

Saint Francis, the Catholic Church, and Islam

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Part I: Francis and the Sultan

OF ALL SAINTS, Francis of Assisi is the most transparent and the most opaque. His goodness, his generosity, his humility, his courage, his troubadour heart and mind, invite us to rush toward him, trust him, thank him, pray joyfully for his intercession. He is a man without guile, and we respond to him with a newfound innocence of our own. This is the transparency of which we speak. Yet at the core of Francis lies a mystery. Every historian, theologian, novelist, playwright, and poet who attempts to understand Il Poverello grinds to a halt before this *terra incognita*. This is not, as with Francis's near-contemporary Dante, the enigma of transcendent art, its sources or genius; nor is it, as with our own near-contemporary Einstein, the parallel enigma of the origin of profound insight into the natural order. It is a deeper, more vexing mystery, one that Francis exhibits to the highest degree, and one that each of us must address, embrace, make his or her own: the mystery of holiness. What allowed this man, what could possibly allow anyone born of man and woman, to be known—inaccurately, but we see what is meant—as the Second Christ? How did it come to pass that this man rebuilt the Church, rekindled the faith of millions, received the stigmata upon his maculate flesh? These mysteries will never be and can never be fully resolved, for they are intimately linked to the Mysteries of Christ and his Cross. Thus Pius XI, in his 1926 encyclical, *Rite Expiatis*, quotes

approvingly the remark of one of Francis's earliest biographers, Thomas of Celano, that in "all [Francis's] efforts, public as well as private, he turned to the Cross of Our Lord, and from the moment he began to live as a soldier of Christ, the divers mysteries of the Cross shone round about him."¹

This nimbus of mystery shines around many chapters in Francis's life. One such is the saint's celebrated encounter with Sultan Al-Kamil in 1219 AD, in the midst of the Fifth Crusade. About this encounter little can be said with certainty, reminding us that one of the delightful ironies of historical research is that events about which we possess few or no details sometimes possess the greatest gravitas. This meeting of Christian saint and Muslim head of state has been described and misdescribed, analyzed and misanalyzed in a torrent of books, essays, articles, and speeches that shows no sign of abating. Our intention is to look at this and other encounters between Christians and Muslims in order to see what the Church and the *ummah* (the Islamic community) can learn from them; for the future of these encounters, we believe, is of vital importance for the happiness of humankind.

In 1219, the year that saint met sultan, Francis was thirty-eight years old. It was five years before he would receive the stigmata, seven years before his death. Approved by Pope Innocent III in 1209, his Order was flourishing, although he suffered mishaps galore while attempting to spread his teaching abroad. He had been shipwrecked on the Dalmatian Coast in 1211 en route to Jerusalem and two years later had fallen sick while sailing to Morocco; in both cases he had been forced to return to Italy. His 1219 trip to Egypt would prove, therefore, to be a watershed.

The other key figure in the celebrated encounter, Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil Naser al-Din Abu al-Ma'ali Muhammed, may be unfamiliar to many readers. A nephew of the great Saladin, Al-Kamil became sultan of Egypt in 1218, while the Fifth Crusade was in full flower. This Crusade, initiated by Innocent III and his successor, Honorius III, harbored a high ambition: to recapture Jerusalem and the Holy Land, a goal that required toppling the Ayyubid Dynasty in Egypt. The key to this, in turn, was the seizure of the port city of Damietta, about 120 miles north

¹ See http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_30041926_rite-expiatis_en.html.

of Cairo. When al-Kamil became sultan, Damietta was already under siege by armies from several European nations.

Al-Kamil was a skilled military strategist, but another side of his character emerged as soon as he took the throne—that of a seeker of peace. He extended several truce proposals to the Crusaders, most notably an offer to surrender Jerusalem in exchange for a European withdrawal from Damietta. These proposals were swiftly rebuffed by the considerably less irenic Cardinal Pelagius, leader of the crusading army; nevertheless, in 1229, ten years after Francis's visit, al-Kamil would achieve his greatest triumph for peace, a ten-year truce with Frederick II that remains a model of judicious balance, in which the Muslims returned Jerusalem to the Crusaders while retaining possession of the Temple Mount and its holy places, the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Al-Kamil was also, and surely not incidentally, deeply interested in religion, as described by al-Maqrizi, a Muslim historian who flourished two centuries later:

Al-Kamil much loved men of learning, preferring their society. He was passionately addicted to listening to the traditions of the Prophet. . . . He loved discussions with Muslim divines, and had a number of curious problems on jurisprudence and grammar with which he would examine scholars, and those who answered rightly he advanced and gave them his favor.²

During the intense heat of August 1219, Francis arrived at Damietta, along with Brother Illuminato and other companions, having set sail from the heel of Italy's boot with a likely stopover in Rhodes. St. Bonaventure, in a passage from his *Major Legend* of Francis, provides a clue to Francis's thoughts en route to Egypt. Francis, Bonaventure tells us, saw two lambs and declared to Illuminato, "Trust in the Lord, brother, for the Gospel text is being fulfilled in us: Behold, I am sending you forth like sheep in the midst of wolves." What was his aim, in this extraordinary adventure? Almost certainly just what it appeared to be to his contemporaries: the conversion of the "wolves," as most Christians

² Al-Maqrizi, *A History of the Ayyubid Sultans of Egypt*, trans. R. J. C. Broadhurst (Boston: Twayne, 1980), 229.

saw them—that is, the sultan and his court—perhaps mingled with desire for his own martyrdom. As Dante puts it in *Paradiso* XI: “In thirst for martyrdom, he had preached Christ and them that followed Him in the proud presence of the Sultan.” Franciscan sources emphasize the desire for martyrdom, non-Franciscan sources the wish to convert.

Upon his arrival in Damietta, Francis was appalled by the cruelties of the siege. Dominican scholar Augustine Thompson, author of a recent, richly informative biography of Francis, believes that the sight awoke in the friar “memories of his own traumatic military experiences.”³ Francis began to rush about, first warning the Crusaders of impending doom and then turning his attention to the Muslim enemy across the Nile, petitioning Cardinal Pelagius to allow him to approach the sultan in order to teach the ways of Christ. At first Pelagius refused the request, either worried about Francis’s safety or concerned that al-Kamil would mistake this private initiative as a state-authorized mission to negotiate the siege. But Francis was a master at badgering others (in a most holy way), and the Cardinal capitulated.

Soon after, Francis and Illuminato sailed, without armed escort, across the Nile and into the enemy camp. Muslim soldiers surrounded them, believing them to be deserters ready to convert to Islam. When they realized their error, threats and manhandling ensued. Francis responded by shouting *Soldan! Soldan!*—“Sultan! Sultan!”—and the two friars found themselves in the presence of al-Kamil.

We know little of what transpired during the meeting (or meetings, as the encounter extended over several days); what we do know is based upon second- or third- hand evidence presented by Bonaventure, by Jacques de Vitry, a French historian and bishop, later a cardinal, who was present at Damietta, and by more remotely placed medieval chroniclers. Sifting the sources, it is difficult to discern whether al-Kamil initially saw Francis as a potential convert or as a political agent in disguise. Francis, however, made it clear from the start that he was in Egypt to preach the Lord and thereby convert the sultan. Al-Kamil predictably summoned his theologians; Francis helpfully offered to be decapitated if he failed to convert them as well as the sultan. Needless to say, he

³ Augustine Thompson, O.P., *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 67.

failed; al-Kamil and his *mutakallimun* (scholars of *kalaam*, the science of theological discussion), seasoned and devout Muslims one and all, were no more likely to be persuaded of the truth of Christianity under these conditions than Francis was likely to be converted to Islam. The *mutakallimun* considered the friar an advocate of *shirk* (polytheism) and recommended immediate execution. Thankfully, the sultan stayed his hand.

Instead, he and Francis engaged in a discussion that lasted a few more days and that, at least at first glance, led nowhere. At one stage in the proceedings, according to Bonaventure—a careful researcher who sought out eyewitnesses and who may have heard this particular tale first hand from Illuminato—Francis offered to undergo a trial by fire, during which he and the Muslim religious authorities would walk through a conflagration, “so that you will recognize,” as Francis put it, “which faith deserves to be held as the holier and more certain.”⁴ When the sultan declined this proposal, explaining that the *mutakallimun* would prefer other approaches, Francis offered to try the flames alone, declaring that if he suffered burns, it would be suitable punishment for his sins, but if he came through unscathed, the sultan must acknowledge Christ as God and Savior. Al-Kamil rejected this as well, pleading fear of an unruly response by his subjects; he may also have been unwilling to see the little friar killed in what he surely perceived as a futile gesture. Augustine Thompson rejects the authenticity of this episode, both because he believes it does not match Francis’s character and because he rejects all such events not found in contemporary records. We must bear in mind, however, that Bonaventure, while not a contemporary of Francis, interviewed for his biography many who knew Francis well, that ordeals by fire were well attested in twelfth-century Italy, and that, as French medievalist André Vauchez points out, Francis would have been aware of the Old Testament Canticle of the three children in the furnace protected from the flames by divine intervention. In any event, the sultan closed the conversation, pressing upon Francis and Illuminato gold and silver gifts. Francis, ever in love with Lady Poverty, explained that he

⁴ St. Bonaventure, “The Life of St. Francis,” in *Bonaventure: The Soul’s Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis*, trans. and ed. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 270.

would accept only food. He and Illuminato then returned to the Christian side of the Nile, Damietta fell to the crusaders, a ghastly sack of the city ensued, and appalled by the violence, Francis quit Egypt for Syria.

This remarkable encounter has given rise to an array of strange, sometimes comical, interpretations. Thus we have Jacques de Vitry in 1226, just seven years after the encounter, painting a portrait of a vicious sultan charmed into submission by an angelic friar; the portrait of Francis rings true, but that of al-Kamil is clumsy propaganda. Leap-ing forward to the twentieth century, we find that historical accuracy is still in arrears, as witnessed by the following nonsense from Idries Shah, renowned Sufi, bestselling author, and spiritual mentor of Nobel Prize-winning novelist Doris Lessing: Shah informs us that from his youth, Francis “was connected with the Sufis,” that he visited Egypt not to convert the sultan but to explore his Sufi roots, that in the Muslim court “he found what he was looking for,” that as a result “the atmosphere and setting of the Franciscan Order is closer to a dervish organization than anything else,” and that Francis’s vision of the six-winged seraph is, in reality, a Sufi allegory!⁵ In a more sober analysis, some modern historians have argued that Francis was indeed, as al-Kamil suspected, on a secret mission to negotiate peace with the Egyptian forces. There may be a grain of truth in this admittedly speculative assessment, for Francis, as we know, always preached peace. In the prologue to his *Mind’s Journey to God*, Bonaventure reminds us that “at the beginning and end of every sermon [Francis] announced peace; in every greeting he wished for peace; in every contemplation he sighed for ecstatic peace.”⁶ Nonetheless, there is no evidence that Francis opposed the Crusaders’ aims; indeed, as Thompson points out, Francis never discusses war in his writings. For the holy friar, the way to peace ran not through political manipulations but through Christ, the Prince of Peace; we may conclude, therefore, that the best evidence continues to support the belief of most historians that Francis visited the sultan in order to usher him and his court, through conversion, into the realm of the Prince of Peace.

This understanding receives additional support from an important

⁵ Idries Shah, *The Sufis* (New York: Anchor Books, 1971), 257–65.

⁶ St. Bonaventure, *Bonaventure: The Soul’s Journey Into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis*, trans. and ed. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 53.

passage in Francis's Earlier Rule, completed by 1221, shortly after his visit to Egypt. In chapter 16, Francis describes his recommendations for missionaries to the Muslims (whom he calls "Saracens") and other non-Christians (whom he calls "nonbelievers"). He begins with the same words of Jesus from Matthew 10:16 that he voiced while sailing to Damietta, "Behold I am sending you forth like sheep in the midst of wolves. Be therefore wise as serpents and harmless as doves." Francis then delineates two—and only two—ways for Christians to live "spiritually" among those of other faiths. The first is to dwell among them as professed Christians, bearing witness to the Faith, yet without "arguments or disputes." The missionary must be, as St. Peter wrote in his first letter, "subject to every human creature for God's sake."⁷ We may recognize this as the method adopted many centuries later by Blessed Charles de Foucauld. The second method described by Francis is for Christians to go among nonbelievers as proselytizers, declaring the word of God and the necessity of baptism. This is the method that Francis employed with the sultan. In one sense it failed, for no conversion resulted. What lesson should we draw from this? That Christians should no longer preach the Gospel or make disciples of all nations or baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? That all efforts at active conversion are off the table? As the most famous Christian convert of all (St. Paul) declares with rhythmic regularity in his greatest and most famous letter, "God forbid!" Preaching Christ is incumbent upon all Christians—just as the invitation (*da'wah*) to Islam is incumbent upon all Muslims.

We may uncover the true lesson of Francis's mission by examining the ways in which it succeeded. Above all, we should note Francis's adherence to the divine admonition to be wise as a serpent, harmless as a dove. Such was his behavior from start to finish, even if we wish that he had been less extravagant in a few of his tactical gambits. As a result of his caution—an expression of his love—there was no bloodshed, no bitterness during the encounter. He never attacked Muhammad, the sultan, or the *mutakallimun*; it has been often observed that throughout his life, Francis never spoke ill of any man. While in Egypt he exhibited

⁷ Francis of Assisi, "The Earlier Rule," in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1: *The Saint*, ed. Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., et al. (New York: New City Press, 1999), 74–75.

genuine tact and palpable purity of heart, qualities that induced the sultan to recognize his strange visitor as a holy man. Francis made a lasting impression, too, on the sultan's advisors, so much so that one of them, the jurist Fakhr ad-Din al-Farisi, has the famous encounter memorialized upon his tombstone.

In describing Francis's excellences, it is important to note that the sultan, too, was wise as a serpent, harmless as a dove. Al-Kamil surely knew and treasured the great *hadiths* on kindness and generosity of spirit, of which the following are characteristic:

Allah is kind and loves kindness and gives for gentleness what he does not give for harshness nor for anything else.

Do you know what is better than charity and fasting and prayer?
It is keeping peace and good relations between people, as quarrels and bad feelings destroy mankind.

These principles of mutual respect and courtesy—grounded, as we shall see, in a shared understanding of the human being as a creature dependent upon God for his very being—had played, in fact, an important role in earlier Christian-Islamic encounters. A long tradition of *majalis*—sessions of the caliph's court, devoted, among other matters, to religious dialogue between Muslims and representatives of other religions, can be traced back to the second Islamic century (the eighth century AD). We possess numerous accounts of these interfaith gatherings; most are literary fictions, but two appear to be authentic. The first recounts the meeting of Catholicos Timothy I, patriarch of the East Syrian Church, and al-Mahdi, the third Abbasid caliph, in Baghdad in 781 or 782 AD, just a century and a half after the death of Muhammad; the second describes the encounter of Bishop Elias bar Shinaya of Nisibis with Vizier Abu l-Qasim in southeastern Turkey in AD 1026–27. These two *majalis* encompassed discussion of most Christian-Muslim flash points, including prophetology, the nature of the Qur'an, the divinity of Christ, the Trinity, and so on. What strikes one immediately is the unfailing courtesy, sincerity, and goodwill of the participants. When Timothy meets al-Mahdi, the caliph tells him that “if you accepted Muhammad as a prophet, your

words would be beautiful and their meaning fine,” to which Timothy declares that Muhammad “deserves the praise of all reasonable men because his walk was on the way of the prophets and of the lovers of God,” and that the Prophet led “his community away from evil and [drew] them to what is right and virtuous.” The encounter between Bishop Elias and the vizier is even more heartening, for during this meeting—two centuries before Francis met the sultan—the two men adumbrate some tentative ground rules for successful Muslim-Christian dialogue. Elias tells the vizier that “if [your] purpose in this talk is the knowledge of our doctrine and acquitting us of the ugliness that is attributed to us, I will set forth what I have. But if the purpose is disputation and debate, I ask [you] to excuse me from it.” To this the vizier responds, “I believe that every Christian is a successful praise-worthy monotheist, even if he does not acknowledge the prophethood of Muhammad. And the only condition of inquiry is a thorough examination of the question and of the counter position. So attribute what comes from me in reply to sincerity and to no other motive.”⁸ Sincerity here is used in the sense detailed a century later by al-Ghazali in his magisterial *Revival of the Religious Sciences*:

Action without intention is drudgery, whereas intention without sincerity is ostentation. . . . Sincerity without truthfulness and exactitude is but a scatter of dust.

This teaching, in turn, is beautifully condensed in the following hadith: “God says ‘Sincerity is one of My secrets, which I consign to the heart of the servant I love.’”

It is this sincerity of heart that Francis perceived in the sultan and the sultan in Francis, and that has come, thank God, to inform and inspire the best of Christian-Muslim dialogue today. The chief representative of this approach during the past hundred years was the great French scholar of Islam Louis Massignon (1883–1962), a friend of Blessed Charles de Foucauld, a brilliant authority on early Islam and Sufism, in particular al-Hallaj, and a devotee of the Blessed Virgin, who

⁸ For a superb account of these and other *majalis*, see Sidney H. Griffith, “The Monk in the Emir’s *Majlis*: Reflections on a Popular Genre of Christian Literary Apologetics in Arabic in the Early Islamic Period,” in *The Majalis: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam*, ed. Hava Lazarus-Yafeh (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), 13–65.

in 1931 became a Franciscan tertiary, taking the name Ibrahim. This name is a key to Massignon's perspective on Christian-Muslim dialogue, for he was convinced that recognition by Christians and Muslims of a common spiritual descent from Abraham would lay the foundation for peaceful solutions to conflicts that plagued North Africa and the Middle East in his time and continue to do so today. Reasons abound, as we discuss below, to question his presentation of Abrahamic consanguinity; nonetheless, the ardor, beauty, and scholarly integrity of his Christian love for Islam remain exemplary.

During February 1934, along with Mary Kahil, a Melkite Christian, Massignon visited Damietta. The two pilgrims knelt in prayer before the altar of the abandoned Franciscan Church, on or near the site where Francis and the sultan had talked seven centuries before. There Massignon and Kahil vowed to form an intercessory fellowship, which they called by the Arabic name of *badaliya* (substitution), pledging to enter as far as possible into the inner life of Islam. In addition to offering aid to those in need, they prayed, in a most audacious request, to be allowed to take on the suffering of their Muslim neighbors. This was an extraordinary sacrificial act, based upon the principle of witnessing without proselytizing. A few months later, the fellowship received the blessing of Pius XI. In time, Massignon's views on Islam spread through much of the Catholic hierarchy, deeply affecting the thought of Cardinal Montini, the future Paul VI, and profoundly influencing the generous approach to Islam as an Abrahamic religion in major documents of Vatican II, in particular *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate*.

Part II: The Church and Islam: Recent Developments

Let us now look at these two critical documents, in order to determine what they say—and what they do not say—about the Church and Islam. *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, promulgated on November 21, 1964, by Pope Paul VI, begins, as the title suggests, with Christ the “Light of the Nations”; and in exploring the mystery of the Church that Christ founded, it seeks to relate those outside the Church to those within her fold, describing them in a series of concentric circles. Closest to the center is the Jewish people, a people “most dear to God”—“for God does not repent of the gifts He makes nor of the

calls He issues.”⁹ The next circle belongs to those who acknowledge the Creator, foremost among them “the Muslims, 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.”¹⁰ In a yet more remote circle stand all “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” and those who through no fault of their own are not aware that they seek God.¹¹

A year later, Paul VI promulgated *Nostra Aetate* (“In Our Age”), the Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions, affirming that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy” in all the world’s religions and expressing esteem for Muslims for the special reason that “they adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God.”¹²

Monotheism and Abraham are the two main points of connection mentioned by *Nostra Aetate*. But there is more: Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet, honor his virgin Mother, await the Resurrection and judgment of the dead, strive to live morally, and serve God with prayer and disciplined self-sacrifice. Above all, *Nostra Aetate* tells us, “this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.”¹³

These words, as Benedict XVI put it in an address to Muslims in Cologne, amount to a Magna Carta for the Church’s dialogue with Islam. Like the Magna Carta, *Nostra Aetate* charts a new direction. We are to begin anew, forgetting the past—one hears an echo of St. Paul “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead” (Phil 3)—and working together for the common good. Like the Magna Carta,

⁹ *Lumen Gentium* §16.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Nostra Aetate* §§2, 3.

¹³ Ibid., §3.

Nostra Aetate does not legislate, it only reorients. It does not minimize the differences between Christianity and Islam. It does not even mention, let alone interpret, the Qur'an or the Prophet Muhammad. Instead, *Nostra Aetate* shifts our focus to the exemplary lives of the millions of Muslims with whom we share our planet.¹⁴

In this respect, *Nostra Aetate* reflects the open-endedness of a council convened to regain the Church's voice and vision for the modern world rather than to answer a particular disputed question. Pope Benedict, who had been one of the *periti* during the heady days of the council, came to think, as he said in a candid reflection on *Nostra Aetate* two years ago, that "in the process of active reception, a weakness of this otherwise extraordinary text has gradually emerged: it speaks of religion solely in a positive way and it disregards the sick and distorted forms of religion which, from the historical and theological viewpoints, are of far-reaching importance."¹⁵ In other words, Benedict cautions, it is possible to read *Nostra Aetate* as if it were a charter to abandon judgments where religion is concerned.

For example, some Christians, perhaps under the inspiration of Massignon, have become rather giddy about the idea of Abrahamic religions. If we share the faith of Abraham, the thinking goes, why bother about the details? Abraham is the model of hospitality toward the stranger, the other, the angel in disguise; we can emulate this hospitality by tracing our family tree back to Abraham and fostering a common Abrahamic creed: the creed of the *hanif*, or natural monotheist. As children of Abraham, conscious of the inadequacy of all humanly constructed images of God, we should wear our theological commitments lightly. Hans Küng and his former pupil and younger colleague at Tübingen Karl-Josef Kuschel have called this program "Abrahamic ecumenism."¹⁶

The problem with the notion of Abrahamic ecumenism is that we are not one household of faith (as the word ecumenism would imply).

¹⁴ See the discussion by Daniel Madigan, "Nostra Aetate and the Questions It Chose to Leave Open," *Gregorianum* 87, no. 4 (2006): 781–96.

¹⁵ "It Was a Splendid Day, Pope Benedict Recalls," *L'Osservatore Romano*, October 11, 2012, <http://www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/it-was-a-splendid-day-benedict-xvi-recalls#.U4k6DfldV8E>.

¹⁶ See the discussion by Reformed theologian Cornelis (Kees) van der Kooi, "Towards an Abrahamic Ecumenism?" *Acta Theologica* 32, no. 2 (2012): 240–53.

And though we share Abraham, we do not agree on his significance, as Jon D. Levenson has convincingly shown in his masterful study *Inheriting Abraham: the Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Summing up his argument informally in an essay for *The Jewish Review of Books*, Levenson borrowed a line from George Bernard Shaw: “if ‘England and America are two countries separated by a common language,’ then Judaism and Christianity are two religions separated by a common Abraham.”¹⁷ Far more than, are Jews and Christians separated from Islam by our vision of Abraham.

Why separated by Abraham? Because for Islam, Abraham is essentially a Muslim prophet, a destroyer of idols who with his beloved son Ishmael rebuilt the Ka’aba as God’s house on earth. The points of connection to the Abraham of Genesis are fascinating, but Islamic tradition holds that Abraham’s true history and identity are as much obscured as they are revealed by the Genesis account.

We are also separated by a common Jesus: Jesus seen through Muslim eyes is the son of the Virgin Mary, not the Son of God; the bringer of the Gospel, not its one great Subject; he was persecuted for his prophesy but not crucified;¹⁸ he is expected at the end of time but is not the true End for which creation longs. Honest dialogue with Muslims must necessarily bring out these differences, and they are far from trivial.

By the same token, honest dialogue means, for Christians, a fuller appreciation of who Muhammad is for Islam. There have been Christians, as far back as the Enlightenment, who professed admiration for Muhammad as a preacher of natural theology; they read the early suras of the Qur’an as a lyrical restatement of the design argument, a pure monotheism of the desert, free from the Church’s suffocating thicket of doctrines and rites. But the Muhammad of Islamic tradition is far more interesting. Tradition characterizes him as the perfect man: a devoted husband and father, exemplary in his conduct of business, defender of widows and orphans, ideal statesman and judge. More exalted still, Muhammad is the man of light, created in the beginning from the

¹⁷ Jon D. Levenson, “The Idea of Abrahamic Religions: A Qualified Dissent,” *Jewish Review of Books*, Spring 2010, <http://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/244/the-idea-of-abrahamic-religions-a-qualified-dissent/>.

¹⁸ Gabriel Said Reynolds, “The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 72, no. 2 (2009): 237–58.

primordial light, so full of that light that he cast no shadow.¹⁹ The light that shone through the previous prophets from Adam to Moses to Jesus was but a partial reflection of Muhammad's own radiance. The miracles associated with the Prophet's career were subordinate only to the miracle of the Qur'an itself; Muhammad commanded the trees to bend in prayer, he ascended to heaven to receive his divine commission, he will intercede for his community on the last day, he is the final prophet, the seal of the prophets, and the only messenger to transmit God's words without distortion. In every way he is the "beautiful model," whose words and deeds, habits and customs (*sunna*), transmitted by the authorized *hadith* literature, form the foundation of Islamic ethics and etiquette, jurisprudence and spiritual life. One can no more understand Islam without the traditional biographies and saying sources than one can understand Judaism without the Talmud or Christianity without the Fathers and the Councils.

We are also divided by a common monotheism. The beauty and power of the monotheism of the Qur'an is its confession of God's majestic transcendence—and the response of communal adoration this confession elicits. The beauty and power of the monotheism of the Gospel is its message of divine humility, of the Son who emptied himself and took on the form of a slave; of the "hands that had made the sun and stars" yet "were too small to reach the huge heads of the cattle"; of Christ crucified and risen; of humanity ruined and redeemed. As St. John Paul II observed in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, not all monotheisms are alike:

Some of the most beautiful names in the human language are given to the God of the Koran, but He is ultimately a God outside of the world, a God who is only Majesty, never Emmanuel, God with us. Islam is not a religion of redemption. There is no room for the Cross and the Resurrection. Jesus is mentioned, but only as a prophet who prepares for the last prophet, Muhammad. There is also mention of Mary, His Virgin Mother, but the tragedy of redemption is completely absent. For this reason

¹⁹ See Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), for a rich survey of traditional literary and devotional expressions of esteem for the Prophet.

not only the theology but also the anthropology of Islam is very distant from Christianity.²⁰

To Muslims we are hardly recognizable as monotheists when we confess our faith in the Communion of Persons in the Blessed Trinity. When we speak of the “wonderful exchange” by which we gave Christ the power to die, our words must seem strange, if not shocking. Similarly, it is a challenge for our Muslim friends to convey the depth of their veneration of the Prophet to us, or to open to us what would otherwise be the sealed letter of Divine love received by so many Muslim saints and mystics—in the light of which the claim that the God of Islam is “never Emmanuel, God with us” needs to be rethought. But if we are truly friends, we can meet this challenge.

This is the point of *Nostra Aetate*. There is all the difference in the world between learning abstract facts about another person’s religion and looking at the world as seen through another person’s eyes. When we look at the world through another’s eyes, we find a new point of departure: neither polemics about what divides us nor platitudes about what unites us.

What does the world look like as seen through the eyes of Muslims? It looks like a gift. And we are in no doubt as to the giver, for his signature is everywhere. Wherever we look there are signs, *ayat*, of God’s power and sovereignty. Thus Sura 56 (Al-Waqi’a, “That Which Is Coming”):

Consider the seeds you sow in the ground—is it you who make them grow or We? Consider the water you drink—was it you who brought it down from the rain-cloud or We? Consider the fire you kindle—is it you who make the wood for it grow or We? We made it a reminder, and useful to those who kindle it, so glorify the name of your Lord.²¹

What does my own life look like? That, too, a sheer gift. Christians and Muslims differ in many crucial points of theological anthropology, but

²⁰ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994): 92–93.

²¹ M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, trans., *The Qur’an* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 357.

we have at least this much in common: we know that we are creatures. We know this, perhaps, even before we truly know that there is a God. We are made out of dust, or similar lowly stuff—a blood clot, a drop of semen, a clinging form, a clump of cells, a bit of clay; and the dust itself is made, theologians tell us, out of nothing. To be a creature is to be marked by contingency, by fragility, by near-nonentity. Though we possess an immaterial soul, we are not the source or support of our own existence. Compared to God, all creatures—humans, angels, animals, jinn—are almost unreal. God alone is real, *al-Haqq*. “What is man that thou are mindful of him?” (Ps 8:4).

Yet that is not the whole story. We are dust with dignity. The Scriptures, both Bible and Qur’an, after reducing human beings to dust, turn around and attribute to humankind a dignity surpassing even angels: “Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor” (Ps 8:5). Hence, in the Quranic account of the creation of Adam, God commands the angels to prostrate themselves before a creature that by all indications occupies a lower rung on the scale of being; and the refusal of Iblis (the Devil) to submit to this command is the moment of his arch-rebellion and fall:

We said to the angels, “Bow down before Adam,” and they did. But not Iblis: he was not one of those who bowed down. God said, “What prevented you from bowing down as I commanded you?” and he said, “I am better than him: You created me from fire and him from clay.” God said, “Get down from here! This is no place for your arrogance” Sura 7 (Sura Al-A‘raf, “The Heights”).²²

We are dust, or clay, made for a purpose; we possess a dignity beyond our wildest dreams, not because of some irreducible excellence, but because we have an Author who gives us a share, apportioned to our nature, of existence, rationality, and love. To be a creature is to live in hope that the God who made us will remake us; that when the story of our life is over, we will see him as He is and become who we are. *Gaudium et Spes* tells us that “When God is forgotten . . . the creature

²² Ibid., 94–95.

itself grows unintelligible.”²³ By the same token, when creaturehood is remembered, God and humanity draw near.

We believe that this shared vision of our creaturehood (more than a vision, really, for all of us feel it in our bones) has practical implications. It is a fundamental common ground, not one that requires theological concessions; and it places Christians and Muslims, in the context of secular societies, on the same side of a host of moral and social issues. From our creature consciousness comes a certain ethic and aesthetic of adoration, embodied in the beautiful act of prostration, which takes the breath away whether one witnesses it in the daily prayer of Muslims, or in the solemn rites of Christian ordination and consecration to religious life. From our creature consciousness comes a sense of modesty. From our creature consciousness comes an instinct for repentance, and a repertoire of penitential disciplines to direct that impulse and correct morbid exaggerations. From our creature consciousness comes an awareness of death and a concomitant commitment to cherish the life of the unborn, the elderly, and the disabled. Our common ground is imperfect and often fraught, but our opportunities to make common cause, in a world that has lost its sense of creaturehood, are inexhaustible.

Creaturehood is, of course, the great theme of St. Francis; his hymn, the *Laudes Creaturarum*, popularly known as the “Canticle of the Sun,” has its roots in the Laudate Psalms—especially Psalm 148—and the Benedicite Canticle (the Song of the Three Children in Dn 3: 52-88). Far from being a sentimental paean to our animal friends, the Canticle of the Sun calls upon creatures to praise their Creator; far from treating all creatures as equivalent, they suggest that each creature is designed to praise the Creator according to its own gifts. It is the exultant humility of *il Poverello*, his penitent joy in honoring God—rather than his quixotic mission to convert the Sultan—that makes Francis the paradigmatic figure for dialogue between Christians and Muslims. **N&V**

²³ *Gaudium et Spes* §36.

