

Conversation and Complementarity: Medieval and Postmodern Trajectories

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Why is it that those of us who are not content with a merely forensic identity as Christians, but keep trying (as Kierkegaard remarked) «to become Christians», that is, followers of Jesus, find it necessary always to return to «the beginning»? Not those mythic beginnings romanticized in the Acts of the Apostles, where everyone held everything in common, but real beginnings. In his prescient *Myth of Christian Beginnings*, Robert Wilken exposed that romantic mode for what it is, and for the ways it had been employed to further the Reformation project.¹ Yet there is a more archetypal sense in which we all need to make a fresh start on the project of «following Jesus», exemplified in the «spiritual exercises» of that other reformer, Ignatius of Loyola. This way of returning to the beginnings returns one to the Jesus who reveals God to be «our Father». By leading us to encounter him through the scriptures in the midst of a community ever imperfectly transmitting them. Ignatius offers each person a way to undertake that indispensable journey to «the beginning».

In the beginning was the Word; the Word was with God and the Word was God. Through him was made everything that is made, and without him nothing was made. ... And the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us (John 1:1–3, 14).

Beginning with the person of Jesus is especially refreshing as it reminds us how the revelation

proper to Christianity is embodied in a person rather than a book. The recognizable inexhaustibility of another person can carry one quite naturally to the utterly inexhaustible person of the Word made human. And once Christians clearly identify their revelation to be in a person, it follows as a matter of course that they will express their faith in that personal source in exchange with those whose faith-journey to God differs from their own. How is that? Because the very personal source will forcibly remind them that revelation ever remains beyond their grasp, always exceeding them by calling them beyond themselves, as friends are wont to do.

Moreover, it is the very person of Jesus which at once links and separates us from those who believe that God revealed His Word to Muhammad in the Qur'an. The linkage as well as the separation can be displayed in parallel formulae expressing similarity-cum-difference. For Christians believe that

Jesus is the Word of God made flesh [or human],
while Muslims believe that the
Qur'an is the Word of God made Arabic [or book].

On the other hand, those Christians who locate revelation primarily in the scriptures unwittingly show themselves to have appropriated a Muslim account of our revelation: that the same God who gave Muhammad the Qur'an gave Jesus the gospels. Yet as honorific as it is meant to be, this encomium acknowledging followers of Jesus as «people of the book» falsifies their revelation. Moreover, Christian theologians who are led thereby to compare the revelation in Jesus with

¹ Robert Wilken, *The Myth of Christian Beginnings: History's Impact on Belief* (New York: Doubleday, 1971).

the revelation in the Qur'an by seeking parallels between scripture and Qur'an lead us on a fruitless comparative path, as they quite overlook the pregnant parallel formulae just noted. And what is more, reflecting on the sinuous path which Christianity had to take to explicate that pregnant formula — «Jesus is the Word of God made human» — will help us to appreciate why Islam will deny what Christians came to affirm. Indeed, reminding ourselves why it took four centuries to articulate the central teaching of our faith will help us to see why they must deny it.

My mentor of fifty years ago in Rome, Bernard Lonergan, helped us to see how the Council of Nicaea (325) was constrained to come up with a non-biblical Greek expression, *homoousion*, to gesture toward the ineffable relation of Son to Father, or Word to God. And as the Cappadocians were to insist some decades later, it is *relation* alone which distinguishes these «two»: in God, the malleable term «person» denotes relation only; indeed relations subsisting. Now whoever can fathom that has plumbed the mystery of the triune God; yet since none can claim to do so, Christian teaching remains a mystery at its heart, ineluctably anchored as it is in the *shema*: «hear, O Israel, God our God is one» (Dt 6:4). In short, the very unicity of God, proclaimed by the Torah and renewed in the Qur'an, at once anchors and problematizes any affirmation we can try to make of the divinity of Jesus, as it absolutely forbids «associating anyone with God». No wonder it took four centuries to find a way to Chalcedon (451), and even then, as my Jordanian Catholic friend remarked: «we knew nothing about «Islam» or who those people were who came up from the Arabian peninsula; we just knew they weren't Greeks!» So, the implication was, we welcomed them! Hence we can understand how the Chalcedonian formula, celebrated as it can be among theologians, failed to meet universal acceptance — even after it had so elegantly culminated the dramatic twists and turns tracked by Thomas Weinandy in his *Does God Change?*² Given the intellectual gymnastics displayed in that centuries-long quest, as well as the facts on the

ground which often inhibited the entire community's engaging in them, who could blame those not gifted with so personal a revelation if they were to find the person of Jesus utterly baffling — whether they be his contemporary compatriots or followers of Abraham some seven centuries later?

But let us look more closely at this utterly traditional assertion that Christian revelation resides not in words or assertions but in a person, to ask how that startling fact demands that erstwhile followers of Jesus will always find it necessary to return to «the beginning». Consider the exchange following Jesus' arresting finale to the extended discourse of John 6: «unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you» ... Many of his disciples ... said: «this teaching is difficult; who can accept it?» ... Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve: «Do you also wish to go away?» Simon Peter answered him: «Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God» (53–68). Yet as revealing as is Peter's confession, we can take it a step further to avow something not yet possible even for John to have asserted: «You are the very Word of God.» As we have noted, four centuries of wrestling with the residue of Jesus' presence separates the confession: «you have the words of eternal life» from the avowal: «you are the very Word of God.» Yet John's way of juxtaposing «you have the words of eternal life» with «you are the Holy One of God» already suggests the direction to be taken: linking «you have» with «you are». For notice how, absent this link, Peter's confession could be taken in the way which Muslims (and many an evangelical Christian) presume: that Jesus brings the revelation enshrined in the New Testament.

To understand why the early church would move to interpret Peter's confession by the yet more startling «you are the very Word of God» will reveal the dynamics of Christian theology as Bernard Lonergan exposed them. We could initially illustrate this dynamic from John's chapter 6, whose startling references to *body* and to *blood* are meant to recall an embodied perso-

² Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Change?* (Still River, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1985).

nal intimacy which only presence can normally convey. Whatever Jesus' reaction to Mary Magdalene's embrace: «do not cling to me, Mary, for I have not yet ascended to the Father» (Jn 20:17) may portend, her spontaneous action presumes an established way of greeting. Yet here, as always, John's gospel distills what the synoptics narrate: people could not help but be taken with the very person of Jesus. While the synoptics emphasize his teaching, we all know that a genuine teacher accomplishes more by presence than by rhetoric: by contrast with the words uttered by accredited teachers, Jesus spoke «with authority». Lonergan locates the work of theology in this way: to address those questions elicited in inquiring minds and hearts as they attempt to make sense of the sayings of revelation, imbedded in its literary structures; after which such constructive efforts to understand would have to be measured against the revelational texts themselves, to allow all to assess whether they were now better able to grasp their import.

Moreover, for this Jesuit, there can be little doubt that the «exercises» of Ignatius guided both ends of this process: the ingathering of those ways scripture narrates Jesus' manifold ways of being present, together with the constructive theological efforts to understand them, whereby recognizing Jesus as «the Holy one of God» could culminate in acknowledging him to be, himself, the very Word of God. So while centuries of reflection, with the help of some philosophical strategies, would be required to complete the shift from «having words» to «being the Word», the community would come to recognize what was being asserted as the very truth of the revelation in Jesus, following the prescient opening to Luke's gospel:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ... it seemed good to me also, having followed all these things closely for some time past, to write an ordered account for you ... that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed (Lk 1:1-4).

This convoluted introduction to what ensues certainly reveals the intricacies of Greek grammar, but even more, the profoundly theological undertaking represented by the gospels themself-

ves. Yet allowing their import to emerge would require centuries of meditation and probing, with contentious, if not acrimonious, argument. Yet Christians equipped with established «doctrines» — incarnation, trinity, and the rest — can easily overlook the simple fact that it took their community four centuries to formulate them. Yet once we come to an awareness of that, we will find ourselves in a position to acknowledge more readily what «hard sayings» these very doctrines are: «this teaching is difficult; who can accept it?» Yet the quest for understanding on which Lonergan launched us never ceases: some, like Robert Barron,³ will be inspired to lead one into the heart of doctrinal articulation, to reveal how they can be «food for the soul», while others may be led, by the way these assertions will astonish other-believers, like Jews or Muslims, to better appreciate what they are trying to articulate. For their astonishment becomes our wonder at what it is we claim to believe; yet absent such wonder, we will be worshipping an idol and not the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus, whose «ways are higher than our ways, and thoughts higher than our thoughts» (Isaiah 55:9, adapted). In short, as both Barron's literary inquiry and our interfaith elaboration remind us: whoever pretends to possess the truth of revelation has already bowdlerized it. Jesus the Christ is no less unknowable than the God who sent Him, though He is (mercifully) more accessible to those who believe in him. Yet *what* they believe remains ever in need of deeper and unsettling understandings — Lonergan's legacy to us all.

So this journey of «returning to the beginning» can lead us to appreciate the transcendence of a God made immanent to Christians in Jesus, and to Muslims in the Qur'an. And as the eminent Catholic Islamicist, Roger Arnaldez, expounds in his engaging *Three Messengers for One God*,⁴ it is in the mystery of that one God that Abrahamic believers will be able to meet

³ See Robert Barron, *And Now I See: A Theology of Transformation* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

⁴ Roger Arnaldez, *Three Messengers for One God* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 1994); originally published as *Trois Messagers Pour Un Seul Dieu*, Paris, 1983.

without losing their identity; rather, as experience abundantly shows, such encounters will bring each believer to a richer understanding of the gift of their respective revelations. Yet how can I, as a Catholic philosophical theologian, make a statement about the respective revelations of Christians and Muslims? My astute friend and interlocutor in Aberdeen, David Braine, insists that I cannot:

I shall stick through thick and thin to my point, made not as a philosopher, not as a speculative theologian, but as something I understand to be integral to Catholic faith, namely: «I do not think that it is compatible with Christian doctrine that there be any new public revelation after the apostolic era» (private communication, March 26, 2008).

And we would all agree, I am sure, that the one whom David Braine and I both acknowledge currently as Pope Benedict XVI would concur; as indeed the Christian community has consistently maintained since Islam emerged on the world scene. That explains, of course, why the most hospitable place Christians have been able to find for Islam was that of «a Christian heresy». Yet in a probing rather than a defensive spirit, can the initially offensive phrase «respective revelations of Christians and Muslims» be given a respectable theological pedigree?

First Example: Effect of *Nostra Aetate* on Christian Attitudes Towards Jews

Let me essay two examples which will not meet that challenge directly but may leave the door ajar. The first, and more familiar, notes the sea-change operated by the Vatican II document, *Nostra Aetate*, regarding the status of current Jews in the Christian imaginary. (I use «imaginary» to underscore that the position which the council replaced was never enshrined in church doctrine, however widespread it may have been.) The extent of the official «about-face» can be illustrated by contrasting the Pauline text which the Council endorsed: «the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable» (Romans 11:29), with the assertion of the letter to the Hebrews: «in speak-

ing of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete; and what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away» (8:13). Here conciliar authority implicitly invokes a strategy not unlike that employed in Qur'an interpretation (whereby later texts «abrogate» earlier ones which appear to contradict them) to valorize the Romans text over that of Hebrews; though historians would doubtless concur that the «supersessionist» image indicated by Hebrews had dominated the Christian imaginary to that point. Debates over whether it remains appropriate to have «missions to the Jews,» once the church acknowledged the integrity of their call from God, were bound to ensue. Yet to contend, as the late Paul Van Buren was wont to do, that it would then be unseemly to claim that Jesus «fulfilled» the Hebrew scriptures, seems to overreact to the old situation rather than respond to the new one inaugurated by *Nostra Aetate*. For however one may interpret the protean term, «fulfill», what it portends is enshrined in the Christian liturgical practice of Advent, underscoring how central to faith in Jesus is the contention that his presence brings the Hebrew scriptures to an unparalleled and unprecedented focus — at least one sense of «fulfill». What the conciliar insistence on the integrity of God's call to Jews in the covenant would seem rather to demand of Christians is a respect for that initial covenant and for Jews currently abiding by it, even while celebrating its «fulfillment» in Jesus, so inviting Jews to give witness to that integrity in their lives and actions.

Interlude on Assessing Other Faith Traditions (and One's Own)

Such a mutual respect for difference recalls the celebrated verse of the Qur'an:

If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you. So emulate each other in doing good, and God will judge about your differences (5:48).

If our differences show one tradition to be superior to another in certain respects, and others to be superior to one's own in other respects, then

what have we (who are not God!) to say except to learn from one another? In another key, the Qur'an's insistence that only «God will judge about your differences» should remind us that while engaging in dialogue doubtless demands that we respect others' convictions about the truth of their revelation, we can afford to «bracket» the truth-question as we focus on the meaning of what they assert. In fact, neither adherents nor interlocutors are in a position to assess the truth of a revelatory tradition, which is why doubt remains endemic, even to a faith which regards itself as «strong». Indeed, the very notion of a «strong faith» is freighted with paradoxes, as Paul reminds us again and again; and Peter could hardly forget, even in full bombastic stride in the Acts of the Apostles, that fear of the Jewish power structure made him deny even knowing Jesus, so his mentor's darkest hour became his most shameful. The only way we have of discerning the truth (or falsity) of a religious tradition, it seems, is from its fruits. In our own personal lives, growing evidence of a spiritual power at work in us can lead to a progressive corroboration of a faith freely entered into and faithfully adhered to, though always imperfectly. Faith-claims, so-called, are so thoroughly hedged by paradoxes of this sort that it is difficult to speak of ascertaining the *truth* of a religious tradition. So it is only «right and just» for dialogue to bracket such questions, and grant the faith-assertions of another while exploring their meaning, in an effort to probe the coherence and illuminate life-giving character of another tradition. all the while anticipating that the exchange will also help us to better understand and appreciate our own. And that has certainly turned out to be the case in the experience of most who engage in interfaith dialogue.

It may well be that characterizing dialogue in that way also makes one sound non-committal, so confirming a polarity between *dialogue* and *proclamation* that has marked some recent Roman and papal statements. But an act of proclaiming can at best be an act of witnessing; indeed, there is no other way to proclaim the truth of a faith-statement, short of stamping one's foot! (We used to ridicule erstwhile «Thomists» for their efforts not only to expound the

philosophy but to prove that it was true! Again, how do that but stamp one's foot?) These are hardly contentious points; they merely express the very grammar of faith. The truth (or falsity) of a religious tradition, then, is not open to our assessment; the best we can do is to attend to the witness given, and where that results in holy men and women (who are as recognizable to us all as «classics» are to a literary critic), then we have at hand the only evidence we can possibly have for the truth of a tradition. As Wilfrid Cantwell Smith put it, a tradition which produces holy men and women deserves whatever respect we can give it, as being more than a human fabrication. Moreover, the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* [«Dogmatic Constitution on the Church»] offers similar animadversions in the context of discussing the church as «the people of God»:

Finally, those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God. In the first place we must recall the people to whom the testament and the promises were given and from whom Christ was born according to the flesh. On account of their fathers this people remains most dear to God, for God «does not repent of the gifts He makes nor of the calls He issues». But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Mohamedans [sic], who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind. Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and all things, and as Saviour wills that all men be saved. Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel. She knows that it is given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life (16).

This positive assessment of ways in which «other-believers» or even non-believers are already related to the Kingdom of God resonates with the Qur'an's insistence that «God will judge about your differences». By that same token, it firmly lays to rest any human query into «who can be saved», strongly implying that salvation (however we may understand it, and whatever it may be) is God's business, not ours! Yet have we not been skirting the vexing question: can the Qur'an be counted among «respective revelations»?

A Strategic «Answer» to the Question

Indeed, we have, but in the interest of learning how to ask it properly. Yet by insisting (on logical grounds having to do with the nature of faith) that we are not in a position to answer the question one way or the other, it seems prudent to lay it to rest. But note that the question of the truth of Islamic revelation does not run completely parallel with *Nostra Aetate's* adoption of Paul's insistence regarding his own Jewish people that the «gifts and the call of God are irrevocable», for that enjoys scriptural warrant. (We must be careful not to insert «Judaism» here, however, since that social construction is in fact younger than Christianity; what Paul is speaking of, and what Vatican II adopts, is the covenant faith of the people of Israel, as lived out by contemporaries. And some of those believers have today been busy confronting the polemical anti-Christian dimensions of Judaism itself.) With Muslims, it seems the best we can do, doctrinally, is to consider them (as *Lumen Gentium* does) included »in the first place [in] the plan of salvation» by the way they «acknowledge the Creator, ... profess to hold the faith of Abraham, [and] along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind». The fact that these truths, for Muslims, derive from the Qur'an, does not by itself confirm the divine origin of the Qur'an, of course, but we have already insisted that nothing can do that, since adherence to Qur'an or Bible can only be by an act of faith. Yet everything points to extending respect to Muslims' faith in the Holy Qur'an,

and doing so in such a way as to facilitate a radical change of attitude towards Muslims parallel with that effected towards contemporary Jews. To be sure, the grounds will be different, but the logical impossibility of saying either «yes» or «no» to the incisive question — whether the Qur'an can be considered a revelation —, together with the commendations of *Lumen Gentium*, as well as the way «ordinary Muslims» witness to a palpable sense of the presence of God in their lives, should all argue to the rightness (in the sense of a prudential judgment) of extending to them, as a community, respect for their faith in the Qur'an as revelation. This would represent a step beyond both *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate*, which urged respect for Muslims but stopped short of acknowledging Islam as an inspired community, or *umma*. Yet the extension could be a quite natural one, for respecting people for their faith certainly entails respecting its source.

A Second Example: Is the Universe temporal or Everlasting?

The next example borrows from medieval controversies regarding creation of the universe, in which Jews, Christians and Muslims were actively engaged, and (where possible) learned much from one another. From the initial way the question was posed, it seemed that those who relied on revelation — Bible or Qur'an — over against the prevailing philosophical account of the day, inspired by Plotinus but modified by the Muslim philosophers, al-Farabi and Avicenna, were committed to insisting that the universe had to be created along with the initial moment of time — had, in that sense, to be temporal — to square with the agreed import of the revelatory texts. So it seemed as though the entire question of whether the universe is freely created by God turned on its having an original moment. Distinguished Jewish and Muslim contenders, Moses Maimonides and al-Ghazali, insisted on this point. But Thomas Aquinas found the nub of free creation elsewhere. Relying on his predecessor, Moses Maimonides, he argued that the issue of temporal or everlasting origination of the universe was formally undeci-

dable by reason, so believers were free to adopt a philosophically less elegant temporal origin. Yet once Aquinas clearly espoused that option, with his Jewish and Muslim interlocutors, he went on to insist logically, that a free creator would also be free to originate the universe with or without an original point. In other words, an everlasting universe need not automatically spell necessary origination, but could be compatible with a free act of creating on the part of an eternal God. So while Aquinas believed firmly that the universe was originated with an initial moment (and so «temporal»), he regarded that fact as depending on the free will of the creator, who could also have freely acted otherwise. This position also had a benefit of focusing creation on utter dependence on God rather than temporal origination; so reminding us that *creation* and *conservation* are effectively identical.

Following Aquinas' lead, albeit in an analogous way, and concurring with David Braine that a «new public revelation after the apostolic era [would be in]compatible with Christian doctrine.» I could yet ask whether initiating a fresh revelation in the Arabian peninsula in our seventh century would be possible to our God — to the God, that is, whom Muslims adore with Christians. (David Braine has also elaborated an elegant demonstration that Muslims and Christians worship the same God, against some astute critics who contend otherwise, leaving quite to one side those who have never participated in the worship of Arabic-speaking Christians and thus naively can contend that Christians worship God while Muslims worship Allah.) It is difficult to know what the answer to this question could be, since logical possibilities regarding God (unlike those regarding the universe, which Aquinas addressed) are notoriously difficult for us to negotiate. Indeed, no set of questions seems more intractable than those regarding what God would or could do; for unless we confine ourselves to the restricted set of logical impossibilities, which would hardly be relevant here, human reason simply cannot extend that far. Yet nothing, it seems, forbids our entertaining the possibility, without settling it one way or another. That is, we could not rule out a fresh revelation as impossible, even though we would be unable to offer a constructive account of what would

make it possible for God actually to do it. So we would be left, at best, with an «abstract possibility», somewhat like Aquinas could find an everlasting universe compatible with a free creator, but this time on a less firm ground of possibility. So this fancier example cannot add much support to the prudential conclusion already reached: it would behoove us to respect Muslim faith in the Qur'an as divine revelation, substantively from the witness the umma has given in facilitating the holiness of men and women, and now, additionally, because that faith-assertion does not contain a logical impossibility.

Concluding Reflections

Yet whatever western Christians may *think* about Islam, it is their encounter with Muslims which will matter — to them and to Muslims. It would be difficult to imagine a more deep-seated prejudice than that which lasted for centuries between European Christians and Jews — the «other» in their midst —, to the point of some countries expelling them from their midst. Deadly proof of this prejudice can be found in the ease with which a neo-pagan Nazi regime could carry out its efficient plan of eliminating Jews — simply as Jews — from the very midst of traditionally Christian countries. Moreover, the sea-change effected by Vatican II had to await the shared shame of the *Shoah* to be initiated, for as later Vatican reflections («We Remember») acknowledged, a pervasive anti-Judaism had prevailed in the Christian west, and facilitated the Shoah there. The West was not long in finding another sinister «other» in «Soviet Communism», and when that evaporated in 1989, «Islam» emerged as a proven historical candidate. It seems that Hegel's analysis of the negative dynamics of nation-states was on target: each one needs a counterpart. Berthold Brecht opens *Mother Courage* with a recruiting sergeant announcing: «what we need is a good war!» (George Bush has always played scripted parts!) So analyses like the ones I have attempted can offer little hope to countering something so irrational as the need for an «other», yet as the French love to remind us: «les événements nous dépassent tous!» So yet unexpected or

untoward happenings may well open our hearts to the need for that very «other» to help correct what so many feel to be deeply errant in western society, a drama superbly narrated in Charles Taylor's recent *A Secular Age*.⁵ In fact, one of those events — the response of 138 Muslim intellectuals to Pope Benedict and other Christian leaders, «A Common Word» — reminds us that such events are already taking place.⁶

So let us complement our analysis with images designed to illustrate the fundamental rapport between Muslims and Christians, turning on the complementary images of Qur'an and Jesus. We may begin with the image of Jesus as the «good shepherd»:

He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice; [for he comes] that they may have life, and have it abundantly (John 10: 3,10).

Sheep, of course, are notoriously dumb! Yet their connection with the «good shepherd» is more instinctive than reflective, which I suspect to be the point of the parable. We are all «slow learners» when it comes to essential things, and especially things of God. Yet there is something within us which responds to an authentic voice: «Jesus spoke with authority; not as the scribes and Pharisee» — the gospel stand-in for any accredited religious teacher! And Peter's gloss on this text reminds us: «you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls» (1 Peter 2:25).

Linkages with the role the Qur'an plays in Islamic tradition are uncanny. The «inimitability» of the holy book is characteristically illustrated by the spontaneous effect it is said to have on Arabic speakers, charmed by the rhythmic structure as to be drawn instinctively to its message. This recurrent fact reveals the *fitra* which all human beings share: the residual divine image in our faculties of apperception by which

we can be drawn to the truth, despite countless distractions and self-serving denials. Moreover, to parallel Peter's comments (and echo a recurrent theme in John), Muslims name that «world» [*dunya*], which provides distraction and abets self-serving, the domain of ignorance [*jahiliyya*], recalling the situation which the Prophet encountered in the Hejaz when he began disseminating his revelation. This historical situation serves as a metaphor for the original human condition, in which we are all «going astray» until our hearts can acknowledge the revelation given: for Peter, «the shepherd and guardian of your souls»; for Muslims, the opening sura of the Qur'an, which they frequently pray: «Guide us in the straight path, / The path of those whom you have blessed, / Not of those against whom there is displeasure, / Nor of those who go astray [*al-Fatihah*].»

Now what is required of those who hear the divine voice is to follow it; to obey its prompting (like sheep!), or (in one inadequate rendering of «Islam») to «submit» to its demands. As John puts it in response to a skeptical people asking: «What must we do to perform the works of God?» — «This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent» (John 6:28–9). Notice once again that the focus is not on what Jesus says, but who Jesus is: from «you have the words of eternal life» to «you are the Word of eternal life». And it is instructive that Muslim tradition, at first distracted by the trenchant «distinction» between creator and creation, held the Qur'an to be created, as indeed everything which is not God must be. Yet before long, the very idea that God could be mute was seen to be unseemly, so it was asserted: the Qur'an itself must be uncreated, even though copies of it that we use will of course be created. So the Qur'an is believed to be that Word «in the beginning with God», through which the universe is created and which, of course, must be God, since no multiplicity is to be tolerated in the One God. Here Christians will recall that same demand, lodged in the *shema* («hear, O Israel, God our God is One»), urging them to return to the «the beginning», there to find the origin of their unique faith in Jesus, as well as discover unsuspected links with that of Muslims.

⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).

⁶ Cf. <http://www.acommonword.com>