

## CHAPTER 4

# Sibling Rivalries, Scriptural Communities

## *What Medieval History Can and Cannot Teach Us about Relations between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*

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Since 1989, that is, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the ways in which we think about the geopolitical importance of the history of religion, and particularly of Islam, have been turned on their heads. A brief quote is sufficient to make the point, this one from a 1957 intelligence report by a high-level U.S. intelligence and security interagency group called the Operations Coordinating Board:

Islam is important to the United States, *because it has compatible values*. The present division of the world into two camps is often represented as being along political lines, while the true division is between a society in which the individual is motivated by spiritual and ethical values and one in which he is the tool of a materialistic state. Islam and Christianity have a common spiritual base in the belief that a divine power governs and directs human life and aspirations while communism is purely atheistic materialism and is hostile to all revealed religion.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the Cold War such ideas played an important role in our geopolitics, helping to mobilize, for example, evangelical Christian lobbying for U.S. support of the Taliban in the 1980s.

It is difficult to think of an intelligence assessment coming to the same conclusion today. This is not, I submit, because intelligence assessments about Islam were more accurate in 1957 than they are today, or vice versa. It is rather because of rapid changes of conviction about what constitutes the key ideological alignments and differences between friends and enemies. A good example of the sharpness of that change is Samuel Huntington's famous (or infamous) essay and later book, "The Clash of Civilizations," which argued that geopolitical conflict would now take place along the fault lines between competing civilizational blocks, whose cohesion was largely determined by a shared religious tradition and culture (Buddhist China, Western civilization, and the Islamic world were his main categories). We don't have to agree with Huntington on the precise nature of these "civilizations," the inevitability of their "clash," or the reasons for the particular violence of the conflict with Islam ("Islam has bloody borders," as Huntington notoriously put it).<sup>2</sup> But even if we don't, we can still admit that the world is now much more preoccupied with religious conflict, and particularly conflict between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, than it was when the Operations Coordinating Board made its predictions in 1957.

One curious result of this heightened preoccupation is that history of religion has become a battlefield in something of a proxy war over how we should think about our own time and place. How to use the past in order to understand the present, and how our commitments in the present should shape our understanding of the past: these questions confront the historian of religion with increasing sharpness. Indeed I found the intelligence quote in a 2004 book by a distinguished medievalist colleague, Richard Bulliet, whose *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* emphasizes a long history of affinities between Islam and Europe, and suggests Islamo-Christian is a more accurate term than Judeo-Christian to characterize the history of what we sometimes call "Western civilization."<sup>3</sup> In the first sections of this essay, I will attempt to criticize some of the ways in which we have been asking and answering these questions. But I will conclude with more positive suggestions about what the study of the religious past can offer citizens of, and believers in, the present.

Today there are literally hundreds of writers turning to the Middle Ages in order to make this or that argument about the relationship between Western and Islamic civilization. The topic has attracted some very good novelists—including Salman Rushdie, Amin Maalouf, and A. B. Yehoshua—and also produced some very polemical history. But the proxy war is not only literary. A number of policy projects also turned to the history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, among them the Union for the Mediterranean

conceived by French president Nikolas Sarkozy as a union of all nations—whether Christian, Jewish, or Muslim—whose shores are lapped by the Mediterranean’s waters, including both Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

According to Sarkozy, the three Abrahamic religions had their origins around the shores of the Mediterranean, and on its waters they traded and related with each other for more than a millennium. This ancient unity of Mediterranean history and culture, he suggested, could serve as a platform for the pursuit of Middle East peace and mutual prosperity. But his historico-geographic definition of the union was immediately resisted by the European powers it excluded (namely Germany) as an attempt to circumvent the EU and create an alternative French-dominated vehicle for regional policy. By the time the Joint Declaration of the Union for the Mediterranean was signed on July 13, 2008, it still invoked the shared history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Mediterranean as its springboard for the pursuit of peace and prosperity. But the list of signatories included not only Germany but all the EU member states, with the European Commission and the Arab League as additional participants. Apparently the binding force of Mediterranean history reaches from Iceland to Yemen. But it still does not reach the United States, and that, of course, is the geopolitical point.<sup>4</sup>

The Union for the Mediterranean is a large transnational initiative, but a smaller example of how the past is deployed in order to participate in the politics of the present will help me illustrate more clearly the limitations and perils of this approach. Some five years ago, at the suggestion of the prime minister of Spain (seconded by Turkey), the United Nations established a new Secretariat for the Alliance of Civilizations with the mandate (I am quoting from the secretariat’s concept paper, a draft of which is in my possession) “to overcome prejudice, misconceptions, misperceptions, and polarization . . . that foment violence.” To quote that concept paper just a bit further, the secretariat was meant as “a call to all of those who believe in building rather than destroying, who embrace diversity as a means of progress rather than as a threat, and who believe in the dignity of humankind across religion, ethnicity, race, and culture.” The secretariat hosted a series of working groups, many of them focused on examples of multiculturalism and toleration from the Middle Ages and other historical periods, and then, for reasons that are unknown to me (but presumably not because its mission was accomplished), closed its doors less than a year after it opened them.

The one line I have quoted from the UN’s concept paper suffices to make clear a contradiction at the secretariat’s very foundation: this “alliance” of all who are for diversity and deplore polarization defines itself through a series

of oppositions and exclusions. It is against those who would (apparently) rather destroy than build, strive to eliminate diversity rather than embrace it, and who do not believe in the dignity of mankind. We know, of course, whom the drafters of this constitution have in mind: all American policy-makers who are followers of that rival paradigm, “The Clash of Civilizations.” Such people are destroyers, eliminators. They are excluded from the “Alliance of Civilizations” because they are not civilized themselves. In this sense, the “alliance” is itself also a “clash,” and the claim to toleration is already intolerant.

This may seem an obvious point. Yet it seems to me important to stress the barbarism that attends many of our claims to civilization (to paraphrase Walter Benjamin),<sup>5</sup> both because our tendency to deploy exemplary histories in order to justify our own politics and criticize that of our rivals is so powerful, and because the complexity of the intercultural and interreligious challenges we confront today is so great. I offer just two short contemporary examples of such claims in order to support the point.

In September 2006, at the University of Regensburg, Pope Benedict XVI gave a speech entitled “Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections.” In it he used medieval Christian sources to characterize the violent intolerance of Muhammad and his followers. The speech triggered protests, even violence, across large parts of the Muslim world. At the center of the storm were a few short but pregnant lines quoted by the pope from a “Dialogue” that the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus claimed to have had with a learned Muslim in the winter of 1391, when he was himself a soldier fighting in the armies of the Muslim sultan.

Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached. . . . God is not pleased by blood. . . . Faith is born of the soul, not the body. Whoever would lead someone to faith needs the ability to speak well and reason properly, without violence and threats.<sup>6</sup>

Building on such quotes, Benedict went on to claim that Western European Catholicism represents the only successful synthesis in humanity’s dialectical struggle between faith and reason. Modern scientific culture inclines toward an excess of reason. Protestantism, because of its rebellion against scholasticism and Greek philosophy, inclines toward an excess of faith. Islam, on the other hand, represents an extreme subjection to God: pure faith, without reason. This is why, according to the pope, Islam is so violent and intolerant.

This is one strategy for using the medieval past in our present conflict: as evidence that one side is inherently rational and tolerant while the other is not. The pope certainly does not have a monopoly on the approach. In fact it is also a common Islamist strategy. Many Muslim thinkers and writers today point to the fact that large communities of Christians and Jews lived under Islamic rule in the Middle Ages, at a time when Western Christendom was bent on converting, killing, or expelling whatever non-Catholics lived within its boundaries. This is the explicit claim of my second example, article 31 of the Hamas Charter (1988):

The Islamic Resistance Movement is a humanistic movement. . . . Under the wing of Islam it is possible for the followers of the three religions— Islam, Christianity, and Judaism—to coexist in peace and quiet with each other. Peace and quiet are not possible except under the wing of Islam. Past and present history are the best witness to that.<sup>7</sup>

Like Pope Benedict, the drafters of the Hamas Charter look back to the Middle Ages and seize on one strand—albeit a very different strand—of its history in order to argue that Islam is the only religion capable of providing both Truth and tolerance. Each of these claims that one religion is more tolerant than another is made in pursuit of claims to that religion's superiority, and to the inferiority or political exclusion of the other. These claims to tolerance in the past are also claims to power in the present.

For an example of similar dynamics at work in the United States, consider the controversy—after the Islamist bombing of the World Trade Center—over plans to build an Islamic center in Manhattan, a short distance from “Ground Zero,” and name it “Cordoba House.” Some, like the former House Republican leader Newt Gingrich, claimed that the center is intended as a symbol of Muslim conquest over the West, because it is “named for a city in Spain where a conquering Muslim army replaced a church with a mosque. This name is a very direct historical indication that the Ground Zero mosque is all about conquest and thus an assertion of Islamist triumphalism which we should not tolerate.”<sup>8</sup>

The imam leading the effort to build the center, Feisal Abdul Rauf, makes contrasting claims: “For many centuries, Islam inspired a civilization that was particularly tolerant and pluralistic. Many Jewish and Christian artists and intellectuals emigrated to Cordoba during this period to escape the more oppressive regimes that reigned over Europe’s Dark and Middle Ages. Great Jewish philosophers such as Maimonides were free to create their historic works within the pluralistic culture of Islam.”<sup>9</sup> “The . . . name reminds us that

Muslims created what was, in its era, the most enlightened, pluralistic, and tolerant society on earth.”<sup>10</sup>

These quotes were provided to me by a news organization called Media Matters for America, which asked me to comment on the rival claims. “Based on your knowledge of Medieval Spain,” they wrote, “can you help sort out the distortions from the fact? How are we to understand the symbolism of ‘Cordoba?’” Such a question can’t be answered simply by separating fact from distortion. We cannot arbitrate between these claims by marshaling rival historical facts—pointing out against Newt Gingrich, for example, that the Muslim conqueror’s placement of Cordoba’s mosque atop a preexisting church is no more and no less a statement of world-domination than the Christian “reconquerors” placement of a cathedral atop the mosque; or against Imam Abdul Rauf that although Maimonides was indeed born in Cordoba, none of his work was produced in Muslim Spain, because he was just a child when he and all the other Jews of that city were forced to convert to Islam and exiled from the city by its rulers.<sup>11</sup> In order to answer the question of Cordoba’s symbolism, which is also the question about the utility of the past for the present, we need first to come to grips with a much larger question: what kinds of knowledge can the past offer the present?

Let me pause to insist that, in pointing to some similarities in contemporary invocations of history, I am not trying to say that all invocations of the past are the same, or equally valid. Nor am I equating the pope with Hamas, or Hamas with the pope; Newt Gingrich with Feisal Abdul Rauf or vice versa. And I am also not suggesting that only Christian and Islamist movements engage in this use of history, or that it is limited only to questions of religion. We could easily show a similar logic at work in some Zionist arguments about the virtues of a Jewish state, or in some neoliberal arguments about the virtues of American-style democracy. What I am trying to suggest is something much more banal: that when we turn to history—medieval or any other—in order to demonstrate the exemplary virtues of a given culture or religious tradition in comparison with another, we are often re-creating the dynamics we claim to be transcending.

This does not mean that history has nothing to offer us in our present need. But what it has to offer is more or less the opposite of what we often ask it for. So far all the examples I have given are of our asking history to produce exemplary moments to feed our competing fantasies of perfection: it is Europe, or America, or Islam, or Israel that stands for peace, progress, and pluralism, not the other. This demand is as old as history itself: think of Herodotus, deploying his art to imagine the superiority of his Greeks to the “barbarian” Persians.<sup>12</sup>

This use of history to imagine the virtues and the boundaries of one's own community will never disappear: it is one of the primary reasons why people tell stories about the past. But history has something more to offer, and it is that something more that we, as teachers, citizens, and even as policymakers, should be demanding of it. First, we should ask of our histories that rather than confirming our preferred fantasies about the past—our fantasy about the essential tolerance of Christianity and the aggressiveness of Islam, for example, or vice versa—they make us critical of those fantasies. Our sense of the past exercises a powerful influence on how we think we should act in the world. All the more important, then, that our historians help us interrogate that sense of the past, lest we act in the grip of what Johann Gottfried von Herder, referring to European ideas about the history of Islamic Spain, called “a comforting fairy-tale” (“angenehmes Märchen”).<sup>13</sup> I've tried to do some of that interrogating in the first part of this essay, pointing out examples of such fairy tales in our present political and religious discourse.

We might call this critical function of history its “negative role”: to deconstruct the exemplary histories and comforting fairy tales with which we approach our world. But history has “positive” pedagogical functions as well: attention to the long history of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism can help us to rediscover the multiple potentials that exist within all three religions and their scriptural traditions. On questions of pluralism and tolerance, for example, all three scriptural traditions have the potential to legitimate attitudes toward the others which range from extensive toleration to total extermination, from (to choose only among passages in the Gospel of Luke) Jesus's exhortations in the sermon on the plain to “love your enemy” and “offer him your other cheek,” (6:27 and 29) to the nobleman's command in Jesus's parable: “But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them before me”<sup>14</sup> (19:27). Which of these potentials becomes dominant in a given time and place has little to do with some “essential” tolerance or violence of a given scriptural tradition, and everything to do with the specific work that tradition is asked to do in the particular historical circumstances of that given time and place.<sup>15</sup>

For approximately fifteen centuries, Christian theologians worked very hard to explain why killing heretics, Muslims, or Aztecs during Crusade or conquest should be considered an “act of love.”<sup>16</sup> Today few would do so, not because the Scriptures themselves have changed, but because for historical reasons we read those Scriptures in a different way. Conversely, under the pressure of colonialism, ideas about Jihad that would have seemed like heretical innovations to Sunni Muslims from the entire first millennium of Islam,

came to seem normative, traditional, and conservative to many Muslims in the modern age.

I do not mean to imply that one of these attitudes is true to the scriptural tradition and the other is false. Nor am I declaring that all interpretations of Scripture are arbitrary. My point is rather that all three scriptural traditions are rich enough to have generated—and to continue generating—a vast diversity of potential views. And all of these views—insofar as they are generated through and authorized by Scripture—can be understood by those who hold them as continuous with and true to the beliefs of the founding prophetic communities.

For example, on the question of violence and how to treat one's enemies, we might expect the early Christians, powerless and persecuted, to pay more attention to the passage about "turning the other cheek to be struck," whereas it would not be surprising if, as many historians have shown, saints like Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and John Chrysostom, writing once the emperor had become Christian and put his sword at the disposal of the church, began to pay more notice to "slay them before me." Nor would it be surprising—and I add this as something of a response to Pope Benedict's Regensburg address—if the early Islamic community, arising as it did in a context saturated by late antique Christian representations of holy war deployed by the Roman Empire in its long struggle with Persia, should have adopted some of those Christian representations as its own.<sup>17</sup>

"Historicism" is the technical word we use for approaches that pay attention to the multiple meanings produced by myriad communities at diverse moments in time, rather than treating the truths of a religion or a culture as essential and unchanging (a position sometimes loosely associated with "fundamentalism"). It seems banal to point out that this production of new meaning continues in all three religious traditions: the interpretation of Scripture continues to generate not only new beliefs about specific points, but also new scriptural communities (think of the many different evangelical communities that have proliferated in the United States and the Third World over the past forty years, or of the new egalitarian, reconstructionist, and secularist movements in Judaism), and even new religions (such as the Mormons). But I will focus on Islam, because at this moment the fantasy that it is monolithic and unchanging is particularly powerful, both within Islam, and outside of it.

Every student of Islamic history knows that there have always been many different ways to interpret the Prophet's words and actions, resulting in many different scriptural communities. Politicians and newspaper readers have of

late become much more aware of differences between Sunnis and Shi'ites, but there are many more Islamic communities, all based on different understandings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. According to an early tradition, Muhammad himself predicted this process: "Those who were before you of the People of the Book became divided into 72 sects [*milla*], and this community will be divided into 73, 72 in Hell, and one in Paradise."<sup>18</sup>

"The People of the Book became divided": Muhammad is teaching us something important here. The Book, that is to say, the scriptural and prophetic tradition from which Jews, Christians, and Muslims all trace their descent, simultaneously unites the adherents of all three religions into one people, and divides them all into many. This ambivalent promise to unite us in blessing and divide us in dissension seems to me a basic attribute of the scriptural tradition. As the book of Deuteronomy frequently tells the Israelites: read and observe my commandments correctly and you will be blessed, incorrectly and you will be cursed.<sup>19</sup> Much of the Hebrew Bible is a demonstration of how hard it is to get the reading right, and a demonstration of what happens to those who fail to do so.

To put it another way, the very same scriptural "book" that unites all "Peoples of the Book" also divides them, from the first moment of its revelation, in an eternal struggle over how it should be read. It is this struggle that moves the sectarian history of the Abrahamic faiths forward through time, this struggle that explains why God "abhorred the tent of Joseph, and chose not the tribe of Ephraim; but chose the tribe of Judah, the mount Zion which he loved" (Psalm 78:67–68). The same struggle produced the second-Temple Jewish sect that became Christianity. We can see it going on in all the early Christian texts, beginning with the letters of Paul,<sup>20</sup> but my favorite example comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 24.

Two men are talking on the road to Emmaus. A third figure, a stranger, appears on the road. "What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?" "And they stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?' And he said to them, 'What things?' And they said to him, 'Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.'" Contrary to their first impression, their new companion proves to be quite well informed. "'O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' And beginning with

Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:13–35). “Concerning himself,” the gospel says, because of course the stranger was the risen Jesus, although his two disciples did not recognize him till dinnertime and journey’s end. The Gospel is making an important point. If we read the prophecies one way, then Jesus, who was condemned, suffered, and died, cannot be the promised Messiah. But if we read them a different way, then in fact that is exactly what they promised. In order to become Christian you need to learn to read the old books in a new way, and one of the most important tasks of the new books is to teach you how.

The sectarian background of the New Testament is well known. Fewer people are aware that the Qur’an is the product of a similar environment, in which a new sectarian community forms out of the coming together of many existing traditions.<sup>21</sup> The Qur’anic community included rabbinic Jews, Samaritans, Christians of many different stripes, as well as polytheists and followers of earlier prophets to the Arabs. Like the Gospels, the Qur’an sees itself as including and fulfilling all of the prophetic tradition that produced these earlier scriptural communities.<sup>22</sup> Thus at the beginning of Sura 2—“The Cow”—God promises Adam that those who believe in his revelations shall neither fear nor grieve. It is only “those who reject faith and belie our signs,” who need fear. “They shall be companions of the fire. They shall abide therein”<sup>23</sup> (2:39).

This would seem to welcome receivers of previous prophecies, especially the Jews and Christians (the “People of the Book”) who accept God’s prior revelations. But just like the letter of Paul or the Gospels, the Qur’an needs to defend its distinctive readings of those revelations. Thus Sura 2 continues:

O Children of Israel! Call to mind the (special) favor which I bestowed upon you, and fulfill your covenant with me. . . . And believe in what I reveal, confirming the revelation which is within you, and be not the first to reject faith therein, nor sell my signs for a small price; and fear me, and me alone. And cover not truth with falsehood, nor conceal the truth when you know what it is. (2:40–42)

The sura then revisits many of the episodes of Israelite disobedience to God related in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, ranging from their complaints about eating nothing but manna in the desert (2:61) to their attacks on Jesus (“Is it that whenever there comes to you a messenger with what you yourselves do not desire, you are puffed up with pride?—some you call impostors, and others you slay!” [2:87]).

These passages provide excellent examples of how deeply intertwined the Qur'anic community and its emerging Scriptures were with communities and Scriptures of Christians and Jews. The accusation that the Jews always persecute their prophets, frequent in the Qur'an (e.g., 2:61, 87, 91, and in many other suras) has obvious New Testament analogs. Think only of the Acts of the Apostles (7:51–53): “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute?” Today critical scholars of the Qur'an call these analogic moments “intertexts,” and the study of these intertexts is one of the most rapidly expanding fields in Western Qur'anic studies. Many Qur'anic stories about earlier prophets—such as the repeated account of the infant Jesus making birds out of clay which then fly away—that were once thought to be eccentric, we now know came from the community's vast store of Christian and Jewish sacred lore long since lost or marginalized as uncanonical—in this case the Infancy Gospel of Thomas.<sup>24</sup>

Let me dwell for a moment on the well-known intertexts from just one Qur'anic verse, verse 93 of Sura 2, a passage that focuses on the moment of scriptural revelation itself:

And remember we took your covenant and we raised above you (the towering height) of Mount (Sinai) (saying): “Hold firmly to what we have given you and hearken (to the Law)!” They said: “We hear, and we disobey.” And they had to drink into their hearts (of the taint) of the calf because of their faithlessness. (2:93)

“We raised above you Mount Sinai?” (cf. Sura 2:60, 4:153) The line is not to be found in the five books of Moses or the Hebrew Bible. Yet even the geographic vocabulary of the phrase marks it as an “intertext,” for the Qur'an names the mountain not in Arabic (*jabal*), but Aramaic (or Syriac, the language of Christians in the region: the word is the same in both): *Tūr Sīnān* (compare the Targum's *tūrā de-sīnai*). The Qur'an consistently refers (with one exception) to the site of revelation in Aramaic (or Syriac), not Arabic, as in the opening of Sura 52: “By the Mount [*Tūr*] (of revelation)! By a decree inscribed in a scroll unfolded!” The passage is a citation, though it comes not from the written but from the oral Torah, that is, from the Talmud. Commenting on Exodus 19:17 tractate Shabbat reports a discussion of the rabbis:

“And they stood beneath the mount”: R. Abdimi b. Hama b. Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be he, overturned the

mountain upon them like an inverted cask, and said to them “If you take upon yourselves the Law, good. If not, here you will find your grave.” R. Aha b. Jacob observed: “This furnishes a strong protest against the Law.”<sup>25</sup>

Even the devastating line “we hear and we disobey” turns out to be an intertext of sorts. In Exodus (24:7) and Deuteronomy (5:24) the Israelites declare to Moses, “We hear, and obey.” The Qur’an’s transformation of that phrase is a multilingual pun, playing on the homophony between Hebrew *shama’nu v-’asimu* (we hear and obey) and Arabic *sami’inā wa-’aṣaynā*: (we hear and disobey) (Deut. 5:24).<sup>26</sup> The play on words reveals the shared scriptural space of these communities at the same time that it shatters it.

The ambivalence of this gesture is constitutional of the scriptural tradition we call Abrahamic. Much like the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus, the Qur’an is here declaring its continuity with previous scriptures, in this case by maintaining that these prophesied the coming of Muhammad, but that those prophecies were concealed through misreadings or falsifications of the Scriptures by the communities that preserved them. As Sura 4:46 has it, “Of the Jews there are those who displace words from their (right) places and say ‘We hear and we disobey’ . . . with a twist of their tongues and a slander to the faith.” Our multilingual pun, in other words, underwrites the Islamic doctrine of “*taḥrīf*”—the charge of Jewish and Christian alteration and falsification of previous Scriptures—that allows the Islamic community both to honor the previous Scriptures (unlike, for example, the Marcionites in early Christianity) and to set them aside (unlike the Christianity that became orthodox).

I stress the heuristic potential of these intertexts in part because they are among the more self-consciously dialogic passages of Scripture, and can therefore tell us a great deal about the hermeneutic processes of identification and disidentification that produce and maintain sectarian communities within the Abrahamic tradition. Of course these intertexts also remind us of how “multicultural” the early Qur’anic community—like the early Christian and the early rabbinic communities—could be, and thereby open a path toward a historicism that can relativize each tradition’s claims to exclusive truth. Such reminders offer an attractive kind of relief in an age when scriptural traditions seem poised in intractable opposition: the relief that, however badly things have turned out, they could have turned out otherwise. This is the relief that we nowadays call contingency, and unlike Nietzsche, I do not mock it.<sup>27</sup> But it is not the relief that I am after.

In fact my goal is rather to suggest that the historian has more to offer than either (1) exemplary histories of the sort I began by criticizing, or (2) a thoroughly relativizing historicism of the sort I've just described. The history of scriptural interpretation can teach us something much more radical: it can teach us that Scripture itself does not force us to choose between historicism and faith, or between an awareness of the constant transformation of the beliefs and practices of historical religious communities, and a belief in our own adherence to revealed truths. It allows us, if we wish, to maintain both. The scriptural tradition itself enjoins the ongoing struggle to read it correctly; legitimates the multiple readings that emerge from that struggle in different times and places; emphasizes the inexhaustibility of those readings; and sometimes even reminds us that it is not given to any human in this world to determine which of those readings is definitive. Seen in this light, historicism can become one of the tools by which Scripture generates its own critique, revealing new truths for new times, but sustaining the understandability of all of these new truths—again, if we so wish to understand them—as implicit in Scripture from its very origins in God.

The Qur'an, for example (I focus my concluding observations on Islam for reasons both political and pedagogical, but the same could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, for the Jewish and the Christian Scriptures), often reminds us that its truths are divine, that those truths have the power to save us, and that we must therefore struggle to read the Scripture correctly. In this sense the so-called Islamist fundamentalists are right, and this is the struggle that they focus on. But we must not forget that the Qur'an itself can correctly be read to comment on its own exegesis in ways that authorize believers to read and interpret it, and that it legitimates the many different readings that emerge from the struggle of those believers to do so in different times and places.

For although the Qur'an often proclaims itself a "book wherein there is no doubt," it is also aware that, when subjected—as it must be—to human interpretation, Scripture will inevitably generate doubt and conflict. In the words of Sura 3:7:

He . . . revealed unto you the Scripture in which there are clear revelations [*muḥkamāt*] . . . , and others which are ambiguous [*mutashābihāt*]. But those in whose hearts is deviation [*zaygh*] pursue the ambiguous, seeking dissension [*fitna*] and seeking to interpret it [*ta'wīlīhī*]. But no one knows its explanations except God. And those who are firmly grounded in the knowledge say: "We believe therein; the whole of it is from our Lord." None will grasp the message except men of understanding.<sup>28</sup>

John Wansbrough once called this passage “the point of departure for all scriptural exegesis.”<sup>29</sup> In order to understand why, we have to notice, not only its distinction between clear and ambiguous revelations, but also an ambiguity within the canonical text of the Qur’an itself. Depending on where we choose to insert a reading pause, the passage “wa-mā ya’lamu ta’wīlahū illā llāhu wa-l-rāsikhūna fī l-’ilmi yaqūlūna āmannā bihī kullun min ‘indi rabbinā wa-mā yadhdkkaru illā ulū l-albābi” can be translated in ways that give sharply divergent scope to interpretation. The translation above suggests that only God can interpret the ambiguous passages. But if we pause instead a little later in our reading, the sense is very different: “None knows its explanation save God and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge. Say: we believe therein.” In other words, even this self-reflective verse of revelation warning of the dangers of ambiguity is itself ambiguous, claiming simultaneously both that the ambiguous verses of Scripture can be understood by (at least some) believers, and that they cannot.

We know that the earliest Qur’anic communities wrestled with this ambiguity, because we have precanonical variants (that is, versions that predate the canonical Uthmanic redaction) of the verse that avoid it. It seems all the more significant that the canonical version chose to preserve the ambivalence, even if the standard readings (and translations) later editors have offered often attempt to contain it. (The widely reprinted Qur’anic text approved by al-Azhar in 1344/1925–26 places the pausal abbreviation *mīm* [i.e., *al-waqf al-lāzim*] above the word *Allāhu*, making the standard reading obligatory. Other modern editions and printings, however, choose to mark it differently.)<sup>30</sup>

Across the long history of Qur’an interpretation, the canonical ambivalence of these verses has nourished those who would expand human hermeneutic agency. It was, for example, on the basis of this ambivalence that the Muslim philosopher and jurist Ibn Rushd (Averroës, d. 595/1198) erected his doctrine of a twofold path. According to him the mass of believers should restrict their Qur’anic hermeneutics to the clear verses: “They should be told that it is ambiguous, and known by no one except God; and that the pausal stop should be put here after the sentence ‘And no one knows the interpretation thereof except God.’” But “those firmly rooted in knowledge” (by which Ibn Rushd meant philosophers) could and should interpret the “ambiguous” verses of the Qur’an in pursuit of allegorical truths, which sometimes seemed to contradict the “clear” ones.<sup>31</sup>

Twentieth-century exegetes, like their medieval predecessors, have also insisted on the Qur’an’s multiple teachings. For example, the Sudanese scholar Mahmoud Muhammad Taha taught—in opposition to the attempts of Islamist

parties like the Muslim Brotherhood to impose Shari'a law—that the Qur'an has many layers of meaning.<sup>32</sup> In particular, he drew a distinction between the teachings that the Prophet addressed to the needs and circumstances of his followers in the Arabian desert in the seventh-century, and the teachings he addressed to the vast future of humanity.<sup>33</sup> According to Taha, the Shari'a law that Islamic parties wanted to impose on the Sudan was a relic of that early message, whereas the Prophet, through his life and example (Sunnah), had modeled different teachings for different futures, including modernity.<sup>34</sup>

Taha made his points through the Qur'an. In the verse “Every day He (shines) in (new) splendor,” (55:29), he saw evidence that the Qur'an is full of teachings that await discovery, teachings that make new and evolving sense of the world as it changes.<sup>35</sup> (Compare the comment of a prominent twelfth-century Jewish exegete: “The *pshat* [the plain sense of Scripture] renews itself every day.”)<sup>36</sup> He pointed out that the Qur'an itself emphasizes the inexhaustibility of those readings: “If the ocean were ink (wherewith to write out) the words of my Lord, sooner would the ocean be exhausted than would the words of my Lord”<sup>37</sup> (Q 18:109). (Compare John 21:25: “But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”) And against claims to supreme exegetical authority, he stressed its insistence that it is not given to any human in this world to determine which of those readings is definitive (“over all endued with knowledge is One, the All-Knowing,” Q 12:76).<sup>38</sup> In other words, Taha insisted that the Qur'an itself contains and authorizes the “historicism” and “pluralism” that can constrain its own “fundamentalism.”

To pick a concrete example, on the question of Islamic politics toward non-Muslims, the Qur'an had taught—according to Taha—the Shari'a of Jihad to an infant Islam: “Slay the pagans wherever you find them . . . but if they repent, and establish regular prayers and practice regular charity, then open the way for them” (9:5). A more mature teaching came in Sura 3:159: “It is part of the mercy of Allah that you deal gently with them. If you were severe or harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about you: so pass over (their faults), and ask for (Allah's) forgiveness for them; and consult them in affairs. . . . Then, when you have taken a decision, put your trust in Allah.” But the pinnacle of the Qur'an's teaching expressed a very different relationship between prophecy and politics, addressed to a more perfect Islam: “Therefore you give admonition, for you are one to admonish. You are not one to manage (men's) affairs”<sup>39</sup> (88:21–22).

Mahmoud Muhammad Taha was executed by the Nimeiri regime in January 1985.<sup>40</sup> Shari'a law was imposed in the Sudan, with genocidal

consequences. But neither Taha's death, nor the defeat of his ideas at that particular moment in history, make his teachings less essentially "Islamic" than those of the victors. They remain a potential vision of Islam, one of the many contained in the inexhaustible sea of ink that is Scripture.

The discovery of these scriptural constraints to the claims of exclusive truth, the revelation of this divinely authorized historicism: this is, it seems to me, an important "positive" task not just for the historian, but for all who teach or study these Scriptures and the communities of belief that have formed around those Scriptures, Christian and Jewish, as well as Islamic. In saying this, I do not mean to endorse specific "policy" projects, such as the White House's "National Strategy for Combating Terrorism" of February 2003. That strategy called for establishing a Muslim World Outreach program that would train Islamic preachers, support Islamic schools that counter the teachings of so-called fundamentalist madrassas, and attempt to reshape the content of religious debate in Muslim countries. That same year the National Security Division of the Rand Corporation published a report entitled *Civil and Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, Strategies* that called for U.S. government support of Islamic reformers who teach what the report referred to as "historicizing" interpretations of the Qur'an. By 2005 the U.S. budget for all such activities was approximately \$1.3 billion.<sup>41</sup>

I do not myself believe that such efforts in religious "reeducation" can prove effective without simultaneous (and vast) political and economic efforts at a global level. The ways in which believers read their Scriptures, the kinds of readings they find convincing, the resonances those readings have for them: these are not independent of the kinds of political, economic, and social pressures those readers and their communities face. But I also do not believe that we should condemn such efforts, as some of my colleagues do, as attempts to impose Western secularism on Islam.<sup>42</sup> As I briefly tried to suggest, "historicist" and "pluralist" positions are just as present in the Qur'an and in the long history of Islam as "fundamentalist" and "Islamist" ones are, and the rediscovery of those positions is no more an un-Islamic imposition than the mid- to late-twentieth century rediscovery of medieval "fundamentalists" through the writings of such medieval theologians as Ibn Taymiyyah.<sup>43</sup> Besides, should those efforts succeed, and "fundamentalist" visions of Islam lose ground to "historicist" ones, it will not be because of American dollars, but primarily for the same reasons that those fundamentalist visions themselves became so influential in the second half of the twentieth century: because they became meaningful and convincing to millions of believers struggling to make sense of their changing world.

The reader will surely be aware, after this mad dash through several thousand years and three Scriptures, that my essay is as much sermon as science. For the sake of clarity, I might summarize the sermon as two reductively opposed lessons. First the “negative” lesson: no scriptural tradition has “the answer.” All are capable of generating violence, intolerance, exclusion. It is simply not true that the world would live in peace if Muslims and Jews turned to Pope Benedict’s beloved *logos* from the Gospel of John, or if Jews and Christians were ruled by Hamas’s Qur’an. Even if the entire world converted to one Scripture, the very nature of the scriptural traditions means that their reading would continue to generate new sects and new conflicts.

And then the “positive”: every scriptural tradition has “the answer,” insofar as each is capable of generating tolerance, inclusion, equality, freedom, or whatever other values the societies reading them come to deem important. It is simply not true—to choose only one Western version of a widespread fallacy, that of Jean-Luc Nancy—that the teachings of Jesus are capable of generating their own critique, whereas those of Muhammad are not.<sup>44</sup> We can learn to read each of the scriptural traditions in ways that expand the space for religious freedom—extending even to freedom *from* religion!—if that is what we want to do, while at the same time maintaining—again, if we wish to do so—the conviction that these truths we derive from Scripture are God-given.

This is not what the U.S. military calls “actionable intelligence.” The ways in which communities read their Scriptures are not random: they are the product of habit and custom, and changing them requires effort on the part of teachers and readers everywhere. But neither is the situation hopeless. All of our scriptural communities have changed their reading habits many times over the centuries. (The shift in Catholic teachings about Jews after WWII provides one notable example.) As the thousands of reform movements in the contemporary Muslim, Jewish, and Christian worlds make clear, they are still doing so today. How can teachers of medieval history best help the efforts of all these “peoples of the book?” Perhaps by reminding them that “the book” is not written in stone, and that the people have the power to reshape its meanings.

43. See still Gaines Post, “Masters’ Salaries and Student-Fees in the Mediaeval Universities,” *Speculum* 7 (1932): 181–98. The issue entered canon law under the larger rubric of possible “crimes”: *Decretales* 5.5, ed. E. Friedberg, *Corpus iuris canonici* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1879) II, 767–71.

44. A recent orientation: Gregory M. Sadlek, *Idleness Working: The Discourse of Love’s Labor from Ovid through Chaucer and Gower* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004).

45. Ailred of Rievaulx, *De speculo caritatis* II.4–16, ed. A. Hoste and C.H. Talbot (Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis 1; Turnhout: Brepols, 1971), 67–74 (with explicit reference to Paul on laboring for one’s bread, here applied to internal work).

46. I have dealt with this earlier in *Rupert of Deutz*, for instance, 276, and more recently in “Wrestling with the Word: Rupert’s Quest for Exegetical Understanding,” in: *Rupert von Deutz—Ein Denker zwischen den Zeiten*, ed. Heinz Finger, Harold Horst, and Rainer Klotz (Libelli rhenani 31, Cologne: Erzbischöfliche Diözesan- und Dombibliothek, 2009), 185–99.

47. Rupert, *Commentaria in euangelium sancti Johannis*, ed. Haacke (Corpus Christianorum 9, Turnhout: Brepols, 1969), 1; Rupert, *De glorificatione trinitatis*: PL 169.11.

48. See for instance Rupert, *In Apocalypsim*: PL 169.825–28.

49. Giles Constable, *The Letters of Peter the Venerable* (Cambridge 1967), no. 20, 38–39.

50. Petrus Damiani, *Die Briefe* 62, ed. Kurt Reindel (Die Briefe der deutschen Kaiserzeit IV, Hannover: Monumenta Germaniae Historica, 1988) II, 219. My translation is deliberately slightly more literal than that of Owen Blum, *Letters 61–90* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 14.

51. Petrus Damiani, *Letter* 54, ed. Reindel II, 145.

52. *Ibid.*, 96, ed. Reindel III, 47.

53. *Ibid.*, 49, ed. Reindel II, 77.

54. *Ibid.*, 77, ed. Reindel II, 385.

55. *Ibid.*, 100, ed. Reindel III, 105, 102–3.

56. Joachim, *Tractatus in expositionem vite et regule beati Benedicti* III.6, ed. Alexander Patschovsky (Rome: Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo, 2008), 254–58.

57. *Ibid.*, III.5, ed. Patschovsky, 243.

58. Joachim, *Psalterium decem cordarum* II (IV.4), ed. Kurt-Victor Selge (Quellen zur Geschichte des Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters 20, Hannover: MGH, 2009), 285.

59. Joachim, *Tractatus* IV.4, II.3, ed. Patschovsky, 189–90, 193, 304–5.

60. *Ibid.* III.6, 274.

61. *Ibid.* II.2B, IV.4, ed. Patschovsky, 170, 304–5.

62. Joachim, *Psalterium* II[II.2], ed. Selge, 123–29. Joachim says people might find the analogy to coins more apt (*congruentius*).

63. *Ibid.* II[II.4], ed. Selge, 137–39.

## Chapter 4

1. Cited in Richard Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 99–100. Emphasis added.

2. Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (summer 1993): 35. For “bloody borders” see Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 258.

3. Bulliet, *Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization*, 9–13.

4. *The Joint Declaration of the Paris Summit of the Mediterranean* can be accessed at the Union for the Mediterranean’s website: <http://www.ufmsecretariat.org/en/institutional-documents>.

5. Cf. Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” VII: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1977).

6. The official translation of Benedict XVI’s speech is available on the Vatican’s website, at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html). For a much more extended version of the arguments I am presenting in this section of this paper, see my “Judentum und Islam in der europäischen Dialektik von Glaube und Vernunft: Anmerkungen zur Geschichtstheologie Papst Benedikts XVI,” in *Religionskontroversen im Verfassungsstaat*, ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Astrid Reuter (Göttingen: Verlag Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 181–207.

7. [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/hamas.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp). For a slightly different translation, see <http://www.thejerusalemfund.org/www.thejerusalemfund.org/carryover/documents/charter.html>.

8. All quotes in this and the following paragraph were provided to me by Media Matters for America.

9. See the introduction to Rauf’s *What’s Right with Islam: A New Vision for Muslims and the West* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 2.

10. *Ibid.*, 275.

11. See Joel Kraemer, *Maimonides: the Life and World of One of Civilization’s Greatest Minds* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 37–41, and Sarah Stroumsa, *Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 8–10, 59–61.

12. Throughout his *Persian Wars*, trans. A. D. Godley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920–25), Herodotus switches freely between “barbarians” and “Persians” when naming the enemy of the Greeks. This does not mean, of course, that Herodotus cannot also use comparisons with the Persians to criticize the Greeks.

13. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität*, in Herder, *Werke*, edited by Martin Bollacher et al., Bd. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker, 1991), 475, 483.

14. All NT translations quoted here are from the Revised Standard Version. Hebrew Bible quotations are from the JPS translation.

15. Some modern New Testament commentators argue that these words should not be attributed to Christ. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3rd ed., ed. Michael Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), for example, suggests that Luke 19:11–27 be read as a parable alluding to the uneasy succession from Herod to Archelaus in 4 BCE. The “voice” commanding execution would then be that of Archelaus, not Jesus. Nevertheless many early Christian thinkers, ignorant of modern scholarship and apologetics, read these passages as authentic quotations of Jesus.

See, e.g., John Chrysostom's use of the "slay them before me" passage in *Against the Jews*, I.2 (PG 48.846).

16. See Jonathan Riley-Smith, "Crusading as an Act of Love," *History* 65, no. 214 (June 1980): 177–92.

17. Michael Gaddis, *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Brent D. Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). On the relationship between Christian imperial Holy War and early Islamic ideas about sacred violence, see Tom Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

18. The tradition is discussed in Uri Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur'an: the Children of Israel and the Islamic Self-Image* (Princeton: Darwin, 1999), 137. Cf. 117–46.

19. Deuteronomy 27–28.

20. Galatians 3:15–17 (on what the "seed of Abraham" means) and 4:29–31 (on the difference between children born to a slave as opposed to a free woman), or Romans 4:2–4 (where Paul's interpretation of Genesis 15:6 undergirds the entire doctrine of justification by faith).

21. My use of the term *sectarian community* owes a great deal to the observations of John Wansbrough *The Sektarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

22. On the many prophetic traditions within the Qur'an, see Brannon Wheeler, *Prophets in the Qur'an: An Introduction to the Qur'an and Muslim Exegesis* (London: Continuum, 2002). For Judaeo-Christians, see S. Pines, "Notes on Islam and on Arabic Christianity and Judaeo-Christianity," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 4 (1984): 135–52. On the Samaritans see the article by John Bowman, "Banū Isrā'īl in the Qur'ān," *Islamic Studies* 2 (1963): 447–55, who argues that many Samaritans greeted Muhammad as the "prophet like unto Moses" promised in Deuteronomy 18:18. See also P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 14–15, 21–28. On the importance of Syriac Christian gospel commentaries and traditions in the Qur'anic community, see Joseph Witztum, "The Foundations of the House (Q 2:127)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 72 (2009): 25–40, as well as the same author's forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation (Princeton University). For some new methodological approaches to the study of intertexts, see Dirk Hartwig, Walter Homolka, Michael Marx, and Angelika Neuwirth, eds., "In Vollen Licht der Geschichte:" *Die Wissenschaft des Judentums und die Anfänge der kritischen Koranforschung*, Ex Oriente Lux 8 (Würzburg: Ergon, 2008).

23. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Qur'an (henceforth Q) are from *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, trans. 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, 11th ed. (Amana Publications: Beltsville, MD, 2006).

24. On this see, among others: Cornelia Horn, "Syriac and Arabic Perspectives on Structural and Motif Parallels Regarding Jesus' Childhood in Christian Apocrypha and Early Islamic Literature: the 'Book of Mary', the *Arabic Apocryphal Gospel of John* and the Qur'an," *Apocrypha* 19 (2008): 267–91; Neal Robinson, "Creating Birds from Clay: A Miracle of Jesus in the Qur'an and Classical Muslim Exegesis," *Muslim World* 79, no. 1 (1989): 1–13.

25. Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88a. See also BT Avoda Zara. Other Aggadic traditions derive the same story from Cant. 8.5, “Under the Apple tree did I stir thee up:” Midrash shir-ha-shirim (ed. L. Grünhaut, Jerusalem), 47b. and Cant. Rabba 45a col. B (top).

26. The Qur’anic transformation of this phrase, however, was itself deeply influenced by rabbinic Jewish commentaries, as Julian Obermann brilliantly demonstrated in “Koran and Agada: The Events at Mount Sinai,” *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 58 (1941): 23–48. See also G. D. Newby, “Arabian Jewish history in the Sīrah,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 7 (1986): 121–38, here 136–38; and I. de Mateo, “Il Tahrīf od alterazione della Bibbia secondo i musulmani,” *Bessarione* 38 (1922): 64–111, 223–360.

27. See Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 57–124.

28. Italics added. On these terms see L. Kinberg, “*Muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt* (Koran 3/7): Implications of a Koranic pair of terms in Medieval Exegesis,” *Arabica* 35 (1988): 143–72.

29. John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2004), 149.

30. There is an important bibliography on this verse, its variant versions, and its vocabulary. See above all Stefan Wild, “The Self-Referentiality of the Qur’ān: Sura 3:7 as an Exegetical Challenge,” in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 421–36.

31. See Friedrich Niewöhner, “Zum Ursprung von der Lehre von der doppelten Wahrheit: Eine Koran-Interpretation des Averroes,” in *Averroismus im Mittelalter und in der Renaissance*, ed. F. Niewöhner and Loris Sturlese (Zurich: Spur, 1994), 23–41. The translation is by George F. Hourani, *Averroes on the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy* (London: Luzac, 1961), 66. The Arabic is in Ibn Rushd, *Kitāb faṣl al-maqāl wa-taqrīr mā bayna sharī’a wa-l-ḥikma mina l-ittiṣāl*, ed. Albert N. Nader (Beirut: n.p., 1961), 53. Cf. *Kitāb faṣl al-maqāl*, 38–39. I say “seemed” in order to avoid opining on the question—contentious long before Leo Strauss and his followers highlighted its relevance for modern thought—of whether or not Ibn Rushd believed that the two truths did indeed contradict each other.

32. The most important work of Taha’s that has been translated into English is *The Second Message of Islam*, trans. Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987). On the life of Ustadh Mahmoud see An-Na’im’s introduction to *The Second Message*, as well as his article “The Islamic Law of Apostasy and its Modern Applicability: a Case from the Sudan,” *Religion* 16, no. 3 (1986): 197–224 (written in response to Taha’s 1985 execution by the regime of President Numeiri). Taha was first known as a leader in the Sudanese independence movement, and later as a major figure in that country’s Republican Party. Numeiri banned Taha from lecturing publicly (in 1973), then imprisoned him (1983–84), and finally had him condemned and executed him. For fuller treatment, see Mohamed A. Mahmoud, *Quest for Divinity: A Critical Examination of the Thought of Mahmud Muhammad Taha* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), esp. 12–40.

33. Jews might think here of parallels with the “Doctrine of Accommodation” developed by Maimonides, a doctrine he himself described with a word adapted from the Qur’an: *talattuf*, God’s “shrewdness in the service of loving kindness.” The theme runs throughout the *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedlander (New York: Dover, 1956), but see 3.29–50. Christians might think of parallels with I Corinthians 3:1–2: “I fed you with milk and not solid food, for you were not able to take it.”

34. On Taha’s flexible and contextual style of Qur’anic hermeneutics, see Mahmoud, *Quest for Divinity*, 97–99 (“The Qur’an as Open Text”) and 100–104 (“Interpretive Strategies”). On Taha’s philosophy of history, see *ibid.*, 132–38. Taha’s point is summarized nicely in *ibid.*, 177: “Islam is historical, and by virtue of this historicity it assumes a changeable and mutable nature that allows it not only to respond to the needs of past societies but also to the more complex needs of present-day global societies.”

35. Taha, *Second Message*, 165: “God wishes us to have more of His knowledge every moment. He says: ‘Everyday He [reveals Himself] in a fresh state’” (55.29).

36. “*Ha-peshtot ha-methadshim be-khol yom*” Rashbam, *Commentary on the Pentateuch (Perush ha-Torah)* (Jerusalem: Hotsa’at Sefarim Horev, 2009), 37, 2. The passage was brought to my attention by Israel Yuval.

37. Taha, *Second Message*, 149: “For this reason it is false to assert that the Qur’an may be finally and conclusively explained.”

38. *Ibid.*, 169.

39. Cf. *ibid.*, 166, for his citations of 9:5, 3:159, and 88:21–22, though he cites those same verses throughout his work.

40. For more on Numeiri’s imposition of Shari’a law to the detriment of women and non-Muslim Sudanese, see Ann M. Lesch, “The Fall of Numeiri,” *University Field Staff International Reports* 9 (1985): 1–14, esp. 9–10 on “Islamization.” See also *ibid.*, 11, on the hanging of Taha and the humiliation of the Republicans.

41. The 2003 document is available at <http://archive.org/details/nationalstrategy29185gut>. The 2006 update can be found at <http://www.cfr.org/terrorism/national-strategy-combating-terrorism-2006/p11389>. Cheryl Benard, *Civil and Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, Strategies* (Pittsburgh: Rand Corporation, 2003).

42. Saba Mahmood, “Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation,” *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006): 323–47. The figure of \$1.3 billion is provided by Mahmood, 330.

43. On the reappropriation of Ibn Taymiyya, see *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, ed. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), especially the essay by Mona Hassan, “Modern Interpretations and Misinterpretations of a Medieval Scholar: Apprehending the Political Thought of Ibn Taymiyya,” 338–66. An argument against the categorization of Ibn Taymiyya as a fundamentalist or “extremist” can be found in Yahya Michot, *Muslims under Non-Muslim Rule: Ibn Taymiyya*, trans. Jamil Qureshi (Oxford: Interface, 2006). See also Jon Hoover’s *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), which even suggests the presence of “rationalistic” and “egalitarian” possibilities in his writings.

44. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

# FAITHFUL NARRATIVES

HISTORIANS, RELIGION, AND  
THE CHALLENGE OF OBJECTIVITY

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