trinity.” At this point, I can add the claim that the word “Son” is a marker that points to a whole complex of ideas related to God, humanity, and salvation. Can we remove that marker anywhere without the risk of pointing to a different conception of Jesus’ relationship to God, and thus a different conception of our relationship to God?

4 Conclusions

In my first article, I argued from Jesus’ own words in John1:13-17 that the truths enshrined in the phrases “my Father” and “our Father” are central to the Christian gospel. In this second article, I have argued that the early church had opportunities to avoid certain misconceptions and to build bridges with its surrounding culture by adopting categories for speaking of God other than “Father” and “Son.” The church fathers refused to adopt these other categories (or, when they did use words like “Word,” they balanced them with “Son”), because they believed that only Father/Son language did full justice to the heart of the Christian faith.

Is such Father/Son language deeply offensive to Muslims? Yes it is, in ways that those who work directly with Muslims know far better than I do. But remember that Father/Son language has also been and still is deeply offensive to many others besides Muslims, for various reasons. Most obviously, it was deeply offensive to the Jewish audience of Jesus' ministry, and yet Jesus used such language, as did the New Testament writers. This language was deeply offensive to Greek intellectuals influenced by Neoplatonic philosophy, and yet the church used it nonetheless. It is deeply offensive to all whose concept of "god" is impersonal or non-relational. (Hindus and Buddhists come to mind here.) Even in the west, it is deeply offensive to the many people whose concept of "fatherhood" is shaped by human fathers who have not loved them, who have neglected them, who have abused them. But precisely because this language causes so much offense, it also has the capacity to expose and correct our human notions of what it means to be "God", to expand and redeem our human notions of fatherhood, to point to that which Christianity uniquely offers to the world. As I mentioned briefly at the conclusion of my first talk, the differences between Christianity and Islam do not consist merely in the fact that Christianity offers a different *means* of salvation. Much more fundamental than this is the fact that Christianity offers a different *kind* of salvation. Allah, as Muslims conceive him, can have no son. Correspondingly, he cannot really have personal relationships, and his followers are not (and do not consider themselves to be) in anything like what we call a personal relationship to him. Allah has nothing personal or relational to *offer* his subjects. But the true God, the God of the Bible, offers us not merely servant-status, but actual relationship as sons/daughters, as friends. Indeed, the very names for the two religions make this clear. "Muslims" are those who submit to Allah, and Islam is "submission" pure and simple. But although submission to Christ is very important to Christianity, "Christians" are

more foundationally “the Christ ones,” the ones who are related to Christ in a way that derives from his own relationship to God the Father. This is a fundamentally different approach to the Divine, a fundamentally different approach to salvation, than Islam or any other religion offers. And one of the ways that the Bible proclaims this kind of salvation to us is through the words “Father” and “Son”. Is there *any* biblical passage using these words in which this kind of salvation is not hinted at, not pointed to, not marked out at least indirectly? Is there any passage in which we can be so sure that the Holy Spirit meant something else that it is worth breaking the visible link between that passage and other passages by translating with a word or phrase other than the common language equivalent to “father” and “son”?

Another way of looking at this is to ask what we would gain—and what we would lose—by translating “Son of God” *in some passages* with words other than the common language equivalent. In order to avoid the possibility of any misunderstandings along procreative lines, we would likely have to translate *all* of the Father/Son language in a different way. I have suggested that doing that is simply not an option. If we must use common language equivalents to “Father” and “Son” in the most theologically significant passages, then what would it accomplish to use other language in a few places? My hunch is that we would gain very little.

On the other hand, what would we lose by sometimes translating “Son of God” language with words other than the common language equivalents? We would lose some of the markers by which the Bible points to its central affirmation, that Jesus is the Father’s eternal Son. Even if we can prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that in some passages “Son of God” means something other than this, nevertheless in those passages the language of “Son” *still* points to other passages in which “Son” bears this significance. Do we really want to remove such markers from the translated Bible?

HOW DOES CHRISTIANITY 'SUBVERSIVELY FULFIL' ISLAM?

By Chris Flint¹

1 Introduction

Lesslie Newbigin nicely encapsulates the perennial dilemma in Christian mission: "Every missionary path has to find the way between these two dangers: irrelevance and syncretism."² The twin dangers Newbigin discerns map, respectively, onto two equal and opposite misunderstandings of the relationship between Christianity and other religions: mere discontinuity on the one hand, and mere continuity on the other. A missionary who views Christianity as standing at every point in an unqualified *discontinuous* relationship to other religions is in danger of presenting the gospel in a way that could be perceived as irrelevant.³

By contrast, a missionary who holds that Christianity and other religions share in an unqualified *continuous* relationship is liable to domesticate the gospel within a wider matrix of incompatible presuppositions.⁴ Neither approach is worthy of Christ, for neither communicates the truth in love.⁵

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² Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 67.

³ This may subsequently lead to "extraction" as communities expel converts for being culturally foreign.

⁴ The missionary's own underlying philosophical predispositions may also have a bearing here. At risk of oversimplification, a naïve 'modern' overemphasis on objectivity - "communication is what *I say*" - may tend to promote irrelevance; whereas a sceptical 'postmodern' overemphasis on subjectivity - "communication is what *they hear*" - may tend to promote syncretism. A more helpful third way is that advocated by Paul G. Hiebert, "The Missionary as Mediator of Global Theologizing,"

Interpreting Christianity as the “subversive fulfilment” of other religions holds promise for steering between the Scylla of irrelevance and the Charybdis of syncretism,⁶ for this approach denies neither the relationship of discontinuity nor the relationship of continuity, but rather, simultaneously, affirms them both.

It is not merely the pragmatic value of “subversive fulfilment” for the missionary endeavour, however, that commends it, but first and foremost its faithfulness to the teachings of Holy Scripture. In this essay, we will first demonstrate that “subversive fulfilment” has a secure theological grounding,⁷ before then illustrating how Christianity is

in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland; Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 303. Drawing on Peircean semiotics, Hiebert explains that “[f]orms and meanings are linked to realities, and meaning lies in our understandings of these realities. Communication, therefore, is possible and is not measured merely by what the sender means or the receptor comprehends but by the correspondence between what the sender and the receptor experience and understand about reality. This correspondence can be tested by the use of realities external to the minds of those involved in communication.”

⁵ Cf. Ephesians 4:15. The missionary should seek to synthesise his/her own particular understanding of Christianity (the thesis) with the cultural background into which s/he speaks (the antithesis) so as to communicate the gospel in a way that the hearer can understand. This process differs fundamentally from Hegel’s dialectic in that valid contextualisation is discerned by reading the Bible, rather than by reading history (or providence). For a contemporary example of an attempted synthesis which does not adequately respect the authority of scripture, consider the “Insider Movement,” which I critique in Chris Flint, “Church and Mosque: A Comparison of a Christian View of *Ekklēsia* and a Muslim View of the Mosque as part of the *Ummah* and an Analysis of the Missiological Implications of these Views,” *SFM* 8 (2012): 599-695.

⁶ Hendrik Kraemer was the first to use the phrase “subversive fulfillment [sic.]” in the context of a Christian Theology of other religions. See Hendrik Kraemer, “Continuity or Discontinuity,” in *The Authority of Faith* (vol. 1 of *International Missionary Council Meeting at Tambaram, Madras*; London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 5, as cited in Daniel Strange, “Perilous Exchange, Precious Good News: A Reformed ‘Subversive Fulfilment’ Interpretation of Other Religions,” in *Only One Way? Three Christian Responses on the Uniqueness of Christ in a Religiously Plural World* (ed. Gavin D’Costa; London: SCM Press, 2011), 91.

⁷ Basic Christian confessional commitments are presupposed throughout this essay, such as the unity, inerrancy and supreme authority of scripture, interpreted in the light

specifically the “subversive fulfilment” of orthodox Sunni Islam, and illustrating how these findings may be applied practically on the mission field.

2 The Theological Basis of “Subversive Fulfilment”

As already alluded to, for Christianity to *subvert* another religion requires a relationship of discontinuity; for Christianity to *fulfil* another religion requires a relationship of continuity; and for Christianity to *subversively fulfil* another religion requires such continuity and discontinuity to exist simultaneously. In this section, we shall outline the biblical evidence for each of these three requirements, and in so doing identify “idolatry” as the conceptual key that unlocks this apparent paradox.

2.1 *Discontinuity*

The term “religion” is hard to pin down,⁸ but Clouser’s definition is helpful: “A religious belief is any belief in something or other as divine,”⁹ where “*the divine is whatever does not depend on anything else for its existence.*”¹⁰ Christianity, for example, is a religion because the

of secondary Christian authorities including such historical formulations as the Ecumenical Creeds.

⁸ Christopher J. H. Wright, “The Christian and Other Religions: The Biblical Evidence,” *Themelios* 9 (1984): 4, comments: “The student of comparative religion who turns to the Bible for guidance meets his first discouragement in the fact that ‘religion’ is not really a biblical word at all. The Bible is concerned, not with religious systems as such, but with man in his life on earth before God. All that man does, therefore, in every sphere of life, including that which he calls ‘religious’, is judged in the light of his response to the Creator-Redeemer God who is axiomatic to the whole sweep of Scripture.”

⁹ Roy Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality: An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 21.

¹⁰ Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*, 19 (emphasis original). Clouser’s definition is useful in that it enables us to discern the “religious” nature of even those

Bible teaches that God is *a se*: as the uncreated Creator, who both created all things *ex nihilo*,¹¹ and now upholds life everywhere,¹² God is *sui generis*;¹³ there is none like YHWH, and there is no God beside him.¹⁴ Indeed, the covenant name, YHWH, which underscores God's personal, relational nature,¹⁵ if etymologically related to the Hebrew verb "to be," may itself be a proclamation of divine aseity.¹⁶ Moreover, the oneness of God is declared in the Shema.¹⁷ To worship any god other than YHWH, then, is to worship a false god.¹⁸ By definition, then, non-Christian religions are discontinuous from Christianity, for they proclaim as *a se* someone or something other than YHWH, the God Whom all nations are obligated to worship.¹⁹

worldviews and cultures which are explicitly non-theistic, such as Buddhism and post-enlightenment Western secularism.

¹¹ Genesis 1:1; Hebrews 11:3; Revelation 4:11.

¹² Acts 17:28.

¹³ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: "God Crucified" and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 86, speaks of "YHWH's transcendent uniqueness.... a form of uniqueness that puts YHWH in a class of his own." Perhaps the biblical adjective coming closest to the meaning of "transcendentally unique" is "holy": an adjective primarily associated with God, yet applied derivatively to his chosen people (e.g. Leviticus 11:44-45).

¹⁴ 2 Samuel 7:22; 1 Kings 8:23, 60; Isaiah 44:6-7; 46:9.

¹⁵ Exodus 3:14.

¹⁶ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 134, comments: "the name Jehovah signifies primarily that in all that God does for his people, He is from-within-determined, not moved upon by outside influences."

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 6:4. Chris Wright, "Editorial: Deuteronomic Depression," *Themelios* 19 (1994): 3, notes: "It is not just an argument over how many gods exist. The shema does not say, 'There is only one God,' but (in effect), 'Yahweh alone is that one God.'"

¹⁸ J. A. Motyer, *The Revelation of the Divine Name* (London: Tyndale Press, 1959), 7 n 18, observes that "the Bible knows nothing of different 'names' of God. God has only one name - Yahweh. Apart from this, all the others are titles or descriptions."

¹⁹ Psalms 2; 96; Isaiah 45:22-23; Ezekiel 14:12-20.

The New Testament is careful to identify Jesus himself with YHWH.²⁰ Notice, for instance, Jesus' emphatic claim to the divine name, "I am";²¹ a theme which recurs in the Philippian Christ-hymn, which, with its background in Isaiah 45, climaxes with Jesus' participation in "the name that is above every name."²² Similarly, consider the inclusion of Jesus within the Shema.²³ In these, and other ways,²⁴ then, Jesus is included within the divine identity.²⁵ Indeed, Bauckham helpfully terms biblical monotheism "Christological monotheism";²⁶ this religious discontinuity extends even to Jews who fail to rightly recog-

²⁰ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006), 131, comments: "YHWH stood *sui generis*, entirely in a class of his own as *the* God, the sole Creator of the universe, and Ruler, Judge and Savior of the nations. And the New Testament repeatedly makes exactly the same affirmations about Jesus of Nazareth, putting him in the same exclusively singular, transcendent framework and frequently quoting the same texts to do so" (emphasis original).

²¹ See Jesus' seven "I am" sayings in John's gospel (John 6:35; 8:12, 58; 10:7, 11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1), and His interpretation of Psalm 110:1 in the synoptics (Matthew 22:41-46; Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44).

²² Philippians 2:6-11; cf. Isaiah 45:22-23. See the illuminating discussion in Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 51-53.

²³ 1 Corinthians 8:4-6; cf. Deuteronomy 6:4. Bauckham, *God Crucified*, 40, concludes from this passage that Paul "distinguishes the one God to whom alone allegiance is due from all pagan gods who are no gods; he draws on classic Jewish ways of formulating monotheistic faith; and he reformulates them to express a christological monotheism which by no means abandons but maintains precisely the ways Judaism distinguished God from all other reality and uses these to include Jesus in the unique divine identity. He maintains monotheism, not by adding Jesus to but by including Jesus in his Jewish understanding of the divine uniqueness."

²⁴ E.g. Jesus forgives sins (Mark 2:5-12; cf. Micah 7:18); is exalted over all angelic powers (Ephesians 1:20-21; cf. Nehemiah 9:6); participates in God's work of creation (Colossians 1:16; cf. Psalm 33:6); accepts worship (John 20:28-29; cf. Exodus 34:14) and judges the world (John 5:22; cf. Genesis 18:25).

²⁵ Bauckham, *God Crucified*, 26, discerns that "the intention of New Testament Christology, throughout the texts, is to include Jesus in the unique divine identity as Jewish monotheism understood it."

²⁶ Bauckham, *God Crucified*, 25-42.

nise Jesus: to reject Jesus is to reject YHWH.²⁷ For this reason, Jesus is “the way, the truth and the life”;²⁸ “salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”²⁹

At the level of the individual heart, then, we find what Strange calls a “principal discontinuity/dissimilarity” between those who do, and those who do not, believe in Jesus.³⁰ This “antithesis” extends to the religious sphere:³¹ one is either “rooted and built up in Christ,” or else “taken captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy.”³²

²⁷ 1 John 2:22-23. Michael Ovey, “The Cross, Creation and the Human Predicament,” in *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today* (ed. David Peterson; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 110-111, shows that humanity’s rejection of Jesus in the New Testament is presented as a recapitulation of humanity’s primal rejection of God in Genesis 3.

²⁸ John 14:6.

²⁹ Acts 4:12. Note that the first century milieu into which the early Christians made such bold exclusivistic statements was a context not, in this respect, too dissimilar from today’s widespread and cherished religious and philosophical pluralism. See, e.g., Bruce W. Winter, “In Public and in Private: Early Christian Interactions with Religious Pluralism,” in *One God, One Lord: Christianity in a World of Religious Pluralism* (ed. Andrew D. Clark and Bruce W. Winter; Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1991).

³⁰ Strange, “Perilous Exchange, Precious Good News,” 109.

³¹ Cf. Strange, “Perilous Exchange, Precious Good News,” 114. The Bible portrays this radical difference between believer and unbeliever in several ways. For example, genealogically, consider the contrasts between the murderous line of Cain-Lamech (Genesis 4:8-24) and the line of Seth, in which “men began to call on the name of the LORD” (Genesis 4:25-26); and the election of Isaac over Ishmael, and of Jacob over Esau (Romans 9:7-13). The New Testament frames the antithesis in the starkly contrasting categories of belief/unbelief (1 Peter 2:7); wisdom/folly (Matthew 7:24-27); good/evil (Luke 6:45); light/darkness (Ephesians 5:8); life/death (John 5:24); sighted/blind (John 9:39); and those in Adam/those in Christ (Romans 5:12-21): between these antithetical categories there can exist no fellowship (2 Corinthians 6:14). These distinctions, though temporarily confused (Matthew 13:24-30), will be finally clarified at the eschatological separation, whereupon the antithesis will become irrevocable (Matthew 25:32-33, 46).

³² Colossians 2:6-8.

2.2 Continuity

The doctrine of creation teaches that all men and women, irrespective of their religion, at a deep level share a common awareness of God. Not only does mankind witness nature's perpetual testimony to God,³³ but also, by virtue of the image of God stamped upon us,³⁴ we bear the complementary internal witness of our ineradicable religious nature,³⁵ the requirements of God's law being written upon our hearts.³⁶ Through both general revelation and the image of God,³⁷ therefore, every human possesses true knowledge of the true God.³⁸ We all, then, share a common created capacity to relate to God: and not merely to a generic "god", but specifically to YHWH, the God Who is there.³⁹

³³ Psalm 19:2; Romans 1:20.

³⁴ Genesis 1:27.

³⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. Jon Van Hofwegen; trans. Henry Beveridge; Grand Rapids: CCEL, 2002), I.iii.1-2 (Beveridge 39-40), calls this the "*sensus divinitatis*" or "*semen religionis*." It may be possible to adduce direct support for this from Job 37:7 and Ecclesiastes 3:11, though the proper interpretation of both verses is contested.

³⁶ Romans 2:14-15. Cf. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 148-153. Matthew 7:2-3 may also presuppose instinctive human knowledge of God's standards. Consider also Deuteronomy 4:6 and Isaiah 24:5.

³⁷ Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9 affirm that, post-fall, the image of God in man, though distorted, is not lost. Daniel Strange, "For their rock is not as our Rock"; An Evangelical Theology of Religions" (Unpublished manuscript, Oak Hill College, 2012), 154-158, terms this "imaginal revelation."

³⁸ John 1:9 is often adduced as further support of this proposition. However, the particular "enlightening" described in this verse more likely describes Christ's objective exposure and condemnation of human sinfulness, rather than His implanting within us an inward and subjective knowledge of God. See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (PNTC; Nottingham: Apollos, 1991), 123-124.

³⁹ Strange, "For their rock is not as our Rock," calls this a "*particular religiosity*" (emphasis original).

Whether our relationship to YHWH is good or bad,⁴⁰ there is further continuity between adherents of the different religions due to mankind's common participation in the general kindness of God, who "causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous".⁴¹ The theological term for this kindness is "common grace".⁴² By this indiscriminate expression of divine love,⁴³ God's character is revealed,⁴⁴ and we, and also, by implication, our false religious systems, are restrained from deteriorating to the fullest extent.⁴⁵ Christians are instruments of common grace through whom God stems societal tendencies toward corruption,⁴⁶ while positively, "common grace" does, in a sense, enable even non-Christians to perform genuine civic good.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Doug Coleman, *A Theological Analysis of the Insider Movement Paradigm from Four Perspectives: Theology of Religions, Revelation, Soteriology and Ecclesiology* (Pasadena, Calif.: WCIU Press, 2011), Kindle e-book, loc. 947, rightly observes that "every individual is technically in some kind of relationship with Yahweh, be it friendly or adversarial."

⁴¹ Matthew 5:45.

⁴² John Murray, "Common Grace," in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (4 vols.; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 2:96, defines common grace as: "every favour of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God" (emphasis original).

⁴³ Cf. Psalm 145:8-9. For an insightful treatment of the different ways in which the Bible speaks of God's love, see D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000).

⁴⁴ Acts 14:17.

⁴⁵ Romans 1:21-32 traces the horrific consequences that ensue when God judicially removes this restraint and gives us over to our sinful desires. This restraining function of common grace may also be seen in Genesis 9, where God introduces new fears that will curb future bloodshed (whether the animals' dread of humans, or would-be murderers' fear of capital punishment). By common grace God even restrains *Himself*, covenanting to preserve the world after the flood despite mankind's enduring sinfulness.

⁴⁶ Matthew 5:13. Cf. Donald Macleod, *Behold Your God* (Rev. and exp. ed.; Fearn: Christian Focus, 1995), 150.

⁴⁷ Cf. Romans 13:3-4; 1 Peter 2:14. Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (2d ed.; ed. William Edgar; Phillipsburg: P&R, 1974), 65, summarises: "the

While much of the continuity between different religions can be explained with reference to general revelation, the image of God, and common grace, we should also acknowledge the possibility of non-Christian religions demonstrating awareness of some specific details revealed in the Bible. Visser describes several modes by which this could have occurred.⁴⁸

First, given a monogenetic understanding of human origins,⁴⁹ it is possible that anything originally known by Adam and Noah could have been remembered by their descendants and preserved as traditions.⁵⁰ As Visser observes, from “religious studies, we can conclude that all peoples retain garbled recollections of ... the primal state described in the first chapters of Genesis.”⁵¹

natural man yet knows God, and, in spite of himself, to some extent recognizes God. By virtue of their creation in God’s image, by virtue of the ineradicable sense of deity within them, and by virtue of God’s restraining general grace, those who hate God, yet in a restricted sense know God, and do good.”

⁴⁸ Paul J. Visser, “Religion in Biblical and Reformed Perspective,” *CTJ* 44 (2009): 16.
⁴⁹ Acts 17:26.

⁵⁰ This could even include the *protoevangelium* of Genesis 3:15. D. A. Carson, *The Gaggling of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 250, posits “memory of God’s gracious self-disclosure” as a possible explanation for Melchizedek’s apparently authentic knowledge of YHWH. D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God: a daily companion for discovering the riches of God’s Word* (2 vols.; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 1: mediation for 13 May, similarly argues: “That Balaam was a prophet of God shows that there were still people around who retained some genuine knowledge of the one true God. The call of Abraham and the rise of the Israelite nation do not mean that there were no others who knew the one sovereign Creator: witness Melchizedek (Gen. 14).”

⁵¹ Visser, “Religion in Biblical and Reformed Perspective,” 16, who calls this “proto-word revelation or primeval divine self-disclosure.” Cf. the analogous concept of “*prisca theologia*” advanced by Jonathan Edwards, outlined in Gerald McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards confronts the gods: Christian theology, Enlightenment religion, and the non-Christian faiths* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 93-94. See also Chan Kei Thong and Charlene L. Fu, *Finding God in Ancient China: How the Ancient Chinese Worshipped the God of the Bible* (Shanghai: Zondervan, 2009). For a summary of details from Genesis which are preserved in the Chinese script, see <http://www.morgenster.org/signs.htm> [cited 14 May 2012].

Second, non-Christian religions and philosophies did not develop in isolation, and through contact with Christians and Bible translations, they may have incorporated biblical data into their own religious frameworks.⁵²

Niehaus suggests a third possible source of parallels: “Demonic inspiration.”⁵³ Demons are apparently theologically orthodox,⁵⁴ and can at times reveal to humans information which may overlap with the content of special revelation.⁵⁵

For all of these reasons, then, we should not be surprised to observe similarities between Christianity and other religions.⁵⁶ Strange calls this: “practical continuity/similarity”.⁵⁷

2.3 Idolatry

Only God can create *ex nihilo*. Naturally, then, the Bible portrays idols, not as completely *de novo*, but as parasitic counterfeits.⁵⁸ As

⁵² Visser, “Religion in Biblical and Reformed Perspective,” 16. Cf. Peter J. Leithart, *Did Plato Read Moses? Middle Grace and Moral Consensus* (Niceville, Fla.: Biblical Horizons, 1995), 19.

⁵³ Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 179.

⁵⁴ Matthew 8:28-29; Mark 5:7; Luke 8:28; James 2:19.

⁵⁵ Mark 1:23-24; 3:11; Luke 4:33-34, 41; Acts 16:16-18. Cf. 2 Corinthians 11:14, which characterises demonic activity as having a counterfeiting vein similar to that which, biblically, typifies sin and idolatry.

⁵⁶ Carson, *The Gaggling of God*, 250-251, observes: “Certainly some of the institutions and ideas that characterized Israelite religion were shared with the surrounding pagan religions. That is almost inevitable: unless some group retreats into a hermitage and self-consciously sets out to do quite different things (and even then it will be unlikely that every base will be covered), common rites (e.g. circumcision) and the like are not unlikely. But the question to be asked is what those rites symbolize in each religion, and how common beliefs function within the structure of their respective systems.”

⁵⁷ Strange, “Perilous Exchange, Precious Good News,” 110. The tension between the “principal discontinuity” and the “practical continuity” may be located, metaphysically, in the necessary impracticality of consistently living out a worldview which is in fundamental contradiction to reality, and, epistemologically, in God’s restraining work of common grace.

⁵⁸ Strange, “Perilous Exchange, Precious Good News,” 120.

shall be seen, this understanding of idolatry greatly facilitates our analysis of non-Christian religions.

The Bible emphasises the parasitic nature of idols by typically characterising them as “the work of human hands”.⁵⁹ It is true both physically, in that idol statues are dependent upon pre-existent matter, but also functionally, since idolatry is attractive precisely because it appeals to pre-existing categories which resonate with our created human nature. Wright, recognising this, delineates four particular “things that we tend to manufacture our gods from”: “things that entice us”;⁶¹ “things we fear”;⁶² “things that we trust”;⁶³ and “things that we need”.⁶⁴

The counterfeit work of idols appears in the way they displace, distort or deny God’s character,⁶⁵ so as to present themselves as the means by which particular human desires may be truly fulfilled.⁶⁶ In this way, idols profane God’s name,⁶⁷ and deprive Him of His due glory and praise,⁶⁸ even while frustrating the idolater’s hopes.⁶⁹

⁵⁹ E.g. Isaiah 44:19-20; Revelation 9:20.

⁶⁰ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 166-171.

⁶¹ See, e.g. Job 31:26-28.

⁶² See, e.g. Psalms 96:4.

⁶³ See, e.g. Psalms 33:16-17.

⁶⁴ See, e.g. Matthew 6:31-32.

⁶⁵ Strange, “For their rock is not as our Rock,” 38. Notice that the specific sins of *displacing* God with a false god, *distorting* God’s true character, and *denying* God’s very existence, are condemned by the first commandment (Exodus 20:3); the second commandment (Exodus 20:4-6); and the book of Psalms, (Psalms 14:1; 53:1), respectively.

⁶⁶ Cf. Sennacherib’s similar defamation of YHWH’s character and mimicry of His promises in 2 Kings 18:28-35.

⁶⁷ Isaiah 48:11.

⁶⁸ Isaiah 42:8.

⁶⁹ Jeremiah 2:11-13; Habakkuk 2:18.

As parasitic counterfeits that produce death through that which is good idols partake of the very nature of sin itself.⁷⁰ Idolatry and sin can therefore be seen as mutually interpreting categories. The primordial sin in Eden can be understood as idolatry:⁷¹ the serpent's temptation was *effective* because it appealed to a good created desire;⁷² it was *sinful* because it told lies about God.⁷³ The resultant shame drove Adam and Eve to hide from God,⁷⁴ and this observation suggests, in turn, mankind's instinctive motive for idolatry: substitute worship helps us imagine that our rebellion against God has been concealed.⁷⁵ This may explain why the Bible portrays idolatry as typical of

⁷⁰ Romans 7:13. Cf. Alfred, Lord Tennyson: "A lie which is half truth is the blackest of lies." As cited in Mark Water, *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations* (Alresford: John Hunt Publishing, 2000), 606.

⁷¹ See the discussion in G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Nottingham: IVP, 2008), 127-140, and also Isaiah 2:11-22, which closely relates the sins of human pride and idolatry. Cf. also Michael Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 59, who observes in the Bible a running "contrast between idolatry and faith. The former requires its gods to make themselves available, fully present, visible, which means capable of being possessed and, if need be, manipulated to produce whatever the individual's or group's felt needs are determined to be in any moment."

⁷² Wright, "The Christian and Other Religions," 5, observes: "The strategy of the serpent was not so much to draw man into conscious, deliberate rebellion against God by implanting totally alien desires, but rather to corrupt and pervert through doubt and disobedience a desire which was legitimate in itself. After all, what is more natural than for man to wish to be like God? Is it not the proper function and ambition of the image of God to be like the one who created him in his own image? The satanic delusion lay in the desire to be as God, 'the temptation of man to bring God and himself to a common denominator.'" Cf. James 1:14.

⁷³ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (trans. George Musgrave Giger; ed. James T. Dennison, Jr.; 3 vols.; Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1993), 1:605, traces Adam's sin in Genesis 3 to the "false faith" engendered in him by the devil's seductive lies about the nature of God and of man. Note also the "false faith" of the Jews in John 8 who rejected Jesus based on their own invalid claim to sonship.

⁷⁴ Genesis 3:10.

⁷⁵ Wright, "The Christian and Other Religions," 5, observes: "If the immediate response of the fallen Adam in us is to hide from the presence of the living God, what more effective way could there be than through religious activity which gives us the

deceitful human hearts,⁷⁶ and so, by implication, similarly characteristic of the manmade religious systems which give such heart idolatry formal expression.⁷⁷

This analysis explains why we observe simultaneous continuity and discontinuity between Christianity and other religions: as parasites, non-Christian religions are dependent upon the same fundamental categories that provide the *framework* for human life, and which, therefore, Christianity also addresses; yet, as counterfeits, they pervert Christianity's *content*.⁷⁸ Bavinck thus distinguishes between structural similarities across religions, or "*thatness*," and dissimilarities in detail, or "*whatness*":⁷⁹ the questions *that* all religions attempt to answer are universal; but *what* answers they give to these questions varies. For Bav-

illusion of having met and satisfied him?" Cf. J. R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (London: Falcon, 1975), 69: "Even his religiosity is a subtle escape from the God he is afraid and ashamed to meet." Hosea 10:2 perhaps makes this same connection.

⁷⁶ Isaiah 44:20; Jeremiah 17:9; Hosea 10:2. Calvin, *Inst.* I.xi.8 (Beveridge 83), writes "that the human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols."

⁷⁷ Cf. Strange, "Perilous Exchange, Precious Good News," who understands non-Christian religions as being "essentially an idolatrous refashioning of divine revelation, which are antithetical and yet parasitic on divine truth, and of which the gospel of Jesus Christ is this [*sic*.] 'subversive fulfilment.'"

⁷⁸ Cf. Bruce Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 259: "On the basis of God's universal general revelation and common enabling grace, undisputed truths about God, man, and sin lie embedded to various degrees in the non-Christian religions. In addition to elements of truth, the great religions of the world frequently display a sensitivity to the spiritual dimension of life, a persistence in devotion, a readiness to sacrifice, and sundry virtues both personal (gentleness, serenity of temper) and social (concern for the poor, nonviolence). But in spite of these positive features, natural man, operating within the context of natural religion and lacking special revelation, possesses a fundamentally false understanding of spiritual truth.... The world's non-Christian religions, then, are essentially false, but with glimpses of truth afforded by general revelation."

⁷⁹ Paul Visser, *Heart for the Gospel, Heart for the World: The Life and Thought of a Reformed Pioneer Missiologist Johan Herman Bavinck (1895-1964)* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 171, as cited in Strange, "For their rock is not as our Rock," 156.

inck, these universal questions cluster around five “magnetic points”: “I and the cosmos”; “I and the norm”; “I and the riddle of my existence”; “I and salvation”; and “I and the supreme power”.⁸⁰

We can thus understand why the Bible describes non-Christians both as those who *do*,⁸¹ and those who *don't* know God:⁸² objectively, unbelievers are continually encountered, both inwardly and outwardly, by genuine revelation about God; but subjectively, they suppress this revelation,⁸³ and, transacting what Bavinck calls a “perilous exchange”⁸⁴, condemn themselves to ignorant worship of “an unknown God”.⁸⁵ Thus, whether or not the former religion involved bowing to physical statues, conversion to Christianity can always be interpreted as turning “to God from idols to serve the living and true God”.⁸⁶

2.4 “Subversive fulfilment”

If non-Christian religions idolatrously refashion true knowledge of God so as to proffer illegitimate fulfilments of legitimate human desires, then Christianity relates to these religions in simultaneous discontinuity and continuity, as their “subversive fulfilment”: the gospel

⁸⁰ J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between The Temple and Mosque: A Study of the Relationship Between the Christian Faith and Other Religions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 32-33. On page 112, Bavinck summarises these questions: “What am I in this great cosmos? What am I over and against the norm, that strange phenomenon in my life that has authority over me? What am I in my life that speeds on and on – a doer or a victim? What am I in the face of that remarkable feeling that overwhelms me sometimes, the feeling that everything must be changed and that things are not right as they are? What am I over against that very mysterious background of existence, the divine powers?”

⁸¹ Romans 1:21. N.b. 1 Corinthians 1:21 rules out “natural theology” as the source of this knowledge.

⁸² Galatians 4:8; 1 Thessalonians 4:5.

⁸³ Romans 1:18.

⁸⁴ Bavinck, *The Church Between The Temple and Mosque*, 122. Cf. Romans 1:23, 25.

⁸⁵ Acts 17:23. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes* I.iv.1 (Beveridge 42).

⁸⁶ 1 Thessalonians 1:9.

subverts the “false faith” they engender in God, but *fulfils* in Christ the fundamental human longing for God that the false religions have sinfully commandeered.⁸⁷ Consider Wright’s summary of the biblical response to his four idol categories:

The one who has set his glory above the heavens is the only one before whom we should tremble in awe and worship. To live in covenantal fear of the Lord as sovereign Creator and gracious Redeemer is to be delivered from the fear of anything else in all creation – material or spiritual. As the Rock, he is the utterly secure place to invest all our trust in all the circumstances of life and death, for the present and the future. And as the Provider of all that is needful for all life on earth, the God of the covenant with Noah and our heavenly Father, there is no other to whom we need to turn, to plead, placate or persuade, for the needs he already knows we have.⁸⁸

Similarly, Bavinck notes, Jesus alone truly answers the perennial religious questions encapsulated in the five “magnetic points”: the cosmos is passing away, but I can find my true self in union with the resurrected Christ; Jesus is the norm, Who fulfilled God’s law, and in fellowship with Whom stands fullness of life; the gospel unfolds the riddle of my existence as the relationship of a child to my heavenly Father; salvation is principally redemption from personal enmity with God; and the supreme power is YHWH, the transcendent yet personal King Who humbled Himself unto incarnation and crucifixion in the Lord Jesus Christ.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Cf. Wright, “The Christian and Other Religions,” 5: “The fallen duplicity of man is that he simultaneously seeks after God his Maker and flees from God his Judge. Man’s religions, therefore, simultaneously manifest both these human tendencies. This is what makes a simplistic verdict on other religions – whether blandly positive or wholly negative – so unsatisfactory and, indeed, unbiblical.”

⁸⁸ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 171.

⁸⁹ J.H. Bavinck, *Religious Consciousness and Christian Faith*, 283-289, as cited in Strange, “For their rock is not as our Rock,” 166-167.

Christianity, then, is the “subversive fulfilment” of non-Christian religions. Thus, Christians are to call adherents of other faiths to “repent and believe the gospel!”⁹⁰

3 Christianity as the “subversive fulfilment” of orthodox Sunni Islam

We shall now illustrate the categories explored above by applying them specifically to orthodox Sunni Islam. There are two main advantages of interacting with this particular version of Islam. First, Sunni Islam is, at least nominally, representative of 80-90% of the worldwide Islamic community,⁹¹ and so our findings here should be of broad relevance throughout the Muslim world in general. Second, the ultimate authorities for orthodox Sunni Islam are published works: the Qur’an and the strong hadiths.⁹² Therefore, unlike a study of “folk Islam/s,” where an analysis of primary-sources may be, at best, of only secondary relevance, a fair preliminary analysis of orthodox Sunni Islam should be possible from a study of these written sources. At a later date, it would be helpful to complement this analysis with field research detailing how these observations find subjective expression in particular politico-cultural contexts.

⁹⁰ Mark 1:15.

⁹¹ John L. Esposito, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 306, considers Sunnis to comprise “at least 85 percent of the world’s 1.2 billion Muslims”.

⁹² The hadiths (traditions) I cite in this essay will be drawn from Al-Bukhârî’s collection, which is deemed *sahih* (“reliable”) and thus authoritative by Sunni Muslims. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhârî: Arabic-English* (9 vols.; Riyadh: Darussalam, 1997), 1:19, explains: “Many religious scholars of Islâm tried to find fault in the great remarkable collection – *Sahih Al-Bukhârî*, but without success. It is for this reason, they unanimously agreed that the most authentic book after the Book of Allâh is *Sahih Al-Bukhârî*.”

3.1 *Discontinuity*

We have seen that the discontinuity between Christianity and other religions is “principlial”, located epistemologically in one’s basic worldview commitments. As worldviews may be framed both narratively and propositionally,⁹³ we will here compare and contrast the respective salvation-narrative and theological-propositional contexts of Christianity and orthodox Sunni Islam.⁹⁴ We shall see that, since a Trinitarian conception of God is essential to the gospel,⁹⁵ Qur’anic divergence at this fundamental point renders the two theological systems radically incompatible.⁹⁶

⁹³ James Sire, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 122, defines a “worldview” as “a commitment, a fundamental orientation or the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.”

⁹⁴ For methodological justification of such a comparison, see John Stringer, “A Qur’anic View of Patterns in History,” *SFM* 5 (2009): 100-109, who concludes: “that Islām views Allāh as the Creator in the past, as the present Sustainer of life, and as the future Judge, has created a linear view of history to understand ‘the Arab mind’, more understanding of this historical aspect of their worldview is of importance.”

⁹⁵ Cf. Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1963; repr., Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 36: “even in its most elementary form the preaching of the Gospel must presuppose an understanding of the triune nature of God. It is not, as we have sometimes seemed to say, a kind of intellectual capstone which can be put on to the top of the arch at the very end; it is, on the contrary, what Athanasius called it, the *arche*, the presupposition without which the preaching of the Gospel in a pagan world cannot begin.”

⁹⁶ For a simple overview of the content and significance of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, see n.n., “Explaining the Trinity to Muslims,” *SFM* 6 (2010). The comparison of systematic Trinitarian and anti-Trinitarian theologies outlined in this part of the essay is adapted from pages 487-491 of this article.

3.1.1 Salvation-narrative metanarratives

The triune God behind biblical history is, by definition, personal and relational:⁹⁷ His very essence is love.⁹⁸ Since it is love's nature to express itself,⁹⁹ YHWH naturally speaks in history,¹⁰⁰ in order to know and to be known personally by others.¹⁰¹ Hence our discussion above of general and "imaginal" revelation: both externally, in the universe which God spoke into existence,¹⁰² and internally, through God's image imprinted upon us,¹⁰³ YHWH reveals to us His divine nature.

Through special revelation, God reveals Himself yet more clearly.¹⁰⁴ God's spoken commands are not an end in themselves: on the contrary, love is both the summary,¹⁰⁵ and the fulfilment,¹⁰⁶ of the law. Thus the Bible characterises obedience, not as legalistic merit-making, but as "seeking God";¹⁰⁷ and disobedience, as discussed above, is not breaching an arbitrary, impersonal code, but personally spurning YHWH,¹⁰⁸ defaming His character,¹⁰⁹ and approving Satan's slander.¹¹⁰ Whether the sinner transgresses one command or many, then, s/he expresses a deep-seated hatred of God,¹¹¹ the just retribution for which

⁹⁷ Cf. John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1994), 48-49.

⁹⁸ 1 John 4:8, 16.

⁹⁹ Proverbs 27:5.

¹⁰⁰ Francis A. Schaeffer, *He is There and He is Not Silent* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), 118. Cf. John 1:1.

¹⁰¹ John 1:18; 17:26; 1 Corinthians 8:3; Galatians 4:9; 1 John 5:20.

¹⁰² Romans 1:20.

¹⁰³ Genesis 1:27.

¹⁰⁴ Psalm 19 compares and contrasts the quality of God's self-revelation available in nature and the Torah.

¹⁰⁵ Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 12:29-31; John 13:34-35; 15:12, 17; 1 John 3:23; 2 John 5.

¹⁰⁶ Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8.

¹⁰⁷ Psalm 119:10; 1 John 2:3-6; cf. Joshua 22:5.

¹⁰⁸ Deuteronomy 28:20; Jeremiah 2:13.

¹⁰⁹ John 8:44.

¹¹⁰ Genesis 3:1-5; Revelation 13:6, 14.

¹¹¹ James 2:10-11.

is, appropriately, framed relationally: expulsion from God's loving presence,¹¹² to face His personal hostility.¹¹³

Given this analysis of sin, humanity's greatest need is reconciliation with God.¹¹⁴ It is, however, the prerogative of the offended, not the offending, party, to determine the terms of restored fellowship,¹¹⁵ and humans have so affronted the holy God that reconciliation, even had we desired it,¹¹⁶ now lies beyond our own reach.¹¹⁷

In the gospel, however, God reveals Himself and His love for the world in an all-surpassing way,¹¹⁸ taking the initiative in Christ to fully restore divine-human fellowship.¹¹⁹ Thus, the incarnate Son,¹²⁰ as mankind's representative,¹²¹ vicariously obeyed the Father in perfect filial love,¹²² submitting even to execution as a God-forsaken blasphemer.¹²³ He then rose again,¹²⁴ having conquered sin and death,¹²⁵ to restore His people to eternal fellowship with God.¹²⁶ He sent the Holy Spirit to regenerate sinful hearts,¹²⁷ that we might trust Jesus and love God.¹²⁸ United through faith with Christ in His death and resurrection,¹²⁹

¹¹² Matthew 7:23; 25:11-12; Luke 13:25-27.

¹¹³ 2 Thessalonians 1:8-10; Revelation 14:10-11; cf. Leviticus 26:28.

¹¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:20.

¹¹⁵ Proverbs 18:19.

¹¹⁶ Romans 1:30; 8:7; James 4:4.

¹¹⁷ Romans 5:6; cf. Genesis 3:24.

¹¹⁸ Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 1:1-3.

¹¹⁹ John 3:16; Romans 5:10.

¹²⁰ John 1:14.

¹²¹ Romans 5:15-19.

¹²² John 10:17.

¹²³ Matthew 27:46; cf. Genesis 2:17.

¹²⁴ Matthew 28:6; Luke 24:6; John 2:19; 10:17.

¹²⁵ 1 Corinthians 15.

¹²⁶ Mark 15:38; 2 Corinthians 5:21.

¹²⁷ John 3:6-8.

¹²⁸ Romans 5:5.

¹²⁹ Romans 6:3-11.

Christians enjoy the first fruits of fellowship with God in this life,¹³⁰ and yearn for the new creation,¹³¹ where this relationship will be consummated,¹³² and they will know and love God perfectly forever.¹³³

The Qur'an, by contrast, explicitly denounces the Trinity:¹³⁴ Allah is an undifferentiated monad.¹³⁵ Apparently, then, Allah is not intrinsically relational;¹³⁶ indeed, to know him personally is impossible.¹³⁷ Allah speaks in history to reveal, not his person, but his law.¹³⁸ Since this law is not intended to give insight into his unchanging divine character, his commands are merely nominal,¹³⁹ and, having no intrinsic eternal significance, may be annulled.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, human disobedience does

¹³⁰ Romans 8:23.

¹³¹ Romans 8:23-25.

¹³² Revelation 21:3-4; cf. Leviticus 26:11-12.

¹³³ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

¹³⁴ *An-Nisā'* (4):171. Although Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 14, may be correct in arguing that “[w]hat the Qur’an denies about God as the Holy Trinity has been denied by every great teacher of the church in the past and ought to be denied by every orthodox Christian today,” Volf’s insinuation that the Qur’an is mistaken in its portrayal of Christian doctrine has, needless to say, hardly commended widespread acceptance among orthodox Sunni Muslims!

¹³⁵ *Al-Mā'idah* (5):73.

¹³⁶ Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 48-49.

¹³⁷ *Al-An'ām* (6):103.

¹³⁸ John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), 24, observes that “[t]he Qur’an does not reveal God, but God’s will or law for all creation.”

¹³⁹ This perhaps betrays an Aristotelian influence in the development of Islamic doctrine. Lesslie Newbigin, “The Trinity as Public Truth,” in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 3, observes that “Nestorian Christians, who carried the gospel into great stretches of central Asia, Arabia, and India, had translated Aristotle into Syrian. When the Arab armies overwhelmed the Christian church of the East, Christian scholars became the teachers of their overlords. Aristotle was translated into Arabic, and Aristotelian rationalism became an integral part of Muslim theology.”

¹⁴⁰ *Al-Baqarah* (2):106.

not personally offend Allah;¹⁴¹ it arises merely from the weakness of mankind's created nature.¹⁴²

From the Qur'an's conception of God and sin arises a portrayal of forgiveness profoundly different from that of the Bible. Since Allah never intended a loving relationship with humankind, a costly reconciliation is irrelevant. Instead, Allah may variously decree or withhold punishment,¹⁴³ misleading or guiding whomever he wills.¹⁴⁴

Allah's ultimate verdict is, nevertheless, influenced by human obedience.¹⁴⁵ Allah thus demonstrates his mercy throughout history by sending prophets,¹⁴⁶ climaxing in Muhammad,¹⁴⁷ to explain and model his law,¹⁴⁸ and to exhort mankind to obedience.¹⁴⁹

3.1.2 Theological-propositional assertions

Under pressure from a metanarrative hostile to the gospel, basic Christian propositions, when placed in an orthodox Sunni Islamic context, are radically distorted and denied. Are Christians,¹⁵⁰ or Muslims,¹⁵¹ the true heirs of Abraham?¹⁵² Are we condemned for rejecting,¹⁵³ or ac-

¹⁴¹ *Ā'lay Imrān* (3):176.

¹⁴² *An-Nisā'* (4):28. Cf. also the analysis of Duane Alexander Miller, "Narrative and Metanarrative in Christianity and Islam," *SFM* 6 (2010): 515, who concludes that "[w]hen we examine the metanarratives of Islam and Christianity we find that the fundamental difference ... is anthropological.... we end up with two opinions: original sin or original innocence. And that choice means everything."

¹⁴³ *Al-Mā'idah* (5):18.

¹⁴⁴ *Fātir* (35):8; *Az-Zumar* (39):23.

¹⁴⁵ *Ā'lay Imrān* (3):130-136, 195; *An-Nisā'* (4):31, 124; *Al-Mu'minūn* (23):102-103.

¹⁴⁶ *Yūnus* (10):47; *Hūd* (11):48; *An Nahl* (16):63, 84; *Al-Mu'minūn* (23):44

¹⁴⁷ *Al-Ahzāb* (33):40.

¹⁴⁸ *Al-Ahzāb* (33):21.

¹⁴⁹ *An Nahl* (16):36, 89; *Al-Malā'ikah* (35):24.

¹⁵⁰ Romans 4:18-25; Galatians 3:29.

¹⁵¹ *Al-Baqarah* (2):135-40; *Ā'lay Imrān* (3):65-68.

¹⁵² Cf. Chris Flint, "God's Blessing to Ishmael with Special Reference to Islam," *SFM* 7 (2011): 1-53.

¹⁵³ John 3:36; 1 John 2:22-23; 5:12; 2 John 9.

cepting,¹⁵⁴ Jesus in His divinity? Is Jesus the Son of God,¹⁵⁵ or only a prophet?¹⁵⁶ Was Jesus crucified,¹⁵⁷ or not?¹⁵⁸ Did Jesus bear the sins of His people,¹⁵⁹ or not?¹⁶⁰ Are the Scriptures unchanged,¹⁶¹ or corrupted?¹⁶² Who is the eschatological mediator: Jesus,¹⁶³ or Muhammad?¹⁶⁴ For Christians, such doctrines are matters “of first importance.”¹⁶⁵ The Qur’anic inconsistency with these, and other,¹⁶⁶ biblical teachings, then, renders Christianity and Islam irreconcilably discontinuous.¹⁶⁷

3.2 Continuity

Along with a principal discontinuity, we also expect to observe practical continuity between Christianity and orthodox Sunni Islam, due to

¹⁵⁴ *An-Nisā’* (4):48, 116. Of course, the doctrine of “inseparable operation” means that Christianity does not affirm Christ as a *rival* to God, as these *surahs* seem to assume.

¹⁵⁵ Matthew 3:17; Mark 9:7; Luke 1:35; John 3:16; Acts 9:20; Romans 1:4; Hebrews 4:14; 1 John 5:12.

¹⁵⁶ *Al-Baqarah* (2):252-253; *Ā’lay Imrān* (3):59-60, 84; *An-Nisā’* (4):163; *Bani Isrāil* (17):111; *Az-Zukhruf* (43):81.

¹⁵⁷ Matthew 27:35; Mark 15:27; Luke 23:33; John 19:18; Acts 2:23.

¹⁵⁸ *An-Nisā’* (4):157.

¹⁵⁹ Isaiah 53:4-6; Galatians 3:13; Hebrews 9:28; 1 Peter 2:24.

¹⁶⁰ *Bani Isrāil* (17):13-15; *Az-Zumar* (39):7; *An-Najm* (53):38-40.

¹⁶¹ Psalm 119:89; 152; Isaiah 40:8; Matthew 5:18; 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 16:17; 21:33; 1 Peter 1:25.

¹⁶² *An-Nisā’* (4):46; *Al-Mā’idah* (5):18. N.b. while this is the common Muslim interpretation of these verses today, early Islam apparently accepted the Bible as authentic. Cf. *Al-Baqarah* (2):41; *Ā’lay Imrān* (3):3; *An-Nisā’* (4):136; *Al-Mā’idah* (5):46-47; *Yūnus* (10):94; *An Nahl* (16):43.

¹⁶³ 1 Timothy 2:5.

¹⁶⁴ *Sahih Al-Bukhāri* 60.3.3340 (Khan 4:333-335); 97.19.7410 (Khan 9:304-306); 97.24.7440 (Khan 9:325-328).

¹⁶⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:3.

¹⁶⁶ These include numerous historical contradictions. E.g., *Maryam* (19):27-28 and *At-Tahrīm* (66):12, conflate Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron and daughter of Amram, with Mary the mother of Jesus; *Al-Qasas* (28):38 identifies Haman as a servant of Pharaoh; *Al-Baqarah* (2):249 confuses King Saul with Gideon; and *Al-Qasas* (28):9 states that Moses was adopted by Pharaoh’s wife, not Pharaoh’s daughter.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Galatians 1:6-9.

the influences of general revelation, imaginal revelation, “remnantal revelation,”¹⁶⁸ “influential revelation,”¹⁶⁹ and demonic inspiration. We shall consider each of these in turn.

3.2.1 General revelation

Building upon Demarest’s catalogue of the specific theological truths God reveals through creation,¹⁷⁰ we can see that much of Islamic theology may be derived from general revelation. Such Islamic doctrines include God’s existence,¹⁷¹ wisdom,¹⁷² greatness,¹⁷³ uncreatedness,¹⁷⁴ goodness,¹⁷⁵ majesty,¹⁷⁶ power,¹⁷⁷ sovereign will,¹⁷⁸ universal Lordship,¹⁷⁹ aseity,¹⁸⁰ eternity,¹⁸¹ and immanence;¹⁸² God’s having standards of right and wrong,¹⁸³ and His desert of worship,¹⁸⁴ and of obedience;¹⁸⁵ and God’s roles in creating,¹⁸⁶ in sustaining,¹⁸⁷ and in judging the world.¹⁸⁸

¹⁶⁸ This is the term given by Strange, “For their rock is not as our Rock,” 158-159, to the fragmentary memories of God’s primeval revelation passed on to all humanity by the descendants of Adam and Noah.

¹⁶⁹ This is the term given by Strange, “For their rock is not as our Rock,” 159-161, to the influx of biblical data into other religions due to contact with Christians or Christian Scripture.

¹⁷⁰ Demarest, *General Revelation*, 243.

¹⁷¹ *Al-Dukhân* (44):8; cf. Psalms 19:1; Romans 1:19.

¹⁷² *Al-Jâthiyah* (45):2; cf. Psalms 104:24.

¹⁷³ While not Qur’anic, “*Allahu Akbar*” (“God is Great”) is basic to Islamic orthodoxy. Cf. Psalms 8:3-4.

¹⁷⁴ *Al-Hashr* (59):22-24; Acts 17:24.

¹⁷⁵ *Ash-Shûrâ* (42):28; cf. Acts 14:17.

¹⁷⁶ *Al-Jâthiyah* (45):37; cf. Psalms 29:4.

¹⁷⁷ *Al-Jâthiyah* (45):2; *Adh-Dhâriyât* (51):58; cf. Psalms 29:4; Romans 1:20.

¹⁷⁸ *Ash-Shûrâ* (42):8, 49-50; cf. Acts 17:26.

¹⁷⁹ *Ash-Shûrâ* (42):53; *Az-Zukhruf* (43):85; cf. Acts 17:24.

¹⁸⁰ *Al-Furqân* (25):58; *Adh-Dhâriyât* (51):57-58; cf. Acts 17:25.

¹⁸¹ *Al-Baqarah* (2):255; *Al-Hadîd* (57):3; *Al-Ikhlâs* (112):2; cf. Psalms 93:2.

¹⁸² *Qâf* (50):16; cf. Acts 17:27-28.

¹⁸³ *At-Talâq* (65):5; cf. Romans 2:15.

¹⁸⁴ *Fussilat* (41):37; cf. Acts 14:15; 17:23.

¹⁸⁵ *Al-Mâ’idah* (5):92; cf. Romans 2:15.

¹⁸⁶ *Fussilat* (41):9-12, *Ash-Shûrâ* (42):11; cf. Acts 14:15.

¹⁸⁷ *Ar-Rahmân* (55):29; cf. Acts 14:16; 17:25.

3.2.2 Imaginal revelation

Since Muslims bear the *imago dei* by which men and women possess both the capacity to relate to God, and an innate awareness of His moral standards, it is unsurprising to find the Qur'an regularly condemning unbelief in God's revelations,¹⁸⁹ and also defining a moral code which partially overlaps the Decalogue, including such commands as: worship only one God;¹⁹⁰ make no images of God;¹⁹¹ do not take God's name in vain;¹⁹² honour your parents;¹⁹³ do not murder;¹⁹⁴ do not commit adultery;¹⁹⁵ do not steal;¹⁹⁶ do not bear false witness;¹⁹⁷ and do not covet.¹⁹⁸

3.2.3 Remnantal revelation

The Qur'anic narratives of Adam and Eve,¹⁹⁹ Cain and Abel,²⁰⁰ and Noah,²⁰¹ might initially suggest that the Qur'an has been strongly influenced by remnantal revelation. It is, however, highly unlikely that such traditions were preserved in Arabian memory up until the compilation of the Qur'an. If, on the one hand, we accept the traditional Islamic account, then Arabia pre-Muhammad was experiencing an

¹⁸⁸ *Ash-Shūrā* (42):26; cf. Romans 2:15-16.

¹⁸⁹ *Al-Baqarah* (2):6, 41, 88-90; *Ā'lay Imrān* (3):4, 90, 112, 141; *An-Nisā'* (4):56, 137, 168-169.

¹⁹⁰ *Al-Qasas* (28):70; *Muhammad* (47):19.

¹⁹¹ *Al-An'ām* (6):103; *Ibrahim* (14):35.

¹⁹² *Al-Baqarah* (2):224.

¹⁹³ *Bani Isrā'il* (17):23.

¹⁹⁴ *Al-Mā'idah* (5):32; *Bani Isrā'il* (17):33.

¹⁹⁵ *Bani Isrā'il* (17):32.

¹⁹⁶ *Al-Mā'idah* (5):38.

¹⁹⁷ *Al-Baqarah* (2):283; *An-Nisā'* (4):135; *An-Nūr* (24):7.

¹⁹⁸ *Tā-Hā* (20):131.

¹⁹⁹ *Al-Baqarah* (2):30-39; *Al-A'rāf* (7):11-27; *Tā-Hā* (20):115-124. N.b. Eve is unnamed in the Qur'an.

²⁰⁰ *Al-Mā'idah* (5):27-31.

²⁰¹ *Yunus* (10):71-73; *Hūd* (11):25-48; *Al-Anbiyā'* (21):76-77; *Al-Mu'minūn* (23):23-30; *Al-Furqān* (25):37; *Ash-Shu'arā* (26):105-122; *Al-Ankabūt* (29):14-15; *As-Sāllāt* (37):75-82; *Al-Qamar* (54):9-16; *Al-Hāqqah* (69):11-12; *Noah* (71):1-28.

“age of ignorance,” or “*Jahiliyyah*,”²⁰² when all memory of God had been lost. If, on the other hand, we dispute this Islamic account,²⁰³ then the inclusion of these stories is better explained with reference to influential revelation.

3.2.4 Influential revelation

The resemblance many Qur’anic narratives bear to biblical accounts indicates some kind of biblical influence on the composition of the Qur’an; yet significant discrepancies between the two suggest that this influence was at best only indirect, mediated by secondary Jewish and Christian sources. Indeed, that the author/s of the Qur’an had some contact with Jews and Christians,²⁰⁴ who may themselves have been a step removed from biblical orthodoxy,²⁰⁵ is confirmed by an analysis of the Jewish and Christian sources which lie behind the Qur’an. The Qur’anic account of Solomon, the hoopoe, and the Queen of Sheba,²⁰⁶

²⁰² *Al-Ahzâb* (33):33. The term occurs more often in the *hadith* e.g. *Al-Bukhârî* 3.48.126 (Khan 1:130).

²⁰³ Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 39-40. Cf. Tom Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword: The Battle for Global Empire and the End of the Ancient World* (London: Little, Brown, 2012), 50-52.

²⁰⁴ Cf. Theodor Nöldeke, “The Koran,” in *The Origins of the Koran: Classic Essays on Islam’s Holy Book* (ed. Ibn Warraq; Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1998), 43: “in the rare passages where we can trace direct resemblances to the text of the Old Testament (comp. xxi. 105 with Ps. xxxvii. 29; i. 5 with Ps. xxvii. 11) or the New (comp. vii. 48 [*sic*. 50] with Luke xvi. 24; xlvi. 19 [*sic*. 20] with Luke xvi. 25), there is nothing more than might readily have been picked up in conversation with any Jew or Christian.” We may similarly explain the resemblance of *Al-A’raf* (7):40 to Matthew 19:24; Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25.

²⁰⁵ W. St. Clair-Tisdall, “The Sources of Islam,” in *The Origins of the Koran: Classic Essays on Islam’s Holy Book* (ed. Ibn Warraq; Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1998), 258, argues that “[i]n the Prophet’s day, numbers of Christians in Arabia were not only an ignorant people, but belonged to heretical sects, which, on account of their dangerous influence, had been expelled from the Roman Empire.... Muhammad having but an imperfect knowledge of the Gospel, learned from these people ... what he believed to be the purport of the New Testament.”

²⁰⁶ *An-Naml* (27):20-44.

for example, is derived from the tale of Solomon, the partridge, and the Queen of Sheba, which appears in the Second Targum on the Book of Esther.²⁰⁷ Another rabbinic source is echoed in the Qur'an's account of the lowing of the golden calf,²⁰⁸ and again in the story of the raven which showed Cain how to bury Abel's slain body.²⁰⁹ The Qur'anic portrayal of a young iconoclastic Abraham, who tricked his countrymen into admitting the speechlessness of the idols they worshipped and so was summarily thrown into the fire,²¹⁰ betrays close literary dependence upon the Midrash Rabbah on Genesis 15:7.²¹¹ The Jewish Rashi may well be the influence behind Allah's throne being located "upon the water";²¹² and Islam's definition of daybreak as the time when a black thread may be discerned from a white one,²¹³ mirrors the Mishnah Berakhoth: "the beginning of the day is at the moment when one can distinguish a blue thread from a white thread."²¹⁴ The story of how the virgin Mary, sustained by God's miraculous provision, grew up in the temple under the guardianship of Zacharias the priest,²¹⁵ was imported from the Protoevangelium of James the Less;²¹⁶ and Jesus' speech in the cradle,²¹⁷ and His childhood creation of birds

²⁰⁷ Abraham Geiger, "What did Muhammad Borrow from Judaism?" in *The Origins of the Koran: Classic Essays on Islam's Holy Book* (ed. Ibn Warraq; Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1998), 218-219.

²⁰⁸ *Tâ-Hâ* (20):88. Cf. *Pirke Rabbi Eliezer*, as cited in St. Clair-Tisdall, "The Sources of Islam," 253.

²⁰⁹ *Al-Mâ'idah* (5):31. Cf. *Pirke Rabbi Eliezer*, chp. 21, as cited in Geiger, "What did Muhammad Borrow from Judaism?" 189.

²¹⁰ *Maryam* (19):41-46; *Al-Anbiyâ'* (21):51-70; (37):83-98.

²¹¹ As cited in St. Clair-Tisdall, "The Sources of Islam," 242.

²¹² *Hûd* (11):7. Cf. St. Clair-Tisdall, "The Sources of Islam," 253.

²¹³ *Al-Baqarah* (2):187.

²¹⁴ As cited in St. Clair-Tisdall, "The Sources of Islam," 254.

²¹⁵ *Â'lay Imrân* (3):37.

²¹⁶ As cited in St. Clair-Tisdall, "The Sources of Islam," 262-263. Cf. the Coptic *History of the Virgin*.

²¹⁷ *Maryam* (19):29-34.

from clay,²¹⁸ are adapted from similar accounts appearing in the Gospel of the Infancy,²¹⁹ and the Gospel of Thomas the Israelite,²²⁰ respectively.

Indirect biblical influence is also attested in the history of Islamic Qur'anic interpretation. Consider, for example, the Qur'anic account of Abraham's unnamed son of sacrifice.²²¹ Firestone's analysis of early Islamic commentaries reveals that "Isaac was originally understood to have been the intended victim, but that this view was eclipsed by a new perspective which held Ishmael to have been intended."²²² This interpretative shift began "during the early second Islamic century and became almost universally accepted by the end of the third."²²³ Firestone's observation further substantiates Hawting's claim that Ishmael's increasing prominence within Islam is causally connected to the Muslim conquest of Jewish and Christian lands.²²⁴

The development, then, of both Islamic scripture and Islamic tradition, apparently show evidence of indirect, influential revelation.²²⁵

²¹⁸ *Ā'lay Imrān* (3):49; *Al-Mā'idah* (5):110.

²¹⁹ As cited in St. Clair-Tisdall, "The Sources of Islam," 266.

²²⁰ As cited in St. Clair-Tisdall, "The Sources of Islam," 265. Online: <http://www.tonyburke.ca/infancy-gospel-of-thomas/the-childhood-of-the-saviour-infancy-gospel-of-thomas-a-new-translation/> [cited 22 May 2012].

²²¹ *As-Ṣāffāt* (37):101-113.

²²² Reuven Firestone, "Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice (*Al-Dhabī*, Qur'ān 37:99-113): Issues in Qur'ānic Exegesis," *JSS* 34 (1989):115.

²²³ Firestone, "Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice," 129.

²²⁴ Gerald Hawting, "The Religion of Abraham and Islam," in *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham* (ed. Martin Goodman, George H. van Kooten and Jacques T. A. G. M. van Ruiten; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 500-01: "the Arabs derived the ideas of their Abrahamitic ancestry from the peoples they ruled over, who had been calling them Ishmaelites and Hagarites for centuries. ... The evidence that the Arabs who came out of Arabia with the conquering armies of the 630s and 640s already had a self-identification as Ishmaelites and followed a religion that they identified as Abraham's is not compelling."

²²⁵ It would not, however, be accurate to label Islam a "Christian heresy" in quite the same sense that Arianism might be; for unlike Arianism, which deliberately departed

Moreover, if Woodberry is correct in his appraisal of the five pillars of Islam,²²⁶ we may assess Islamic worship similarly: the *shahada* “is apparently based on the *shema*’ in Deuteronomy 6:4”;²²⁷ that *salat* also has its “roots ... in Judaism [is] shown in [its] terminology, postures, and content”;²²⁸ for *zakat*, “[t]here are numbers of parallels between the Quran and the Bible”;²²⁹ *sawm* is derived both etymologically and theologically from the Jewish practice of fasting;²³⁰ and, in both these same ways, the *hajj* stems from Jewish pilgrimages in the Old Testament.²³¹

3.2.5 Demonic inspiration

In order to explain the apparent Islamic unorthodoxy of some Qur’anic verses, certain medieval Muslim commentators propounded the teaching that some of Muhammad’s revelations were the product of Satanic influence.²³² Today, however, scholarly uncertainty as to whether all of the Qur’an should be traced to Muhammad,²³³ combined with recognition of the highly significant role of influential revela-

from a biblical position, Islam in its origins seems not to have directly encountered and responded to the orthodox Christian position. Islam is more helpfully categorised as simply a “non-Christian religion.”

²²⁶ J. Dudley Woodberry, “Contextualization Among Muslims: Reusing Common Pillars,” in *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today* (ed. Dean S. Gilliland; Dallas: Word Publishing, 1989). This article was later reprinted in the *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, and it is the page numbers from this second printing that I shall cite below.

²²⁷ J. Dudley Woodberry, “Contextualization Among Muslims: Reusing Common Pillars,” *IJFM* 13 (1996): 174.

²²⁸ Woodberry, “Contextualization Among Muslims,” 175.

²²⁹ Woodberry, “Contextualization Among Muslims,” 180.

²³⁰ Woodberry, “Contextualization Among Muslims,” 181.

²³¹ Woodberry, “Contextualization Among Muslims,” 181.

²³² N.b. the offending verses are not extant in Qur’ans today. Cf. Dan Cohn-Sherbok, ed., *The Salman Rushdie Controversy in Interreligious Perspective* (Lampeter: E. Mellen Press, 1990), 7-9.

²³³ Keith E. Small, *Textual Criticism and Qur’ān Manuscripts* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2011), 179, concludes of the Qur’an: “it cannot be demonstrated that there was one version going back to Muhammad.”

tion in the formation and development of Islam, discussed above,²³⁴ makes it possible to adequately account for Islam's origins and development without necessary recourse to identifying direct demonic inspiration as an early source.

3.3 *Idolatry*

Our observation of both structural similarities, and detailed differences, between Christianity and orthodox Sunni Islam, matches our theological analysis of non-Christian religions as collective idolatrous refashionings of divine revelation, formed through the dynamic dialectic of suppression and exchange.²³⁵ Such an analysis of Islam sharpens our understanding of the religion at some critical points.

First, consider the relationship between the God of the Bible and the Allah of the Qur'an. Idolatry is variously the distortion, the displacement or the denial of God as He has revealed Himself to be; and on this issue, all three facets seem to be present. If it is argued that, since one monotheist cannot logically accuse another of worshipping a different God, the intended referent of both Allah and YHWH is the same,²³⁶ Islam nevertheless so *distorts* God as to render the Qur'anic Allah an idol. From another perspective, similarities between the two notwithstanding, the differences between the two deities may be judged so radical as to deem the Qur'anic god a *displacement* of YHWH.²³⁷ Finally, the Qur'an's explicit repudiations of God's triune

²³⁴ See also Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword*, for an accessible account of current scholarly research into the likely origins of Islam.

²³⁵ Cf. Strange, "Perilous Exchange, Precious Good News," 93. This may explain why God's purposes for Ishmael, if relevant to our understanding of Islam, would function with respect to Christianity as both curse and blessing: cf. Flint, "God's Blessing to Ishmael with Special Reference to Islam," 18-19, 41-43.

²³⁶ Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church is Influencing the Way we Think About and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 31.

²³⁷ Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 294-295, writes: "If having some characteristics in common were a sufficient criterion for sameness, one could prove that dogs are cats

nature, and others of His essential qualities and actions in history, logically entail a *denial* of God. Whichever of these analyses we favour, we can conclude, with Calvin: “the Turks in the present day, who, though proclaiming, with full throat, that the Creator of heaven and earth is their God, yet by their rejection of Christ, substitute an idol in his place.”²³⁸

We may similarly compare the biblical Jesus to the Qur’anic Isa. Qur’anic counter-claims to Jesus’ crucifixion presuppose the same referent is in view;²³⁹ this suggests *distortion*. Yet, similarities aside,²⁴⁰ the Islamic connotations associated with Isa so depart from Jesus’ biblical character as to render Isa a *displacement* of the real Jesus;²⁴¹ while the disavowal of Jesus’ divine Sonship points to straightforward *denial*. Again, the category of idolatry has helped here to disentangle the complex nuances of this parasitic corruption.

A brief examination of orthodox Sunni Islam in general, through the lenses of Wright’s four main categories of idols, brings out its par-

because both species have four legs and two eyes.... The question, then, is not whether or not both Allah and the God of the Bible are rightly designated the Almighty Creator – of course that is true – but whether or not the configuration of affirmations and denials about what God is like in the two cases warrant speaking of the same God.”

²³⁸ Calvin, *Inst.* II.vi.4 (Beveridge 247).

²³⁹ Cf. Sam Schlorff, *Missiological Models in Ministry to Muslims* (Upper Darby, Pa: Middle East Resources, 2006), 37.

²⁴⁰ Coleman, *A Theological Analysis of the Insider Movement Paradigm*, Kindle e-book, loc. 1820-1821, notes the tragedy of Jesus’ Qur’anic portrayal: “it is also possible to arrive at an extremely high view of Jesus based on the Qur’anic data, even considering Him greater than Muhammad, and yet explicitly refuse to accept essential biblical teaching such as the crucifixion.”

²⁴¹ Cf. Peter J. Leithart, “Islam: Mirror of Christendom,” n.p.: “Islam’s account of history has a place for Jesus and Christianity. To be sure, the Jesus of Islam is not the Jesus of the New Testament: He is not the divine Son incarnate, He was not crucified and raised (cf. Sura 4.157), and He is not reigning at the Father’s right hand. Still, the prophet Jesus has a place in Muslim ‘redemptive history.’”

parasitic nature yet more clearly.²⁴² Islam *entices* Muslims to obey by holding out as reward, not the joy of knowing and loving God,²⁴³ but an eternity of unhindered indulgence of carnal lusts.²⁴⁴ Submission to the will of Allah is motivated by the *fear*, not of disappointing one's heavenly father,²⁴⁵ but of threats of eternal damnation.²⁴⁶ Muslims are to put their *trust* in the Qur'an,²⁴⁷ rather than the Bible alone, as God's revealed truth,²⁴⁸ and in the efficacy of Muhammad's intercession,²⁴⁹ rather than in Jesus alone,²⁵⁰ for their salvation. Finally, Sunni Muslims, highly conscious of their failure to meet God's standards, recognise that their primary *need* is God's forgiveness; yet they seek this forgiveness, not on the basis of Jesus' vicarious completed work,²⁵¹ but through their own combination of personal good works,²⁵² and obedience to the five pillars of Islam.²⁵³ Ritual prayer, in particular, is con-

²⁴² An equivalent analysis to the following could also be carried out in terms of Bavinck's five "magnetic points."

²⁴³ John 15:10; 1 John 5:3; 2 John 6.

²⁴⁴ *As-Sāffāt* (37):41-49; *At-Tūr* (52):17-24; *Al Wāqī'ah* (56):17-38; *An-Naba'* (78):31-34.

²⁴⁵ Genesis 6:6; cf. Luke 19:41; Ephesians 4:30.

²⁴⁶ *As-Sāffāt* (37):63-68; *Al Wāqī'ah* (56):41-56, 92-94; *Al-Mulk* (67):5-11; *Al-Muddaththir* (74):26-29.

²⁴⁷ *Yūsuf* (12):1-3; *Al-Jinn* (72):1-2.

²⁴⁸ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 204-205, explains that sinful humanity counterfeits God's "three modes of special revelation," drawing attention to "the deep antithesis between true theophany, true prophecy, and true miracle, on the one hand, and false theophany, false prophecy, and false miracle, on the other hand."

²⁴⁹ *Sahih Al-Bukhārī* 60.3.3340 (Khan 4:333-335); 97.19.7410 (Khan 9:304-306); 97.24.7440 (Khan 9:325-328).

²⁵⁰ Acts 4:12.

²⁵¹ John 19:30; Hebrews 9:26; 10:10.

²⁵² *Al-Mā'idah* (5):9; *Al-Anbiyā'* (21):47; *Al-Mu'minūn* (23):102-103; *Ash-Shūrā* (42):26.

²⁵³ Sam Schlorff, *Missiological Models in Ministry to Muslims* (Upper Darby, Pa.: Middle East Resources, 2006), 158, observes that "Muslims have an intuitive knowledge of God, of His requirements, and of their guilt before Him for failing to meet those requirements, but that Islam leads them to repress and suppress this

sidered to have tremendous salvific potential,²⁵⁴ especially congregational *salat* conducted in a mosque.²⁵⁵

3.4 “Subversive fulfilment”

Having identified several instances of “suppression and exchange” in orthodox Sunni Islam, we may now run the process of idolatry in reverse, and so reveal Christianity as the “subversive fulfilment” of these parasitically corrupted truths. Our analysis will in each instance involve three steps: *affirm* the deeper truth which has been perverted; *expose* the distortion; and *evangelise* by demonstrating that the gospel alone offers true satisfaction. Examples of this process are tabulated below:²⁵⁶

knowledge and replace it with a false religious system that deceives them and keeps them from the truth.”

²⁵⁴ *Sahih Al-Bukhâri* 9.6.528 (Khan 1:323): “Narrated Abū Huraira رضي الله عنه: I heard Allāh’s Messenger saying, ‘If there was a river at the door of anyone of you and he took a bath in it five times a day, would you notice any dirt on him?’ They said, ‘Not a trace of dirt would be left.’ The Prophet added, ‘That is the example of the five (daily compulsory) *salāt* (prayers) with which Allāh blots out (annuls) evil deeds.” Cf. *Sahih Al-Bukhâri* 8.61.445 (Khan 1:284): “Narrated Abū Huraira رضي الله عنه: Allāh’s Messenger said, ‘The angels keep on asking Allāh’s forgiveness for anyone of you, as long as he is at his *Musalla* (praying place) and he does not pass wind.’ They say, ‘O Allāh! Forgive him, O Allāh! Be Merciful to him.’”

²⁵⁵ *Sahih Al-Bukhâri* 10.30.647 (Khan 1:373): “Narrated Abū Huraira ...: Allāh’s Messenger said, ‘The reward of the *salāt* (prayer) offered by a person in congregation is multiplied twenty-five as much than that of the *salāt* offered in one’s house or in the market (alone). And this is because if he performs ablution and does it perfectly and then proceeds to the mosque with the sole intention of offering *salāt*, then, for every step he takes towards the mosque, he is upgraded one degree in reward and his one sin is taken off (crossed out) from his accounts (of deeds).” Belteshazzar and Abednego, *The Mosque and its Role in Society*, 10, also observe that prayers performed at Muhammad’s mosque in Medina are considered 1,000 times more effective than usual, and at the Masjid al-Aqsa in Jerusalem, prayers are deemed 500 times more meritorious. Cf. *Sahih Al-Bukhâri* 20.1.1190 (Khan 2:169): “Narrated Abū Huraira ...: Allāh’s Messenger said, ‘One *salāt* (prayer) in my mosque is better than one thousand *salāt* (prayer) in any other mosque except *Al-Masjid-al-harām*.”

²⁵⁶ This table is by no means exhaustive. Had we in the previous section, for example, analysed the idolatry of orthodox Sunni Islam in terms of Bavinck’s five “magnetic

Affirm	Expose	Evangelise
God will reward human obedience.	The rewards Allah offers in the Qur'an cannot satisfy, ²⁵⁷ and are themselves illicit. ²⁵⁸	Mankind can ultimately only be satisfied by knowing and loving God. The barrier to this is not ontological necessity, but relational hostility. Thus those "in Christ," credited with Jesus' perfect obedience, can eternally delight in God as His adopted children.
God will punish human disobedience.	If human disobedience is simply the weakness inherent to our created nature, ²⁵⁹ then Allah is unjust to punish us for it; yet if human obedience is truly blameworthy, then Allah is unjust to overlook any	We are justly rendered guilty, ashamed, and worthy of condemnation, for disobeying God, because doing so betrays our personal hostility towards Him. While fear of damnation may be a

points," those findings could also have been included here, under an equivalent three-step approach: "*affirm* the right human question which has been falsely answered; *expose* Islam's inability to satisfactorily address the problem; and *evangelise* by demonstrating that the gospel alone provides the true solution to the conundrum."

²⁵⁷ Proverbs 27:20.

²⁵⁸ 1 John 2:16. Cf. *Al-Baqarah* (2):187 and *Al-Mā'idah* (5):90-91, which characterise wine as sinful and Satanic, versus *Muhammad* (47):15 and *Al-Mutaffifin* (83):25, which promise rivers of wine in heaven!

²⁵⁹ Schlorff, *Missiological Models in Ministry to Muslims*, 148.

²⁶⁰ *Al-Anbiyā'* (21):47 describes Judgment Day as Allah's weighing on the scales each life as a whole. Jesus, however, warns that God's standard is actually required of each life in every part (Matthew 12:36). Thus, for any to be forgiven, the cross is all the more necessary to vindicate God's justice (Romans 3:25).

Affirm	Expose	Evangelise
	of it. ²⁶⁰	proper inducement to initial repentance, ²⁶¹ on-going fear of God is motivated on the basis of His forgiveness in Christ. ²⁶²
We need revelation and an intercessor.	The Qur'an and Muhammad cannot meet these needs: the Qur'an contradicts God's revelation through His prophets, ²⁶³ apostles, ²⁶⁴ and Son; ²⁶⁵ and Muhammad himself needs intercession. ²⁶⁶	Only God's Son is close enough to God to fully reveal Him to us, ²⁶⁷ and to intercede for sinners: ²⁶⁸ thus His incarnation, ²⁶⁹ and His atoning death and resurrection, ever to intercede for us. ²⁷⁰
We need divine forgiveness, and God requires a sufficient basis for granting it.	From those rebelling against God, ²⁷¹ "righteous deeds" and "sincere worship" can never be an acceptable basis for forgiveness, ²⁷² for even these	The only worthy basis for perfect forgiveness is perfect submission. Only Jesus thus fasted, ²⁷⁴ prayed, ²⁷⁵ and went on pilgrimage, ²⁷⁶ doing so

²⁶¹ Matthew 3:10; Luke 13:1-9.

²⁶² Psalm 130:4; Matthew 18:21-35; Romans 12:1; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, 18-20.

²⁶³ Luke 24:25-27, 44-49; John 5:45-47.

²⁶⁴ Acts 3:17-26.

²⁶⁵ Hebrews 1:1-4.

²⁶⁶ *Al-Ahzāb* (33):56; hence, whenever Muhammad's name is mentioned, Muslims immediately follow it with the prayer: "*sallallahu alayhi wa-salam*" ("the prayers of Allah be upon him and peace"). *Yūnus* (10):15 and *Az-Zumar* (39):13 portray Muhammad as being unsure of his own salvation.

²⁶⁷ Matthew 11:27; Luke 10:22.

²⁶⁸ Romans 8:34.

²⁶⁹ John 1:18; 3:13.

²⁷⁰ Hebrews 7:23-28. Note that only a *sinless priest* can perfectly intercede for sinners, and only an *immortal priest* can intercede for us perpetually. Muhammad is neither.

²⁷¹ Titus 1:15.

²⁷² Isaiah 64:6.

Affirm	Expose	Evangelise
	works must be repented of. ²⁷³	even for His enemies' sake.
God is One.	Being monadic, the “oneness” of Allah can only be correlative to, and thus is necessarily dependent upon, the creation. Allah’s “oneness” therefore comes at the expense of his aseity. Allah’s monadic impersonality also makes his communication to us inexplicable.	YHWH is both personal and absolute: qualities which arise from His nature alone, independently of creation. ²⁷⁷ Moreover, being triune, eternal, other-person-centred love ²⁷⁸ is God’s very essence; ²⁷⁹ a love which motivates, ²⁸⁰ and is supremely expressed to us in, ²⁸¹ the gospel.

4 Practical Missiological Implications

Recognising Christianity as the “subversive fulfilment” of Islam enables us in many areas to steer a course between irrelevance and syncretism on the mission field. Consider personal evangelism, for instance.

²⁷³ Philippians 3:7-11.

²⁷⁴ John 19:28.

²⁷⁵ Hebrews 5:7.

²⁷⁶ Luke 9:51.

²⁷⁷ John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til An Analysis of his Thought* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1995), 65.

²⁷⁸ The self-centred love of a monad is not genuine love as the Bible describes it, but narcissism.

²⁷⁹ 1 John 4:8, 16. Cf. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, 45.

²⁸⁰ John 3:16.

²⁸¹ Romans 5:8.

In contexts where Western-developed evangelistic outlines like “Two Ways to Live” may sometimes seem less culturally accessible,²⁸² the evangelist should not instead adopt the apparently syncretistic “Camel Method,”²⁸³ but rather, aware of the variegation of both sin and common grace in the lives of unbelievers, should favour, not a “one-size-fits-all” evangelistic procedure, but instead a personalised “subversive fulfilment” approach,²⁸⁴ which enables the evangelist to join in the particular conversation the Holy Spirit has already begun with each individual.²⁸⁵ This approach involves four steps.²⁸⁶

First, the evangelist seeks elements of truth which, by virtue of the *imago dei* and common grace, their conversation partner already accepts, in (often unconscious) opposition to their traditional Islamic worldview. This truth need not be anything overtly “religious.” Second, the evangelist, building rapport, enthusiastically affirms that, as a Christian, s/he also holds this truth dear. Third, the evangelist proclaims how this truth is fulfilled in the gospel; thus, implicitly, if not

²⁸² <http://www.twowaystolive.com>.

²⁸³ <http://www.camelmethod.com>. See Emir Caner, “Insider Movements’ Equivalent of Limbo: The CAMEL Method,” in Joshua Lingel, Jeff Morton and Bill Nikides, eds., *Chislam: How Missionaries are Promoting an Islamized Gospel* (Garden Grove, Calif.: i2 Ministries Publications, 2011), 145-153.

²⁸⁴ J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (trans. David H. Freeman; Philadelphia: P&R, 1960), 240, recognises this: “In practice I am never concerned with Buddhism, but with a living person and *his* Buddhism, I am never in contact with Islam but with a Moslem and *his* Mohammedanism.”

²⁸⁵ John 16:8-11. Cf. Bavinck, *The Church between the Temple and Mosque*, 126: “When a missionary or some other person comes into contact with a non-Christian and speaks to him about the gospel, he can be sure that God has concerned Himself with this person long before. That person had dealings more than once with God before God touched him, and he himself experienced the two fatal reactions - suppression and substitution. Now he hears the gospel for the first time.” See also Brian A. DeVries, “The Evangelistic Trialogue: Gospel Communication with the Holy Spirit,” *CTJ* 44 (2009): 49-73.

²⁸⁶ Notice how Paul follows these same four steps in his Areopagus address, recorded in Acts 17:22-31.

explicitly, the incongruity between the particular truth the Muslim here recognises, and the wider Islamic worldview s/he confesses, is exposed.²⁸⁷ Finally, the evangelist calls for repentance and faith. Since truth and unbelief are incompatible,²⁸⁸ ultimately, the choice the Muslim faces is inevitable: either submit to Christ, in Whom alone their glimpse of truth may legitimately be held;²⁸⁹ or else, in hatred of Christ, snuff out that glimmer of light also, and retreat yet further into the darkness.²⁹⁰

Consider the following personal example. During the “fasting month” a couple of years ago, I asked some of my Muslim friends the reason why Muslims fast in Ramadhan. “There is much wisdom in it,” they told me, “but one reason is that it helps us show compassion for all the poor and starving people in the world.” “Why is that?” I asked. “Well,” they replied, “you can’t have true compassion for a starving person just by hearing about them: to be truly compassionate, you need to experience what they experience.” “Really?” I asked. “So you believe that true love and compassion doesn’t just mean hearing about someone from a distance, but actually suffering what they suffer?” “Yes,” they replied. “Wow, as a Christian, that’s what I believe, too! Let me ask you, who do you believe is the most loving and compassionate being of all?” They responded, in line with the opening verse of almost every *surah* in the Qur’an, “God is the most merciful

²⁸⁷ Cf. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, 136: “if we begin with the ideas of those we would convert, a point will be reached when the breach between our view and theirs is clearly evident. There is no direct uninterrupted path from the darkness of paganism to the light of the gospel.”

²⁸⁸ Cf. Strange, “Perilous Exchange, Precious Good News,” 129: “Philosophically speaking, Christianity is true because of the impossibility of the contrary. Biblically speaking, the cracked cisterns of idolatry that bring only disillusionment, despair and unfulfilled desires are wonderfully fulfilled and surpassed in the fount of living water, Jesus Christ the LORD.”

²⁸⁹ 2 Corinthians 10:5; Colossians 2:2-3.

²⁹⁰ John 3:19-21.

and compassionate.” “Really?” I asked, “That’s what I believe too! But as you’ve said, true compassion means not staying at a distance, but suffering what they suffer, and experiencing what they experience. So, if God really is the most compassionate to us, what does that mean? Well, it means that He also needs to suffer what we suffer, and experience what we experience.” They sat for a moment in silence, not knowing how to respond to this. Then I continued, “And that’s who Jesus is! Because God really is the most merciful and compassionate, He didn’t just stay at a distance, He came down to earth as a man, Jesus Christ, to suffer what we suffer and experience what we experience. That’s why He died on the cross – because He is really the most merciful and the most compassionate, just as we said earlier.”

It is not always necessary, however, to begin with a specifically “theological” truth.²⁹¹ After all, everything in creation, and in human nature, testifies to God. Consider another personal example. Last year, on the bus from the airport, I gleaned in conversation with the passenger beside me that, although nominally a Muslim, he was quite disinterested in his religion. Instead, what he was really excited about was returning home to see his wife and children whom, due to his long work hours, he saw only at the weekends. “You must be really sad every Monday morning when you have to leave them behind for the week,” I sympathised. “Actually, not really,” he reflected. “Of course I would love to stay with them, but I remember that this is my duty, to provide for them. This is a hardship I willingly suffer because I want to provide for my family.” As our bus journey was coming to an end, and doubting that I would ever see him again, I congratulated him: “Wow, that’s wonderful – do you know, you’re just like Jesus? He

²⁹¹ Cf. John Stott, *The Message of Acts* (BST; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 232: “we have to begin where people are, to find a point of contact with them ... Wherever we begin, however, we shall end with Jesus Christ, who is himself the good news, and who alone can fulfil all human aspirations.”

also made a sacrifice to provide for His family! That's why He gave His life for us on the cross. Good for you! Keep on being like Jesus! Keep on being like Jesus!" Recognising this element of truth from the image of God in his life had given me the opportunity to offer him both a true compliment, and a glimpse of the cross. We parted after a genuine and empathetic conversation with smiles on our faces.

Given the extent of God's creativity, we should be open to the possibility that even the most ardent of Muslims may yet surprise us with some highly counterintuitive affirmations. Consider this extraordinary exchange I once experienced in conversation practice with one of my English students.

Me: "What would you like to talk about?"

Student: "Hobbies and interests."

Me: "Ok, what are your hobbies and interests?"

Student: "I like music."

Me: "What kind of music?"

Student: "Love songs."

Me: "Really? What does 'love' mean to you?"

Student: "Oh, love is sacrifice."

Could God have possibly granted me a more natural opening for sharing the glories of Christ with my student in a way that she could understand, in a context which resonated with her, and starting from a basis which she already held dear?

Humanly speaking, approaches to personal evangelism driven by generic, pre-determined formulations are liable to bypass the signs of God's prevenient work in the lives of our friends and acquaintances. Without denying the principal discontinuity between us, or the urgent need of all non-Christians to hear the gospel to be saved,²⁹² we should also affirm that, by God's common grace, there will mercifully be

²⁹² Romans 10:14-17.

points of practical continuity between Christians and non-Christians, despite the fundamental incompatibility of our worldviews. Trusting that God has already been at work in their lives in this way frees us to let our friend genuinely take the lead in the conversation and reveal areas of their own personal interest. And as they do so, we will be listening expectantly for signs of the Spirit's previous work in their lives, ready, when these appear, to illuminate these prior dealings with God by the light of the gospel.

5 Conclusion

We have seen that Christianity is the “subversive fulfilment”, both of other religions in general, and of orthodox Sunni Islam in particular. We have defended this analysis theologically, and also illustrated the practical missiological implications with reference to personal evangelism. If the theological undergirding we have provided is secure, then this same “subversive fulfilment” approach should also be of wider missiological application, relevant as well in discipleship,²⁹³ and in church-planting.²⁹⁴

²⁹³ Fundamental to the “subversive fulfilment” approach is an understanding of sin as an idolatrous perversion of a good created desire. This same analysis lies behind biblical discipleship: we fight sin, not by moralism (Colossians 2:20-23), but by grace (Titus 2:11-15), through an ever-deepening appreciation of all we have in Christ (Ephesians 1:18-23; 3:14-19). Cf. Tim Chester, *You Can Change: God's transforming power for our sinful behaviour and negative emotions* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 33 and 38: “If you don't see your sin as completely pardoned, then your affections, desires and motives will be wrong. You will aim to prove yourself. Your focus will be the consequences of your sin rather than hating sin itself and desiring God in its place.” “Sin is like adultery because it's a betrayal of our true and best love. Why would you commit that sin? The 'love' of an adulterous lover is no love at all. [Jer 3:7-8; 5:7; Ezekiel 23:37; Matt 12:39; James 4:4; Rev 2:22].”

²⁹⁴ In church planting, the respective extremes are extractionistic “C1” churches, and syncretistic “Insider Movements.” For some building blocks towards a “subversive fulfilment” approach to church planting, see my table of comparison between the church and the mosque in Flint, “Church and Mosque,” 668-671.

To the missiological community, then, I wholeheartedly commend this interpretation of Christianity as the “subversive fulfilment” of other religions. May this understanding serve us as a compass, helping us chart a biblical course between the twin perils of “irrelevance” and “syncretism”, in a manner which exemplifies neither a bold arrogance, nor a timid humility, but a bold humility in Christ.

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**THE FAILURE OF MULTICULTURALISM:
A REVIEW OF LONDONISTAN:
HOW BRITAIN HAS CREATED A TERROR STATE
WITHIN, BY MELANIE PHILLIPS**

Reviewed by Tony Foreman¹

Melanie Phillips is a Jewish journalist who writes for the 'Daily Mail' in London. Her book *Londonistan* is a response to the 7/7 tube and bus bombings in the capital in 2005 and an analysis of the radicalisation of Muslims in Britain. She believes that Britain is 'sleepwalking' into Islamicisation and that the British establishment is too naïve and unrealistic to appreciate the danger.

She paints the following picture: at the moment there is a significant minority of Muslims in Britain and the proportion is rising. The great majority is peace-loving and came to the United Kingdom to find a better standard of living. Early immigrants accepted the predominant Christian culture. Now, however, with multiculturalism from within and an aggressive strain of Islam from without, Islam is gaining ground and clamouring for changes to British laws. A substantial number of Muslims have a greater sense of allegiance to their Islamic identity than to one based on British values.

As a result of a loss of confidence in Christian civilisation and the Western way of life, the governing class is capitulating to Islam because they are afraid of appearing racist and because of the minorities-and-rights culture that has developed since the 1960s. This has re-

¹ The Rev. Tony Foreman is a minister of the Church of Scotland, and he is the pastor of the Old Kirk in West Pilton, in Edinburgh. He holds a BD and an MPhil and lived as a missionary in Sri Lanka for ten years where he served as lecturer in theology at the Theological College of Sri Lanka.

sulted in some extraordinary developments, such as allowing mullahs Abu Hamza and Abu Qatada to freely preach jihad and foster terrorism at Finsbury Park Mosque in the heart of London. What has surprised and shocked the police and others is the fact that Britain is producing radical young men willing to kill and die in the cause of extremism. In spite of this, there is still complacency and a state of denial.

There's more though. University chairs are funded by wealthy Middle Eastern patrons resulting in a loss of academic rigour in Islamic studies; sharia is now a 'parallel jurisdiction' for family law within British Muslim communities; young Muslims continue to be radicalised; the police etc. fund a variety of hard line Islamic organisations; pro-Islam demonstrators are able to get away with using inflammatory language that others would be arrested for and the British establishment accepts it all. Melanie Phillips' assessment is: 'The greatest danger to the west [*sic*] is the climate of defeatism, appeasement and cultural collapse now on display for the Islamists to see.'

The paralysis of thought and action that has been the principle response to the threat of expansionist Islam is due largely to the progressive Left's human rights agenda. Melanie Phillips holds: 'It has stood all notions of justice, logic and elementary prudence on their heads'. With the support of the courts, human rights law trumps majority Christian culture and values. Even the extremist who is dedicated to destroying the civilisation to which he has been permitted to immigrate and which is supporting him and his family with benefits and housing and all manner of legal provisions is tolerated and welcomed on the basis of minority rights and multicultural ideology.

Both the leftist agenda and the Muslim agenda are happy to see the formerly-dominant Christian consensus disempowered. The Christian Church has been extremely ineffective in countering this threat to its existence. This is because 'At every stage it has sought to appease

the forces of secularism, accommodating itself to family breakdown, seeking to be nonjudgemental and embracing multiculturalism.’ The Church by complying with the secular agenda has had no voice with which to critique radical and expansionist Islam—Michael Nazir-Ali, the former Anglican Bishop of Rochester, being an honourable exception.

The author argues that not only has the Church of England miserably failed to combat secularism and militant Islam, it has joined in the chorus of the unjustified vilification of Israel. Israel—an outpost of the West in the struggle against Islam—gets it in the neck from the new progressives and has become the pariah state of the region in the minds of many Europeans. She also criticises ‘replacement theology’ and ‘supercessionism’ as unworthy attempts by Christian theologians like Colin Chapman and Naim Ateek to undermine Israel. She says: ‘Chapman’s version of replacement theology is based on the premise that the existence of Israel has to be justified. It does not. To single out Israel’s existence in this way is without precedent in the world and is itself evidence of prejudice.’ She would hold to the UN recognition of Israel as sufficient.

Overall, Melanie Phillips regards evangelical Christians as her ideological allies and the battle as much with the secular forces in Europe as the Muslim ones in the Middle East. Her book is a fascinating read and a trenchant critique of the loss of conviction, confidence and courage in the West which she believes, if it does not reassert itself, will lead to the end of a long reign of relatively benign order and influence.

FORMING MISSIONARIES IN JORDAN: AN INTERVIEW WITH A FORMER ANGLICAN MISSIONARY TO THE HASHEMITE KINGDOM

By Duane Alexander Miller¹

1) Tell me about where you were a worker and when. How did you end up there?²

In 1983 I became a freshman at university, and although I had been a believer for some years, I embarked on what turned out to be a disastrous year academically and spiritually. I nearly failed several courses, collapsed morally, and fought depression and discouragement. I appealed to my parents for a year off, and they granted it, on condition that I go to Jordan and study Arabic for a year. This I did at a language school for workers. That year revealed that I had a gift for languages and intercultural work. It also restored my relationship with God and fixed the Middle East in my mind as a place for Christian service

I then attended a large mission conference in Urbana, Illinois in 1987, and there, upon hearing a rousing call for surrender to God's international mission, committed myself to work overseas for the Lord. After my wife and I were married in 1992, we agreed to test the call by spending some months in Jordan together at the same language school. We returned to the States six months later (much to Mave's relief), certain only that she and I were not agreed on the nature of God's call, and I worked in various places and then attended seminary at Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania.

¹ Miller lectures in Church History and Theology at Nazareth Evangelical Theological Seminary (NETS). His blog is duanemiller.wordpress.com. The name of missionary has been withheld at his request.

While I was at seminary [my wife] enrolled in a course on world missions, and there, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, she turned her life over to God for overseas ministry. A few months later we joined Anglican Frontier Missions, raised support from individuals and churches, and made arrangements to return to Jordan so that I could take over the directorship of the language school which I had first attended at age eighteen.

We arrived in Jordan April of 1999 and in June of 1999 I became the director of the language school. We continued ministering there until I turned the language school over to new leadership in 2007, when we returned to the United States.

2) Your ministry put you in a position where you were able to know and influence a large number of young and new missionaries. What were some of the main things that you tried to teach them?

1. That pleasing God is the only worthy goal in any phase of ministry. Others goals constantly seek to influence us, i.e., fluency in the local language, impressing others, emulating some famous missionary of the past, having a large group of friends, saving money, winning a certain number of converts, not making the mistakes of so-and-so. All these goals, and many other seemingly worthy ones, compete for prominence in our thinking, but when allowed to dominate they can all become idolatrous and all devastating to the psyche, family, fellowship, and personal satisfaction of the worker.

2. Similarly, in language instruction I encouraged students to focus on faithfulness to the language-learning process rather than on achieving results. I taught that faithfulness is our obligation whereas resulting skills are a gift of God, necessarily variable according to His will for each individual. Thus, I hoped, the terrible pressure of expectations in language acquisition would not add to the host of other difficulties and stresses already being experienced by students new to

the culture of Jordan, and, counter-intuitively, the freedom from pressure would enable the student's mind to relax itself and acquire language more naturally and freely.

3. I tried to pass on to students some insights into Jordanian culture. I hoped that my descriptions of customs and people of that land demonstrated both the God's love for the Arabs and the delightful humor that can be derived from cross-cultural experiences.

3) I'm sort of cheating here because this is really like ten questions in one. But you also were able to see how new batches of missionaries shifted over time. Could you tell us about the changes you saw, for better and for worse? I am thinking about sending agencies, spirituality, commitment, origins, denominations, mission goals, and so on, but feel free to mention anything else.

I saw no appreciable difference between the character or spirituality of the workers of 1984, 1993, 1999, or 2007. In every group there were those who could not make the adjustment to life in Jordan and/or who gave up and went home. In every group there were also people who not only worked hard but persevered and became fruitful laborers.

Where I did see a difference was in the nationality and race. In 1984 and 1993 most of the workers were white Europeans and Americans at about a 1: 2 ratio, with the occasional person of African or Hispanic or Asian origin. From 1999 to 2007 about half of all workers were Americans, about 15% were Korean or other Asian, and the number of Europeans varied from 20 to 30%.

4) You were in the field when the C5 debate began. How influential was that in Jordan? Did you see any positive or negative effects come out of that debate?

The C5 debate affected Jordan because agencies which embraced insider movement theology operated in Jordan. However, they kept to themselves and tended not to attend formal language training, and most of the discussions I had on the topic were with workers who, like myself, did not embrace insider concepts. I have not had enough exposure to the work of C5 people to evaluate the results.

5) Do you have any advice for other Westerners working closely with Korean workers?

My experience with Koreans leaves me with nothing but a feeling of joy and privilege that I was able to share the wonderful work of the Gospel with such people. If I had any advice, it would be to include Koreans on your leadership teams where you can and to enjoy them. They bring a refreshing fervor and childlike kindness to bear on ministry which is much needed.

6) You're an evangelical Anglican priest. How did other evangelicals receive you? How did the local Anglicans receive you?

Surprisingly, evangelicals were almost universally very respectful of my Anglican orders. Local Anglicans were also exceedingly deferential to me as an ordained priest. They became less enthusiastic about me when I excommunicated their bishop² for associating with American heretics.

7) Is there anything particular in Anglican heritage and practice that you found helped you to weather the mission field?

Being part of the hierarchy of a bona fide local church was a tremendous help in my own adaptation to the local culture. The Angli-

² Bishop Riah Hanna Abu el-Assal, a native of Nazareth, was bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem from 1998 through 2007. The Diocese of Jerusalem consists of all of Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria.

can Church gave me an acceptable excuse to attend events at which I could observe the local culture and language. It also meant that I was functioning in a professional category which the Jordanian counter-intelligence services considered legitimate and unthreatening. Finally, being part of an Arab Church obscured what I imagined to be the sometimes negatively politically charged overtones of my identity as a white American male.

8) I still remember what you told me the first time I met you at a conference in Cyprus about kids: once there are more children than parents everything is chaos. What is your advice to young couples who sense a vocation to the mission field but also would like a family?

In my view children are a blessing from God and should not be avoided. However, you should clarify to yourself whether you believe that missionary work justifies the spiritual or physical neglect of the spouse and children God gives you. If not, then a large family will affect your career and you should prayerfully prepare yourself for the emotional difficulty you will experience when you must give up missionary opportunities to care for family. I personally found that with five or more children overseas travel and living become exhausting, expensive, and muddled.

9) Can you foresee a day when Muslims will be allowed to legally convert to Christianity in Jordan?

In the near term I expect conversion to Christianity to become steadily more difficult and less legal all over the world.