

HOW DOES CHRISTIANITY 'SUBVERSIVELY FULFIL' ISLAM?

*By Chris Flint*¹

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 *Ekklesia* 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-world 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 Elencic 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 “principal”, 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 commanded 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; *Banī Isrā’īl* (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 *Banī Isrā’īl* (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-Bukhārī* 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 *Al-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 *Ad-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-Iklâs* (112):2; cf. Psalms 93:2.

¹⁸² *Qâf* (50):16; cf. Acts 17:27-28.

¹⁸³ *At-Tâlâq* (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-Shûrâ* (42):26; cf. Romans 2:15-16.

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

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

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

¹⁹² *Al-Baqarah* (2):224.

¹⁹³ *Bani Isrâil* (17):23.

¹⁹⁴ *Al-Mâ'idah* (5):32; *Bani Isrâil* (17):33.

¹⁹⁵ *Bani Isrâil* (17):32.

¹⁹⁶ *Al-Mâ'idah* (5):38.

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

¹⁹⁸ *Tâ-Hâ* (20):131.

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

²⁰⁰ *Al-Mâ'idah* (5):27-31.

²⁰¹ *Yunus* (10):71-73; *Hûd* (11):25-48; *Al-Anbiyâ'* (21):76-77; *Al-Mu'minûn* (23):23-30; *Al-Furqân* (25):37; *Ash-Shu'arâ* (26):105-122; *Al-Ankabût* (29):14-15; *As-Sâffât* (37):75-82; *Al-Qamar* (54):9-16; *Al-Hâqqah* (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 Inrân* (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-Sāffāt* (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 Abrahamic ancestry from the peoples they ruled over, who had been calling them Ishmaelites and Hagarenes 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 Gaggling 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-Sāflāt* (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-Sāflāt* (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-Bukhārī* 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-Bukhārī* 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-Bukhārī* 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-Bukhārī* 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 ongoing 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-Ahzâb* (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"). *Yûnus* (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., *Chrislam: 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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