



**Philosophic
Conceptualities
of the Self in
Messianism / Mahdism**

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Preface



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How beautiful are the feet of the herald on the mountains, announcing peace, heralding good tidings, announcing salvation, saying to Zion, "Your God has manifested His kingdom." (Isaiah 52:7)

I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him.

And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14)

But he held his peace, and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked him, and said unto him, Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?

And Jesus said, I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven. (Mark 14:61-62)

Seek first the Kingdom of God, and its righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you. (Matthew 6:33) He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. (Philippians 3:21)

Unto thy Lord is the recourse that day.... Stir not thy tongue herewith to hasten it. (Qur'an 75.12, 16)

Those who believe (in the Qur'an), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians,--any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. (Qur'an 2.62)

By Him in Whose Hands my soul is, surely the son of Mary will soon descend amongst you and will judge mankind justly... (Bukhari, 4. 60, 3448)

[The Mahdi] will fill the earth with equity and justice as it was filled with oppression and tyranny. (Sunan Abu Dawud, 36.4272).

Philosophy and faith are not incompatible.[2] Indeed, whenever faith in divine revelation of the One God reflects upon anything in the world, this reflection constitutes what is commonly called "philosophy of religion." Philosophy of religion does its best work not so much in attempting rational proofs of revelation, but of explicating the truths of divine and human action as conveyed

by revelation.

When philosophy concerns itself with revelation, it invariably constructs models of agency and ethical action distinguishing between that which belongs to the Divine and that which belongs to the human. The models present distinctions of similarity, as in acts of mercy; and of difference, as in acts of creation. Both types of action are ethical in nature, that is, they are oriented to bringing about some good result. But the human being can achieve agency only in acts of mercy not in acts of creation, i.e., only where there is a created similarity and never at the point of difference between the divine and the human.

As is clear from revelation, the human being performs no real act of creation since it is beyond the creature's capacity to bring anything into existence. Although it is common to speak of "human creativity" this type of action is always merely a refashioning of an already created substance or form. Indeed, the mark of Abrahamic tradition regarding the being of God and the being of the human is the singularly fundamental distinction between Creator and creature. Creative action is a unique category of divine agency and can only be passively witnessed to or received as a gift by creaturely, human agents.

When considering any agential act, it is also necessary to recognize its personal, individual origin. Although it is common to think in terms of collective action in terms of contractual agreements and concerted efforts of groups from pairs to entire populations, the agency of the individual never disappears from human events. Indeed, at the legal level, and above all the moral level, it is revelation and reason unambiguously point to personal agency in all actions and events in creation.

As the human being achieves full consciousness and conscientious awareness in relation to others, the self fully emerges as a sense of personal identity and accountability. The self and the sense of self in identity and accountability are not so important in terms of the errors to which it is prone, but in terms of the good of which it is capable.

This is a crucial point when considering human ethical action at the point of similarity with Divine action. While the fundamental distinction between divine and human action is never erased, nor could it be, these two agencies disclose their similarity not only at the point of good outcomes, but even more at the point of their personal natures.

The uncreated Self that alone belongs to God has a created correspondence in the created self of the individual human being. Human self-hood and ethical agency are creaturely reflections of the divine Self as eternal Agent - the Ever-living: creating and ever merciful toward the creation. When considering any aspect of divine creativity, whether in originating creation or in bringing to consummation, there is always a dimension of human reflection in terms of self identity and

agency in relation to God. Any consideration of the full effects of revelation upon faith, indeed, creating faith, must keep the relation of Creator and human creatures in view.

True to the primal meaning of "islam" as the original religion of revelation and personal relationship with God the Creator, faithful philosophy is the understanding and action elicited from such faith. While it is understood that this islam unfortunately retreated into the background of human memory or was even forgotten by many polytheistic civilizations, revelation of the One God was extended through the Abrahamic heritage of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The extension of revelation through the prophets particularly with Abraham throughout the three faiths, always focus upon the ultimate work of God to rescue creation from its ultimate decline and destruction through resurrection and new creation.

This is the salvific or soteriological dimension of the revelation culminating in events of the appearing of the Messiah for all believers out of all nations and, according to Islam, inaugurated by the preparatory arrival of the Mahdi, gathering all Muslims to readiness for the appearing of Messiah.[3] All of this comes about exclusively on account of divine intervention, superseding all human action other than response to the call of God to be gathered. However, the ethics of faith rest largely upon the Messianic promise of salvation.

The ethics of faith are the humanistic implications of Messianism / Madhism (M/M). M/M humanism emerges as a great religious philosophical project for aiding the faithful in determining the relationship between the knowledge of divine action or agency and that of human action or agency. It becomes essential to develop a philosophical account in making these determinations for the sake of the realities of human contexts and of their transformation through ultimate divine intervention. The Abrahamic faiths present two models of human agency: ethical and eschatological, the former active and constructive, the latter quite passive and receptive. We move now to the discussion of these two modes.

1) Ethical agency

In this mode of action the human being is enjoined by constraint of divine commandment and / or spiritual motivation to act constructively in terms of others and the environment.

If this fundamental distinction is well-established, robust notions of self conceived in terms of this category that can develop according to conceptualities of personal life-planning and political

existence. Eschatological agency certainly figures in to the faith of ethical human agents but entirely in terms of anticipatory religious practices associated with the eschatological doctrines of M/M. Ethical agency arises from a combination of free obedience to the law of God and loving voluntarism in terms of generosity of action and regard for the other.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant attempted to join the two through the concepts of right and virtue. In this vision, self-respect and other-respect are carefully balanced through a necessity of mutual reinforcement. There is in Kant, however, an over-critical dimension concerning the self-love that is a necessary part of other-love in all ethical agency. One is always acting toward oneself as one acts toward others.

Of course self-love is a highly visible feature of ancient reasoning about the self in relation to others. Aristotle's *Nicomachian Ethics*, Bk IX, as essential to all friendship. Not at all characteristic of grasping greed[4], self-love assumes of model of the self according to the highest, noblest virtues of character and generosity. Everything about self-love is connected with a life-time of identity formation according to the highest principles of moral and affective cultivation.

The genuineness of this self-love actually becomes a necessary prerequisite to ethical action toward others. Friendship is also a crucial aspect here because the self-identity cultivated by self-love is not only a determination to be conformed to virtuous principles but to emulated and mutually motivate one's friend and to be motivated by one's friend in their pursuit. The moment that virtue begins to be born in the self and in the friend with whom one also shares in the mutually conditioned self-love, this love is intensified by the lovability of the nascent virtue element that has become detectable both to oneself and to the other.[5]

The classic concern that virtue must be loved for its own sake, indifferent to the desires of the self, prove to be entirely wrong-headed; that until the self awakens to the desire for virtue and begins to embody it through self-cultivation of virtue, virtue cannot truly begin to be realized. Indeed, the affinity of the human being with another human being is the ground of friendship, such the self-love and other-love cannot be wholly distinguished from one another.

Just as true self-love will not be tolerant of the failures of the self to be virtuous, so too will the friend be intolerant toward failures to pursue the same by the friend.

Although Kant's reasoning on this matter called for duty to supersede all other virtues, this is clearly not a balance tending toward the favoring of love and mercy. His overwhelming concern with self-conceit and arrogance hardly leaves any room for rightful self-love. Kant's goal was an objective grounding of morality, not a yet higher principle of mercy and love. But like fundamental concern with the law, the mature, highly differentiated and cultivated self that corresponds at a creaturely level to the Creator Self that is the unique deity, is completely lost on Kant.[6] Indeed,

Kant does not believe that a proper self-love ever exists.

Benevolence is only a duty; and while he is most concerned with duty as an invariable cause of right action - love or affection being too easily disturbed to be relied upon, even the pleasure of seeing other take joy in one's benevolence toward them could just as well be taken as a matter of indifference.[7] Thus, while Kant is guided by his reduction of human agency to that of duty and virtue as the unwavering commitments to fulfill one's duty - objectively and universalistically[8],

he fails to give a proper account of the person as a highly affective self comparable at the creaturely level to the Creator. Suffice it to say that Kant can affirm self-respect along with respect for others, but as helpful and laudable as his cultivation of autonomous agency is, it does not conceive largely nor intricately enough of the self as ethical agent. While human agency must achieve moral action, human existence is not defined by its agency, but its agency is defined by the human and its qualities of living.

This is where the teachings of Jesus, specifically his love command, along with the prophets and apostles who embody the same command become indispensable. Although the anti-philosophers Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, together with exegetes such as Albert Schweitzer of the early 20th century recognized the subjugation of human life to the falsehoods of a moral system that reduced the human being to a mere agent of action, it is always required that the words of revelation are restored to their authoritative position in philosophical reflection.

Great passages such as "God so loved the world," "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength," "the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath," "love your neighbor as yourself," "you are my disciples if you have love for one another," "now abide faith, hope, love, but the greatest of these is love," are all indications of the centrality of love in ethical agency and the self-formation of the believer.

In the love command of scripture, which is said to sum up all commands, to embrace it and to advance it through obedient action is not merely to achieve correct legal behavior, but to achieve full humanness from the Creator / Redeemer that is God. Just as God's being cannot be reduced to his actions, neither can the human being. Actions serve to achieve relations functions which are greater than the discrete actions as such. The bond of affection and relationship by which virtue enabling covenants and ultimately family and friendship with God and with others, is the incomparable goal of all human agency just as it is in all divine agency. Indeed, eschatological agency is but the fulfillment of divine love and human destiny in that love.

Understanding ethical agency through the love command of Jesus and of all revelation is the critical importance of development and maturation of the self in relation to God and to others. Obviously, the connection between the institutional concerns of the law in establishing and

maintaining a society that embodies political, economic and criminal justice require a reasonable if very imperfect application of human judgment and action to others within a wider community.

Obedience to the love command and the self that is formed by it is a response to transcendent reality, creating a permanent and necessary paradoxical tension that is required of all learning and practice of ethical agency.[9] The tension is to be embraced so that the status quo of human tradition and practice will never be seen as a perfect achievement, but as it truly is, always affected by the sin and error that is the human condition. With the application of the love command to human life of course most supremely, one is enjoined to the most radical application of divine love, namely, to love all equally, including one's enemies. As found in the central message of Jesus' Gospel, Matthew 5:

44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The will of God for the human being is based upon the very pattern of the will of God for himself in universal love. God is impartial; God makes no distinctions in his love. This does not mean that the imperfect systems of justice devised by human beings can be eliminated, but that we as human beings must never allow ourselves to be reduced to that imperfection. No human being, however unjust and unloving in behavior, can be treated any less justice than another, since this is the will of God and the action God shows toward everyone. God's perfection is in his equal love and treatment of every human being - as the Apostle writes: God "has bound everyone under sin so that he may be merciful to all."

This does not mean that he honors everyone equally; or that great achievement in holiness is irrelevant. Righteous living and loving service is immensely greater than wickedness and cruelty.

There is no one who is not in need of mercy because every human being is a sinner. Although the levels of sin from one individual to the next may hold magnitudes of difference, nevertheless, all require the mercy of God. Just as the sun and the rain are universal blessings upon all coming

from God's perfection, human love must all be all-inclusive. Ethical agency in light of the love command requires equal regard toward all on the part of believers. As the great Medieval poet, Iacopone da Todi O Charity, true life - for every other love is dead - You break no laws, but obey them all; and in the heart In which there is no law, you bring it into being.

He who flees from you cannot know the sweetness of your fruit.[10] At the level of institutions and the practice of law, the best human beings may be able to accomplish is equality before the law, attached to it will be an impulsion to see that the essentials of goodness in human living might also be achieved for all. Because God's action is directed by his loving Being, no exercise of justice is without compassion and the obligation to alleviate the suffering of human beings as a part of the life-long formation of the self in love. Here we must realize that when revelation speaks of God's mercy, it is never a passive activity on God's part but active, benevolent, forgiving. Human love based upon the model of divine love will then also have this active basis for every expression of itself.

This is perhaps no better summarized than in the apostle's injunction to avoid vengeance in the practice of justice by deferring vengeance entirely to the God in all of his exclusive perfection and rights. Presuming that human faith and love are ever anything more than imperfect, requiring deepest humility, is to express that most rejected pseudo-religious self-justifying so rejected by revelation. For human beings, the norm of justice as ethical agents of divine love is to find out how to achieve forgiveness as the highest expression of divine mercy in all of our imperfect judgments and human relations.

Since every human being, no matter how faithful they might be before God, still and always requires divine mercy, this mercy in the form of universal forgiveness of the love command is the highest achievement of ethical agency.

One of the great concepts of pre-eschatological time and its conditions for divine / human agency is the "Between the Times" - between the time of creation and consummation, but particularly between the time of the Messiah's first coming and his second coming. The Second Coming, otherwise known as the Parousia (lit. "Presence" of God and of the Messiah, who's Spirit, imbues him and the whole world when He appears). Humanity lives until this end (eschatos) in a transitional, transitory state of non-permanence and must carry out everything according to faith, hope, and love.

Before the of M/M events, humanity must live with its radical limitations - radical in the sense of the depths of human finitude and proneness to sin and therefore the unending struggle to live ethically, toward others, oneself and always toward God. Under these conditions, God is most often called "Merciful" because this supreme need of humanity is mercy. If humanity was not so fallible; if even its best obedience to God and the law were not so very imperfect, some other

attribute of God would have been elevated to first place.

Divine mercy receives the most mention because God's most frequent act toward human beings is the forgiveness of sin and assistance in our weakness. The needs and lacks of humanity are not in God or his plan (or "divine economy" - oikonomia) for creation, but God has permitted humanity to endure this condition in order to instill in them the ethical strength that one day he, completely independent of us, will perfect through resurrection. Until then, we are ethical agents on a pilgrimage between the inauguration and the completion of Messianic promises.[11]

2) Eschatological agency

The One Divine Being acts uniquely and unilaterally to bring human beings and the rest of creation to ultimate perfection. In doing so, His action is unconditioned in relation to all human action and response.[12] Here the human being is enjoined to witness divine acts of reconstructing reality that consummate history and achieve a perfected condition of human and environmental relations. M/M doctrines belong entirely to the conditions of eschatological agency.

M/M doctrines are certainly a key aspect of motivation for ethical agency but once they become a reality in future time, the truth conditions for action shift to eschatological agency. Indeed, whenever the two models of agency are confused or conflated, quite negative consequences often follow, e.g., "hastening the day"[13] such as a vision of large numbers in religious revival.

While religious revivals can be most laudable events, they do not constrain the Divine Being in any way to change the appointed time of the end. When "hastening the day" becomes politicized the eschatological vision of M/M doctrines become temporalized and believers try to approximate divine action in their own actions, the outcome can be quite the opposite to the will of God in terms of ethical agency. In order to avoid such outcomes, their distinction requires strict maintenance.[14]

A key feature of M/M doctrines is that they present a model of reality where ultimate truths and acts of divine consummation are exclusive of human intention and action. M/M doctrines conceive of perfected human conditions, conceptualize their religious hope of a perfected future in terms of unilateral divine agency and posit epochal schematization of history. If followed consistently, M/M doctrine foreclose the possibility of conflating divine and human action and truth realization.

The necessary distinction above requires focus upon ethical agency and rests upon the conventional conceptuality of synergistic agency typical of everyday religious belief and practice. M/M doctrines can serve then as antidotes to utopian aspirations (including religious perfectionism) installed in social and political planning that over-estimate the human capacity to achieve the divinely revealed visions of consummation and perfection. With a categorical focus on ethical agency, the fuller dimensions of self within the religious community can be expanded.

M/M doctrine as eschatological agency has its only analog in a divine act of creation. Divine creative action is entirely unilateral such that while creature participate in the action, they do not contribute to it in any way.[15] This is the nature of the *يوم القيامة* "day of resurrection".

Creatures are either beneficiaries of this unique form of action or exempted from it. Indeed, beyond comparisons even with birth and death, creative action represent fundamental changes in the universe, in the state of the earth, in the course of human events. No human contribution to this type of action is ever in view, according to revelation.

Although there is a proximity of human action to eschatological events, and there are interpretive traditions that in their apologetical zeal suggest ways that ethical agency somehow influences the former, this is in fact not the case. Indeed, human action is not in proximity to the original divine act of creation, but the nature of eschatological action, now matter how close or interpenetrating both kinds of agency are, the eschatological does not depend upon the ethical in any way.

Indeed, the exclusivity of divine action in eschatological agency points both to the weakness and dependency of human action as well as the triumph of this act belonging solely to God. Any share that human beings as believers have in this triumph is one of inheritance, not of co-achievement let alone co-action.

The exegesis of scriptures throughout the 20th and into the 21st centuries has shown an increasing realization of their eschatological nature and their outlook for Judaism, Christianity and Islam. M/M doctrines are expressed particularly in such anticipations of final judgment of the world and above all in the promise of resurrection. In each case, the principle of prophetic mediation of divine agency is central. The M/M offices of prophet, priest and king coalesce into a single figure of divine anointing for redemption of humanity from a world that has become hostile to God and God's purposes for the world.

While the role of M/M mediator is a human one, the life of this one is completely defined by the plan and purposes of God. Nothing in human agency can be done to hasten the appearing of this one, to manufacture the necessary conditions for this appearing, let alone to contribute to the triumph of divine love that characterizes the consummation of creation that is the sole

prerogative of God.

In perhaps the most exalted of all apostolic passages, as a result of the eschatological agency achieved by M/M events at the end of this age, this mediation will render up all things to God "so that God may be all in all." The eschatological action of judgment is followed by that of reconciliation of all things to their Creator and to one another. M/M events and their mediator are necessary in so far as this One is at the prime eschatological agent as Person but only on the way toward the recreation of all things and their recovery in the all-in-all-ness with God.

What kind of agent is the human being under the conditions of eschatological agency? A passive agent. Just as there are two dimensions of faith, passive and active; the aspect of agency is bound up in them. The divine decision to create or to be merciful, is independent of the creature, even though it is entirely directed toward the creature. As all divine action toward is considered non-necessary - God does not need the creation to be God - so especially are eschatological events.

In the same way that faith is first a passive act that receives, eschatological event, following upon the historical events of the present time, eschatological agency among human beings is passive as God brings about those consummating events that are his prerogative alone. The time for ethical agency is over, the time for divine agency is revealed in acts of judgment and resurrection, recreation. Up until this time, believers live in hope and act ethically because of their expectation of the eschatological agency.[16]

Another of the primary distinctions to be made between the ethical agency and eschatological agency is the personal focus of the former and the collective focus of the latter. In ethical agency, the human individual is responsible for his or her own acts; in the passivity of eschatological agency, humanity becomes a collective reality, either to be redeemed or condemned, depending upon true faith in the consummation of all things. It is thus incumbent upon ethical agents to develop themselves personally, i.e., to grow intellectually and morally, to care for the body and for one's progeny, to seek the welfare of others, and the peace of the world, always guided by love.[17] Although eschatological agency is guided by divine love always for each and every creature, the narrative descriptions of this aspect of revelation - upon which M/M doctrines are based - are consistently cosmological and global. This fact should aid the necessary philosophical distinction between the two, however, so that ethical agency is never confused with eschatological agency.

[1] Some key texts: Meir M. Bar-Asher. *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imami Shiism* (1999, Brill; with its extensive review of early exegetes, e.g., Furat ibn Furat ibn Ibrahim al-Kufi, Ali ibn Ibrahim al-Qummi, Abu-'l Nadr Muhammad ibn Mas'ud al'Ayyashi & Muhammad ibn Ibrahim ibn Ja'far al-Nu'mani; A. A. Sachedina. *Islamic Messianism: The idea of Mahdi? in twelver Shi'ism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981 ; S. A.

Arjomand. *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam*; Mercedes Garc a-Arenal. *Messianism and Puritanical Reform: Mahd s of the Muslim West*. Brill: 2006; Paul E. Lovejoy and J. S. Hogendorn, "Revolutionary Mahdism and Resistance to Colonial Rule in the Sokoto Caliphate, 1905-6," *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (1990), pp. 217-244; William Horbury. *Messianism among Jews and Christians: twelve biblical and historical studies*. London: T & T Clark, 2003; Randall Heskett. *Messianism within the scriptural scroll of Isaiah*.

New York: T&T Clark, 2007; Eric F. Mason. 'You are a priest forever': Second Temple Jewish messianism and the priestly christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Leiden: Brill, 2008; Jacob Neusner. *Ancient Judaism and modern category-formation: "Judaism," "Midrash," "Messianism," and canon in the past quarter-century*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986; G za G. Xeravits. *King, priest, prophet: positive eschatological protagonists of the Qumran library*. Leiden: Brill, 2003.

[2] In the later work of Heidegger, he acknowledges that God appears in modern philosophy as the impersonal cause and ground of being, to which one does not pray nor can one sacrifice the idea. But the greater reality is the nearness of the "divine God" (g ttlichen Gott) in the freedom of faith; cf., Martin Heidegger. *Identit t und Differenz*. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2006, p. 77; cf., also, Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb. *Regions of sorrow: anxiety and messianism in Hannah Arendt and W.H. Auden*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003; Martin Kavka. *Jewish messianism and the history of philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

[3] Judaism also sees two mediatorial figures in its eschatology: Mashiach ben David and Mashiach ben Yossef the latter preparing the way for the former. In Christianity, Moses and Elijah are seen to return to inaugurate the messianic appearing of Jesus.

[4] NE, IX, 8.

[5] NE, IX, 4; cf., Harry Frankfurt. *The Reasons of Love*. Princeton University Press, 2004.

[6] *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5.73, 74.

[7] *Groundwork*, 4.398.

[8] *Ibid*, 4.402.

[9] This has been most appropriately expressed already in the 16th century by the theologian, Martin Luther, in his great formula: the believer as *simil iustus et peccator*, "simultaneously righteous and sinful"; and is no better interpreted in the 20th century than by the religious ethicist

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), cf., *An interpretation of Christian ethics*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935; *Moral man and immoral society: a study in ethics and politics*. New York: C. Scribner's sons, 1932; *The nature and destiny of man: a Christian interpretation*. New York, C. Scribner's Sons, 1949.

[10] From *Lauda 33* as cited in Alessandro Vettori. *Poets of Divine Love. Franciscan Mystical Poetry of the Thirteenth Century*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2004, p. 124.

[11] Cf., Sophia Vasalou. *Moral agents and their deserts: the character of Mu'tazilite ethics*. Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press, 2008.

[12] Cf., Joseph A. Fitzmyer. *The One who is to come*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007; also very helpful: Jerry L. Walls, ed. *The Oxford handbook of eschatology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

[13] Christianity has occasionally misinterpreted some of its scriptures in terms of hastening or constraining God to act eschatologically. In every case however, the proper translation requires the sense of following or traveling to the end to the age; some theologians have called this "the hastening that waits;" cf., such texts as 2 Peter 3

8 But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.

9 The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

11 Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, 12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? 13 But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. 14 Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; 15 and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

Cf., also, 1Corinthians 1:8; Philippians 1:6.

[14] Cf., Anthony D. Smith. *Chosen peoples*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; W.W. Meissner. *Thy kingdom come: psychoanalytic perspectives on the Messiah and the millennium*.

Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1995; Chaim Nussbaum. *Semblance and reality: Messianism in biblical perspective*. Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Pub. House, 1991; Aviezer Ravitzky. *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish religious radicalism*; translated by Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996; Mercedes Garc a-Arenal. *Messianism and puritanical reform: Mahd is of the Muslim west*. Translated from the Spanish by Martin Beagles. Leiden: Brill, 2006.

[15] In the famous essay, "Die Kehre", there is a key quote from the poet, H lderlin's Patmos, stimulated by the vision of John's Apocalypse, "But where this is danger, also grows the redemptive," (Wo aber Gefahr ist, w chst Das Rettende auch), Op. cit., p. 119.

[16] Cf., John M. G. Barclay, Simon J. Gathercole. *Divine and Human Agency in Paul and His Cultural Environment*. Continuum, 2006; Douglas H Knight. *The Eschatological Economy: Time and the Hospitality of God*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2006; Christiaan Mostert. *God and the Future: Wolfhart Pannenberg's Eschatological Doctrine of God*. Continuum, 2002.

[17] Cf., Stephen J. Pope, ed. *Hope & solidarity: Jon Sobrino's challenge to Christian theology*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008; J. Aaron Simmons and David Wood, eds. *Kierkegaard and Levinas: ethics, politics, and religion*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008.

Imam Mahdi: The Crusader of Equality and World Peace

Most of the world religions have faith in the future of humanity. They all believe, though in different forms, that a messiah will save the entire humanity and the world from all sins. The messiah will establish a society on the basis of true virtues.

The Hindu religious scripture Mahabharata says whenever there are sins and injustice in the world the God sends his messenger to earth to fight all evils and establishes an order dictated by justice, equality and peace. Ancient Hindu texts clearly state that at the end of Kalyug (period full of sins) a saint named Kalki will come to this world to fight all evils and to establish just order.

In the same conspectus Bible says that Jesus will come back to earth and after fighting enemies of humanity, establish rule of the Lord God.

Islam though recognizes Jesus as messiah and believers have faith in him that he will fight against rampant injustice and corruption in religion, but they categorically differentiate between Imam

Mahdi and Jesus.

Though, throughout the history of Islam, a few individuals -- driven either by the desperate state of Muslims in their community or a selfish pursuit of power and prestige -- laid claim to being Mahdi. Somehow they found a following as well among the uninformed masses those were desperately looking for salvation from the heavens. For some of these individuals (like Bab of Iran or Mirza Ghulam Qadiani of India) made claim to being Mahdi was just a stepping stone to the development of heretic sects which broke away from the fold of Islam. Thus, it is at least prudent to visit the facts of this prophecy and avoid falling pray to false claimants that will appear from time to time.

According to hadith narrated by Abu Saeed Khudri (R.A.) Rasulullah (Sallallahu Alayhi Wasallam) said: "... (regarding the rule of Imaam Mahdi) the skies will rain down in abundance and the earth will yield forth its crop in abundance, and those alive will desire that those who have already passed away should have been alive to enjoy this prosperity..."

This announcement which will be heard by all those present will establish his authenticity. Another sign which will indicate the authenticity of Imaam Mahdi will be that in the Ramadhaan prior to his emergence an eclipse of the sun and moon will occur.

It is strongly believed that when the believers are severely oppressed in every corner of the world. The saviour will fight the oppressors, unite the Muslims, bring peace and justice to the world, rule over the Arabs, and lead a prayer in Mekkah at which Isa(pbuh) (Jesus) will be present. It is not just Islam which has faith in the saviour of God but other religions of the world also have mention of a messenger who they believe will save the humanity against all odds.

Savior in Christianity

The "New Testament is full of references to Christ's return, more or less direct, and they offer a wide and highly interesting field for study. They are to be found in every one of the twenty seven books of the New Testament, except the Epistle to the Galatians (which had a special object) and the short Epistles, Philemon and 2 and 3 Johns ". Here is a collection of the New Testament passages concerning the second advent of Jesus Christ, which will also serve as material for further study of the subject.

Not all the passages about his return and the last things are quite easily intelligible, chiefly because it is difficult to interpret the symbols used in them and to decide whether a certain passage is to be taken literally or metaphorically. Particularly, the passages from the Revelation of Saint John the Divine, the last book of the Bible, are the most symbolical and, therefore, the least intelligible and the most difficult to interpret.

Quotations From The Bible

(i) "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathered her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord."

- St. Mathew 23: 37-39

(ii) "And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things" Verily I say unto you, there shall not be left here one stone upon another. That shall not be thrown down. And as he sat upon the Mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of they coming, and of the end of the world?"

And Jesus answered and said unto them Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. And ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places.

All these are the beginning of sorrows. Then shall they deliver you up to be affected, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. And then shall many be offended and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another and many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved and this gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations and then shall the end come.

When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, Stand in the holy place, (whose readeth, let him understand): Then let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains: Let him which is on the housetop not come down to take any thing out of his house: Neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes. And woe unto them

that are with child and to them that give suck in those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened. Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not.

For there shall arise false Christs, great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect. Behold, I have told you before, you, Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth: behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not. For as the lightening cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.

For whosoever the carcass is there will the eagles be gathered together? Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened; and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: And then shall appear the sign of that Son of man in heaven: And then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds from one end of heaven to the other.

Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is near: So likewise ye, when ye see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors. Verily I say unto you. This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.

Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away. But of that day and hour knoweth no man no, not the angels of heaven, but my father only. But as the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, And knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left.

Two women shall be grinding at the mill, the one shall be taken, and the other left. Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come. But know this that if the Goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up. Therefore be ye also ready for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh.

Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household to give them meat in due season blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing. Verily I say unto you, that he shall make him ruler over all his goods. But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayed his coming: And shall begin to smite his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken; The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of And shall cut him as under, and

appoint him his portion with the hypocrites; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

- St. Mathew 24

This is not all but in Bible; there are other references as well where they explain the future existence of the messiah.

Above we have dealt with religious parallelism and the Messianic hope in relation to the Semitic religions all of which have risen in or near the Mediterranean region of the world although they have spread far beyond the borders of the lands of their origin. It is desirable to have a view of the Messianic hope (or millennialism) in non-Semitic religions also.

Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism is the religion founded by Zoroaster in Persia around 1000 B.C. Its holy book is the Avesta (or Zend Avesta). Today there are about 20,000 Zoroastrians (Gabars) in Iran (mostly in Yezd) and about 120,000 Zoroastrianism (Parasees) in India (mostly in Bombay). "

The Messianic (or millennial) hope cannot be studied satisfactorily apart from other eschatological problems e.g. the doctrine of resurrection, the final judgment, dissolution of world and the life hereafter. They are all closely (though somewhat mysteriously) related to one another. According to Zoroastrianism "the world would end 3,000 years after Zoroaster's death at which time a new prophet would arise:"

People of this religion believe that in the fourth period of the universe a saviour, Saoshyant, will appear, the dead will rise for their final reward or punishment, and good will reign eternally. Saoshyant "will bring about the final judgment, dispense the drink of immortality and usher in the new world. Thus, Finite Time, which had come forth from Infinite Time, merges with it again after the space of 12,000 years.

In the Judae-Christian religion (the Bible) "the figure of the Messiah, originally a future king of Israel who would save his people from oppression, evolved, in Deutero-Isaiash for instance, into a universal Saviour very similar to the Iranian (Zoroastrian) Saoshyant."

Hinduism

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Hinduism is generally believed to have originated in the second millennium B.C. Hinduism the oldest of the living religions of the world, claiming, as it does, the adherence of about four hundred million people, leaves the door open for future manifestations or incarnations of God. "The incarnations of Vishnu are innumerable, like the rivulets flowing from an inexhaustible take.

According to the Bhagvad-Gita no incarnation is final. It quotes Sri Krishna as saying: "Though unborn and immortal, and also the Lord of all beings, I manifest Myself through my own Yogamaya (divine potency), keeping My Nature (Prakriti) under control. Arjuna, whenever there is a decline of righteousness and unrighteousness is in the ascendant, (then) I body Myself forth. For the protection of the virtuous, for the destruction of evil-doers, and for establishing Dharma (righteousness) on a firm footing, I am born from age to age." The Messianic hope in Hinduism is direct corollary of its incarnation theory. The Sanskrit word "Avatar" etymologically means 'descent' of a deity; technically, it means an incarnation or manifestation of God.

"Vishnu (Sanskrit, the "active one"), in the Indian Rig-Veda (is) a minor deity,... Vishnu in the Epic (Ramayana and Mahabharata) mythology developed into the preserver-god, one of the Hindu triad with Brahma, the creator; and Shiva, the destroyer; and as such he has saved mankind in ten incarnations" 1 whenever a great disorder, physical or moral disturbed the world, Vishnu descended 'in a small portion of his essence' to set it right, to restore the law, and thus to preserve creation....

. A tenth incarnation, Hindus believe, is reserved for the last day, when Vishnu is to return to earth to execute righteousness and judgment.

"Avatar is Hindu mythology (is), an incarnation of the Deity. Ten avatars are peculiarly distinguished, and four of them are the subject of Puranas, or sacred poems. These 10 are among the incarnations of Vishnu, the Supreme God. The Matsya avatar was the descent of the Deity in the form of a Matsya avatar was the descent of the Deity in the form of a fish; Kachyapa or Kurma, in that of a tortoise; Varaha, as a boar; Nara Sinha (Man Lion), as a monster, half man, half lion; Vamana, as a dwarf; Parasurama, as the son of Jamadagni. All these took place in the Satya Yuga, or Golden Age.

The seventh incarnation was in the form of the four sons of King Dasarath, under the names of Rama, Lakshmana, Bharat, and Shtrughana, in order to destroy certain demons that infested the earth... Rama forms the subject of the Ramayana. The eighth Avatar of Vishnu, in the form of Krishna, (is) the best known of all; forms the subject of the great ... Mahabharata. Its object was to relieve the earth from the Daityas, and the wicked men who oppressed it. The ninth was in the form of Buddha. The Kalki, or tenth avatar, is yet to come at the end of Kali Yuga."

Kalki, or White horse. This is yet to come. Vishnu mounted on a white horse, with a drawn scimitar, blazing like a comet, will, according to prophecy, end this present age, viz., the fourth or Kaliyug, by destroying the world, and then renovating creation by an age of purity." 1 "This incarnation of Vishnu is to appear at the end of the Kali or Iron Age, seated on a white horse, with a drawn sword blazing like a comet, for the final destruction of the wicked, the renovation of creation, and the restoration of purity....

It is clear from the above that Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver) and Siva (the destroyer) are the three attributes (or forms) of one and the same primordial person. There is, therefore, no room for the popular misconception that Hinduism believes in three gods and not in the one true God. Unity underlies trinity: trinity (or multiplicity) is the manifestation of unity.

Prophet according to Hinduism is not a messenger or apostle of God but God Himself, since He does not send anyone but Himself descends to execute His divine plan. Kalki, therefore, would be God Himself rather than a messenger of God.

Buddhism

Buddhism is the religion founded by Siddhartha Gautam Buddha in the 6th century B.C. Like Christ, "Buddha had the courage to attack popular religion, superstition, ceremonial, and priest craft, and all the vested interests that clung to them. 25 and consequently came into clash with the institutional religion, with the priest and theologians of his day and was regarded as a rebel against the established faith. And lastly, while Christianity predicts the second coming of Christ, Buddhism holds out the promise of the advent of the Maitreya Buddha. Why the World Need a Messiah?

Justice of present international system may be questioned in which birthplace tend to play so large a role in life chances. One child may get a wonderful life where all the social and financial securities are guaranteed just because of born into an affluent/ developed state. While the other will be deprived even of the basic requirements of life and may have to struggle all his life to feed him and his family what to talk of right to education and dignified life as heralded by several constitutions of the world.

Why those born into some countries lived comparatively so well, while some born into less favored countries lived in absolute poverty, confronted by specters of disease, starvation and death. In this age of 21st century where we are discussing the avenues of having a residential arrangement on Moon or Mars, the humanity is also witnessing the food riot erupted in several countries. On one hand we see people of one country pouring millions of liters of milk and butter into sea just to maintain the global prices while on the other hand a son killing a father over a piece of bread or a father selling off his daughter for the medicine of his wife.

This situation demands action and not just a small increase in foreign aid, but sweeping structural change in the global system. There should be a system of distributive justice which is impartial, universal and accords the interest of all individuals regardless of citizenship or compatriot status, equal weight.

The present political conditions of the world show how a handful of people from the developed world are setting the agenda for the rest of the world by force and oppression. The world's so called superpower is providing all the financial and strategic help to the fascist force of Israel. This evil force is using the money and support to kill the innocent people of Palestine. These oppressive powers are controlling the economy and polity to decide the fate of less fortunate.

The West as a result of their growing or advanced financial power, since the 1950s and also presently, have been dominating and colonizing the other countries. They claim to be peacemakers but they are monsters disguised in human fashion ready to kill by perpetrating injustice against the weaker ones.

We have been living in a complex world in which nations and political movements interact in intricate ways to formulate policies and handle conflicts. It is not difficult to imagine the sufferings of lacks of people of Palestine who are living as refugees in their very own homeland. The West should be reminded that 'justice denied to any people means that a battle line has been drawn'.

The world is at such a juncture where only a Messiah can save the world and humanity from such rampant injustice. One of the first tasks before the messiah will be to encounter these evil forces and remove the double standard policies which are governing the world at the moment.

Here the question arises that could global government be the answer to global poverty and starvation? Do we owe equal to our co-citizens as much as to those in other countries? I argue that not only do we have strong obligations to people elsewhere, but that an accountable integration among nation-states will help ensure that all persons can lead a decent life. Our duties are equally strong to our fellow citizens as well as foreigners.

But the important question is who will be able to govern that global state in such an ideal manner where there is justice, fairness and opportunities for everyone belonging to the earth irrespective of the caste, creed, religion or race. I argue that Imam Mahdi, the imam in hiding, the ambassador of almighty is the only person equipped to bring peace and justice to this Universe.

He will have the ability to be the real crusader of the equality and world peace which is need of the hour. The world can rely only on his administration and dispensation of justice when he reappears which will finally create a world of peace and justice with no despair and oppression.

Imam Mahdi, Allah's appointed ruler will be the only qualified person to form a society where people irrespective of their faith and gender will have everything which is socially desirable.

There will be no concept of nationalism but a global government based on moral principles of justice, fairness and equality. There will be a world without corruption, favoritism, nepotism and violence. It will be exactly the kind of world promised by Quran to the mankind.

The idea of an ideal global government is not wishful thinking but the aspiration of every individual, who always want better things: prettier view, better things to eat, and an ideal life with no social and economic problems. Imam Mahdi, the awaited saviour, will make the world a just and ideal system. He will conquer hearts of man and will form Dar-ul-Islam.

Dialogue or Conversion? An examination of Christian-Muslim eschatological texts and their potential impact on interfaith dialogue

As the world continues to divide along the lines of faith and religion, interfaith dialogue has emerged as a legitimate and powerful tool for peacemaking across the boundaries of culture and belief. This is especially true for followers of the three Abrahamic traditions who have the potential to realize geo-political and cross-cultural reconciliation through this type of engagement. But viewed through the prism of the eschatological texts of Twelver Shi'ism and Christianity, does interfaith dialogue serve a valid and useful purpose?

If, as both traditions claim, the return of the Redeemer signals a period of bloodshed and conversion to "the one true faith" before peace occurs, does interfaith dialogue play a legitimate role in peacemaking? Or, does the moral imperative of converting "the other" as outlined in the sacred texts of both traditions supersede the significance of this peacemaking approach?

The role of religion in international conflict

The events of September 11th, the war and sectarian violence in Iraq, Islamophobia in the West, and the ongoing discord in the Holy Land have underscored the significant role that faith and religion play in the world's most intractable conflicts. Central to our understanding of these and other struggles are the relationships that exist between and among followers of the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Each tradition brings its own doctrinal and geo-political issues to this triad and each must be understood within the context of its association to

the other to appreciate fully past and present clashes.

As followers of each faith have assumed a position of religious and cultural supremacy through the ages, the relationships have been characterized by periods of peaceful co-existence juxtaposed with periods of bloody warfare. Today, the ongoing discord in Holy Land and the mounting tensions between Islam and the West underscore the need for a reevaluation of these relationships as Jews, Christians, and Muslims encounter each other with increasing frequency and intimacy.

As the international community continues to divide along the lines of faith and religion, nations are faced with the moral imperative of engaging with peoples across the boundaries of culture and belief. Because religion is at the core of so much political violence, many religious leaders have begun to successfully engage in the kind of reconciliation dialogue that has eluded diplomats and political leaders for decades. Many of these religious leaders recognize the troubled history that exists between Jews, Christians, and Muslims and, in a post-9/11 world, have a special dedication to promoting reconciliation between and among followers of the Abrahamic faiths.

Human Agency

Many would argue that there is no more salient need in the global community than to facilitate interfaith dialogue conducted within the framework of international peacekeeping and, in recent years, we have seen this kind of outreach become a priority of the world's major religions. It is important to note that interfaith dialogue is implemented through a belief in the concept of human agency which states that human beings have the freedom and capacity make choices, can impose those choices on the world, and ultimately bring about change (in this case, peace and reconciliation between faiths and nations).

However, if viewed through the prism of the eschatological texts of Twelver Shi'ism and Christianity, one may question whether interfaith dialogue serves a valid and useful purpose. If, as both traditions state, the return of the Redeemer signals a period of bloodshed and conversion to "the one true faith" before peace occurs, does human agency expressed through interfaith dialogue play a legitimate role in peacemaking?

Human beings have struggled for centuries to understand their relationship to and with the Creator and creation. The freedom to act, the notion of free will, and the power to affect change are concepts found in many of the world's great religions.

But where is the line drawn between God's activity and human activity in the world? What is the responsibility of God and what is the responsibility of human beings, and where and how do these intersect, overlap, or differentiate? Are there really activities belonging only to and preordained

by God? If so, where and how do we draw this line and make this distinction between what is up to God and what is properly within the purview of man's power to affect or change? Under what conditions does man have the capacity to affect his environment and which events in human history are outside of the purview of human agency?

These are questions that may never be answered to the satisfaction of all believers but we may search the sacred texts and teachings of Christianity and Islam to determine what followers of both traditions are called and empowered to do.

It is clear from the writings of both traditions that Christians and Muslims are entrusted with great responsibility by God for the betterment of the world. A common theme in the teachings of Christian social justice emphasizes the responsible participation in God's own work of creating a more just society. For example, the United States Catholic bishops in their 1986 pastoral letter on the economy entitled *Economic Justice for All* provide a case in point:

Men and women are also to share in the creative activity of God. They are to be faithful, to care for the earth ("The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.") (Genesis 2:15), and to have "dominion" over it ("God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.

Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'") (Genesis 1:28), which means they are "to govern the world in holiness and justice and to render judgment in integrity of heart" (Wisdom 9:3). Creation is a gift; women and men are to be faithful stewards in caring for the earth. They can justly consider that by their labor they are unfolding the Creator's work.

Later, the bishops explain that "although the ultimate realization of God's plan lies in the future, Christians in union with all people of good will are summoned to shape history in the image of God's creative design..." (section 53). Here the bishops echo a point made by John Paul II in his 1981 encyclical *Laborem*

Exercens:

The word of God's revelation is profoundly marked by the fundamental truth that man [sic], created in the image of God, shares by his work in the activity of the creator and that, within the limits of his own human capabilities, man [sic] in a sense continues to develop that activity, and perfects it as he advances further and further in the discovery of the resources and values contained in the whole of creation.

Further, in two passages from the New Testament, we see that Christians are called to a life of

loving service through pastoral action and direct participation in the lives of others. James 1:27 states, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." Also, 1 John 3:18 says, "Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."

Of course, the most compelling command for Christians is found in Matthew 22:37-40 in which Jesus says, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 'This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

According to Christian teachings, then, God's agency is made concrete or complete in human activity in the pursuit of justice and in acts of loving service to mankind.

The concept of human agency in Islam bears similarities to those tenets found in Christianity. For Muslims, sovereignty belongs to God but it has been delegated in the form of human agency (Quran, 2:30). The task for human beings is to reflect on how this God-given agency can be best employed in creating a society that will bring welfare and goodness to the population both now and in the future. God is sovereign in all affairs, but God has exercised sovereignty by delegating some of it in the form of human agency.

Not unlike the passage in Genesis which speaks to the dominion of man over all creation, Surah 45:13 of the Qur'an states: "And He has disposed for your benefit whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth. All is from Him." In addition, Surah 53:39 of the Holy Qur'an states: "Man can have nothing except that which he strives for and the results of his striving will soon be seen." In his book, "Our Belief," His Holiness Ayatullahelozma Makarem Shirazi responds to this by saying, "Such verses in the holy Qur'an will clearly show that man has free will and that we may submit man's deeds and acts to God without any reduction in his responsibilities for what he does.

God wills that we do what we do by freedom and free will so that he may examine us and lead us forward in the way of perfection which can be attained through free will and serving the Lord."

We see also in Islam a pastoral imperative to provide for the orphan and the widow. "And they give food out of love to the poor and the orphan and the captive" (Qur'an 76:8). In addition, it is evident from the numerous references in the Qur'an and the Bible concerning the Day of Judgment that Christians and Muslims cannot be held accountable for their actions unless they are given the agency to do so. So it is clear that for both Christians and Muslims, human agency and free will are important components of their respective traditions.

But the question remains regarding how that agency is best applied when encountering those of

other faiths. If, as eschatological texts from both traditions say, there is only one true faith and all who do not accept that faith will perish, is the moral imperative for Christians and Muslims one of dialogue or conversion?

The return of the Redeemer and the vengeance narrative

Throughout the ages, Christians and Muslim have speculated that the return of their Redeemer was imminent. Although there is a prohibition in Islam about speculating about the time of the return of Imam Mahdi, and Christians are told that no one knows the hour or the day of Christ's reappearance, believers in both traditions have clung to the notion that their deliverance was close at hand.

For Christians, concentration on the eschatological texts of the Bible has taken on increasing significance in recent years. The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 fueled renewed interest in the fulfillment of end-times prophecies, particularly those that predicted the return of Jews to Israel and reconstruction of the Jerusalem temple that was destroyed in A.D. 70. Christians who believe in end-times prophecies tend to focus heavily on the apocalyptic verses of Daniel and Ezekiel in the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation in the New Testament.

For Shi'ia Muslims, an emphasis on the return of the twelfth Imam has been a central theme of their tradition for centuries and their prophecies are described in the Qur'an and various other hadith traditions including that of al-Mufaddal b. Umar. The texts of both faiths speak of a Redeemer who will come to restore justice and peace upon the earth after battles with the forces of evil and the oppressors of the believers. These texts convey the visions of prophets and holy men who used vivid (and often violent) imagery and prophecy to describe the end of days.

The concept of a Redeemer who is to come and establish the rule of justice and establish an everlasting peace on the earth is shared by all major religions of the world. Christians envision a second coming of Christ in which all nations will recognize his dominion to establish the kingdom of God on earth while Muslims conceive of an Imam who will rise against existing intolerable secular authority and create just social order in which Islam will be the one true religion for all nations.

Coupled with this concept, however, is also the belief in that revenge will be exacted upon the oppressor. Perhaps for similar reasons, the revenge narrative is very much a part of both

traditions.

There is a certain brand of religious scholarship that emphatically states that historical context must be considered when examining the eschatological texts of any religious tradition. Professor Aziz Sachedina of the University of Virginia is one such scholar. Dr. Sachedina believes that, for believers of most major faiths, the political and social turmoil of the day was written in form of prophecy, specifically in a narrative evoking vengeance against the oppressor. Such a hope is the natural outcome among groups who have been wronged and oppressed; the need for a deliverer becomes imperative.

For Shi'ia Muslims, the oppression of the caliphs and their administrators added much to the events foretold in apocalyptic traditions, just as the oppression of the early Christians influenced early writers to put their hope in a messiah who would not only universalize the faith but would put down their oppressors. It would seem, then, that the degree of violence of the eschatological texts runs parallel to the amount of oppression experienced by the oppressed group: the deeper the oppression, the darker the apocalyptic vision.

An illustration of this concept may be found in the Bihar regarding the return of the Prophet: "With the believers, those who falsified his mission and doubted it will also return so that proper vengeance for their disbelief can be exacted from them."

This sentiment is further evidenced in the condolences that Shi'ites offer each other on the occasion of the Ashura: "May God grant us great rewards for our bereavement caused by the martyrdom of al-Husayn (peace be upon him), and make us among those who will exact vengeance for his blood with his friend the Imam al-Mahdi, from among the descendants of Muhammad (peace be upon him)."

For Christians, this sentiment is evidenced by several Old and New Testament passages including Deuteronomy 32:43 which states: "Rejoice, oh you nations, with his people. For He will avenge the blood of His servants and will render vengeance to his adversaries, and will be merciful unto his land and to his people."

Supremacy of each tradition and infallibility of sacred texts

Christians and Muslims who believe in the cataclysmic end to history as recorded in their sacred

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texts believe only one group will be saved. The first thing that will occur under the rule of the Mahdi is the conversion of the whole world to Islam. The followers of all other religions will embrace Islam and profess faith in one God, just as He has said in the Qur'an: "...to Him submits whoever is in the heavens and the earth, willingly and unwillingly, and to Him shall they be returned" (3:82).

For Christians, the second coming of Christ signals a period of rapture for the believer but tribulation for non-believer. Those who have not accepted Christ as the Savior of the world will be left behind, and, if not converted, will ultimately perish. According to the Christian faith, the establishment of this Divine kingdom on earth is the great theme of the Bible.

The call of the Gospel is to participation with Christ in that kingdom. He comes to reward his followers, and to assert his authority throughout the earth, "for the nation and kingdom that will not serve him shall perish; they shall be utterly wasted" (Isaiah 60:12). The establishment of Christ as the undisputed Savior is best established the passage in John where Jesus states: "I am the way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

In the apocalyptic texts of Matthew, we see Christ encouraging his disciples to spread the Good News of the gospel ("Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 28:19) and ultimately separating the believer from the non-believer and ("And before Him shall be gathered all nations. And he shall separate them as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats." (Matthew 25:32).

An attitude of supremacy and inerrancy regarding the texts of each tradition permeates each faith as well. Muslims acknowledge the divine attributes of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures but maintain that the Qur'an stands apart in that it has remain pure and unaltered through the centuries. In his book, "Our Belief," His Holiness Ayatullahelozma Makarem Shirazi states: "We believe that, for the guidance of man, God sent down several divine books, among which we may name: the Sohof, given to Noah; the Law, given to Moses; the Gospel, given to Jesus; and the Qur'an, given to Mohammad.

Unfortunately, through long elapses of time, many of the scriptures have been tampered with and altered to some extent by the interference of ignorant and unauthorized people, resulting in the replacement of some incorrect and immoral ideas. Among these as an exception is the Glorious Qur'an which has remain unaltered and is exactly the same as it was; and it has always been shining like the bright sun, throughout the ages and the nations, alighting hearts."

Not surprisingly, there are Christians who support the notion of the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible. One Christian apologist writes, "Since God is truth (John 3:33, Romans 3:4), what is breathed out by God, must also be true (John 17:17) and infallible. Due to the infallible character

of God (Titus 1:2), the Son (John 14:6) and the Holy Spirit (1 John 5:6,7), the Scripture which is inspired by God is also inerrant in every aspect (Matt 22:43-45, Matt 22:32, and Gal 3:16). The Old Testament also attests the inerrancy of the Bible. The word of the Lord is flawless (Psalms 12:6), it is eternal and stands firm (Psalms 119:89), and that every word of God is flawless (Proverbs 30:5-6)."

How Christians and Muslims understand the texts and prophecies of their respective traditions is important because they can influence the ways in which they interpret issues such as war and peace, the environment, and social justice.

For example, if followers in both traditions believe that war and chaos are necessary to usher in end times, why would they work for peace between nations? This is an important question for those participating in interfaith dialogue around the globe but takes on an especially important significance in current US-Iran relations. The Shi'ia emphasis on the return of Imam Madhi has led some in the West, and specifically in the United States, to speculate that Iran's government may be attempting to bring about war to hasten the Mahdi's appearance. Of course, such speculations are antithetical to the teachings of Mahdism which emphasize justice and equity for all of mankind.

Embracing a plurality of perspectives

Over the centuries, there have been few religious leaders who have possessed the patience or the courage to learn about the religion of the other with openness, tolerance, and compassion or to accept that other faiths may be encountering different aspects of the same truth. Medieval Christian apologists from the 7th to the 14th centuries struggled to understand Islam, usually reading the Quran and other Muslim literature in its original language.

The majority of these apologists strove to prove the supremacy of Christianity over Islam; however, there were a few exceptions. Peter the Venerable, for example, wrote in the 12th century that in addressing Muslims, Christians should proceed "not as our people often do, by arms, but by words; not by force, but by reason; not in hatred, but in love." Nicholas of Cusa produced "Sifting the Quran" in the 15th century, which argues that the Quran may be used as an introduction to the Gospel, and praises the human and religious virtues of Muslims.

One of the most compelling calls for religious tolerance may come from the Gospel of John. On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus prays for the unity of all of his followers: 'Father, may they all be one as you are in me, and I in you; may they also be on in us so that the world may believe that you sent me' (John 17:20, 21). Although this appears to be a call to unity within the Church itself, it could also suggest a broader interpretation, calling followers of all faiths to worship the

same God.

The Christian response to other faiths is also expressed in the book of Acts where Peter, responding to the realities of a multi-faith community states, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10: 34-35).

There have been several Shi'ia scholars who have supported the call to unity among a plurality of religious perspectives, particularly in the name of establishing peace. The late Allamah Tabataba'i in his interpretation of verse 200 of the Ali-Imran chapter of the Qur'an says: "Undoubtedly, the emergence and formation of any society are the results of a single objective shared in common by all the members of that society.

This objective is like a spirit which is inspired in all nooks and crannies of the society and brings about a certain type of unity among members of the society." In response to this, Dr. Rahim Eivazi of Tehran University states: "Taking note of this point along with the instinctive inclination of man to unify in spite of differences and plurality may render a new definition for a culture of peace, with the Abrahamic religions being the frame of reference for communication patterns in this direction." Dr. Eivazi goes on to say that, "...considering the inefficiency of governmental preventive measures [to reduce tensions in international relations], new measures (achieved through new angles) are needed; the religious scholars of monotheistic religions should get involved in guiding socio-political currents in this direction."

At a meeting of religious and political leaders in Oslo, Norway in May of 2007, former President Mohammad Khatami noted the distinction between religion as an expression of "divine matter" and religion as an aspect of group identity. He went on to quote Surah 2, verse 285 of the Holy Qur'an which states: "We make no distinction between one and another of his Prophets" and, more explicitly, from verse 136 stated, "We believe in God, and the revelation given to us and to Abraham, Ishmael, Jacob and his descendents and that given to Moses and Jesus and that give to all Prophets. We make no difference between one and another of them."

Because of this, Khatami noted, "A believer in Islam will find himself or herself in an identity framework in which believers in other faiths also exist-an identity which not only leads to tolerance but also brings about a kind of solidarity among followers of different religions." Muslims do form a distinct identity group but it is not exclusive. Islam "can be inclusive as it identifies a kind of compassion and proximity as a basis for relations with other identities." He said further, "Islam calls on followers of other religions to get together in an identity circle vaster than a circle of specific individuals-an identity that stands on two pillars: monotheism and freedom of thought."

Conclusion

This brings us back to our original question: are Christians and Muslims called to convert the other or to embrace the possibility of a plurality of perspectives that allows for mutual and respectful exploration of the other's faith? For me, the answer lies in the fruits of efforts that are already underway in this important effort. Through interfaith dialogue, Christians and Muslims who worship the one God are approaching the exploration of each other's faith with reverence and humility and are realizing new possibilities for establishing peace and lasting relations. For example, through our dialogue work with clerics in Iran, we at the National Cathedral have seen repeatedly that this dialogue takes place under conditions of reverence for the other's faith, not attempts at conversion.

As Dr. David Thomas stated, we are engaging in the kind of "respectful inquiry into the faith tradition of the other that puts preconceptions about its truthfulness and legitimacy aside and attempts to discover the core beliefs and diversity of expressions with respect and attentiveness."

We recognize that we are called to this kind of engagement by the God who knows and loves us all and the God we wish to serve. This knowledge supersedes the need for conversion and establishing the supremacy of each faith, and permits us to explore the path of peace and walk together to worship and honor the one God.

As an American who strives to advance reconciliation between my country and Iran, it pleases me to state that leaders in the Iranian clerical and NGO communities have taken the lead in interfaith dialogue as a means to build bridges between cultures and followers of various faith traditions. It was former President Khatami who proposed the idea of a Dialogue Among Civilizations and Cultures, a notion that received such overwhelming support that the United Nations declared 2001 as the year of Dialogue Among Civilizations.

In addition, the Center for Interreligious Dialogue in Tehran has been conducting interfaith discussions for almost twenty years to provide a platform for the exchange of ideas and the construction of a global community that is grounded in the basic rights of all people. In a joint round of discussions held in Geneva in 2005 between the World Council of Churches and the Center for Interreligious Dialogue, Ayatollah Mahmoud Mohammadi Araqi stated, "We are ready to reach mutual understanding with the nations of the West and any other country or bloc through dialogue.

We reject the idea of a clash of civilizations and still believe that most of the problems of the world can be solved through dialogue. We are open to dialogue and stretch out our hands for anyone in the world who is interested in dialogue to talk and negotiate to find reasonable solutions to our common problems."

Proponents of interfaith dialogue reinforce the notion that people across the lines of faith cannot simply study the sacred texts of the other to deepen their understanding of each tradition. They must meet in person to experience humanity of the other and to comprehend the intricate complexities with which people embrace and live out their faith. One of the failures of the early Christian apologists was that their understanding of Islam was based solely on the Muslim texts they had read. They had virtually no contact with Muslim communities.

We see the negative effects of this kind of isolation underscored in the tensions between the US and Iran, peoples who have had virtually no contact for almost thirty years. In light of the current tensions existing between our countries, the need for peace established through religious channels takes on a unique significance at this point in history.

Interfaith dialogue is work that is ongoing, of course, and each of us must be dedicated to remaining open to learning about the other's faith and humanity. The challenge of this work is not in finding an answer to pluralism but in trying to appreciate why believers from other faiths accept what they do. It is our hope that increasing knowledge of each tradition will lead Christians and Muslims to understand that both traditions are authentic expressions of truth and are parallel paths to the same God. In a world where religion is increasingly used to justify violence, this is a much needed perspective.