

The Quranic Jesus


Prophet and Scapegoat

John Ranieri

ABSTRACT A major theme in René Girard's work involves the role of the Bible in exposing the scapegoating practices at the basis of culture. The God of the Bible is understood to be a God who takes the side of victims. The God of the Qur'an is also a defender of victims, an idea that recurs throughout the text in the stories of messengers and prophets. In a number of ways, Jesus is unique among the prophets mentioned in the Qur'an. It is argued here that while the Quranic Jesus is distinctly Islamic, and not a Christian derivative, he functions in the Qur'an in a way analogous to the role Jesus plays in the gospels. In its depiction of Jesus, the Qur'an is acutely aware of mimetic rivalry, scapegoating, and the God who comes to the aid of the persecuted. Despite the significant differences between the Christian understanding of Jesus as savior and the way he is understood in the Qur'an, a Girardian interpretation of the Quranic Jesus will suggest ways in which Jesus can be a bridge rather than an obstacle in Christian/Muslim dialogue.

KEYWORDS Bible; Girard, René; Jesus; mimetic theory; prophet; Qur'an; scapegoating

✉ John Ranieri, Seton Hall University, 400 South Orange Avenue, South Orange, New Jersey, 07079, USA
✉ John.Ranieri@shu.edu ☎ 0000-0002-7071-2287

©  FORUM PHILOSOPHICUM 24 (2019) no. 1, 183–220
ISSN 1426-1898 E-ISSN 2353-7043

SUBM. 27 June 2019 Acc. 2 August 2019
Doi:10.35765/forphil.2019.2401.07

In the thought of René Girard, the Jesus of the Gospels is of decisive significance in disclosing the scapegoating at the basis of culture, with his crucifixion representing the culmination of the biblical affirmation that God takes the side of victims.¹ But what of the Jesus of the Qur'an? Is the Qur'anic Jesus depicted in a way that continues and reaffirms the insight into victimization evident in the earlier Abrahamic traditions?² Girard himself does not address this question. His references to Islam are few, his references to the Qur'an even fewer, and he does not discuss the Qur'anic Jesus at all.³ I have chosen, therefore, to explore the question in light of his thought. But before turning to the Qur'an, it may be helpful to be as clear as possible about what this essay is and what it is not intended to be. First of all, it is an attempt to take insights from Girard's mimetic theory and bring them to bear on the figure of Jesus in the Qur'an. Although it is clear from his writings that Girard has some familiarity with biblical scholarship, he is not (and never claimed to be) a biblical exegete in the technical sense of someone interested in the intricacies of source, redaction, or literary criticism, or in other forms of historical-critical method. For the most part he is content to come to the biblical text as it is in its present form, interpreting it from the perspective of mimetic theory. This will be the approach taken here with regard to the Qur'an. Questions concerning the dating and chronological order of the surahs, the ascertaining of the specific context of the "occasions of revelation," and the relationship between the Qur'an and the Jewish and Christian scriptures are certainly interesting and worth pursuing. But such questions are not the focus here. The Qur'an now exists as a written text, and the goal of this essay is to interpret what this text

1. René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 87–94.

2. Other authors who have discussed Girard's theory in relation to Islam include: Robert J. Daly, "Girard and World Religions: The State of the Question," in *Mimetic Theory and World Religions*, ed. Wolfgang Palaver and Richard Schenk (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 181–93; Michael Kirwan, "René Girard and World Religions," in *Mimetic Theory and World Religions*, ed. Wolfgang Palaver and Richard Schenk (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 195–213; Wolfgang Palaver, "The Abrahamic Revolution," in *Mimetic Theory and World Religions*, ed. Wolfgang Palaver and Richard Schenk (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 259–78.

3. Some places where Girard makes mention of Islam are: Girard, *I See Satan*, 122; René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 4–5; René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversation with Benoît Chantre* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 41–2, 67, 176, 207–9, 211–6. René Girard, "What Is Occurring Today Is a Mimetic Rivalry on a Planetary Scale: An Interview by Henri Tinq," *Le Monde*, accessed November 6, 2001, trans. for COV&R by James Williams https://www.uibk.ac.at/theol/cover/girard/le_monde_interview.html

says about Jesus through the lens of mimetic theory. Given the incredibly rich history of Qur'anic interpretation, it almost goes without saying that I make no claim to have unlocked the "true" meaning of the Qur'an through an application of Girard's thought. What I offer is rather a possible reading of the text, illuminated by some of Girard's anthropological insights. Girard never argues that his anthropological reading of biblical texts exhausts their meaning; nor do I make any such extravagant claims in my analysis. Just as Girard insists that his analyses can be seen as complementing religious and theological understandings, my analysis here can be understood in similar fashion.⁴ It also needs to be made clear from the start that I am not writing about the figure of Jesus as he appears throughout Islamic tradition. This is an essay about the Jesus of the Qur'an. Finally, I would underscore the fact that this is not a comparison of the Jesus of the New Testament with the Jesus of the Qur'an. Given that Girard discovers anthropological insights in the Bible, it is unavoidable that reference will be made to the biblical text when applying his theory to the Qur'an. But it must be kept in mind that the insights so derived are anthropological in nature. To bring the insights Girard draws from the Bible to bear on the Islamic text is in no way meant to subject that text to a religiously inspired litmus test. Throughout this essay I try to remain faithful to Girard's method—a method rooted in the social sciences rather than theology.⁵ It follows, then, that what I offer here is not an exercise in comparative religion or theology. The figure of Jesus in the Qur'an has an integrity of its own apart from any comparison with the Gospels or later Christian tradition. After a brief introduction pointing out those aspects of Girard's thought which I believe to be pertinent to a discussion of the Qur'anic Jesus, I provide an account of how Jesus is presented in the Qur'an. The essay concludes with a consideration of how Girard's insights might be helpful in understanding the Jesus portrayed in the Qur'an, and how his depiction there continues the anthropological revelation Girard finds to be disclosed in the earlier Abrahamic traditions.

I. DEFENDER OF VICTIMS

The Bible takes the side of victims. Those familiar with Girard's writings will recognize this insight as one of the three pillars of his thought. Following upon his articulation of the mimetic nature of desire and the

4. Girard, *I See Satan*, 190–2.

5. John Ranieri, "An Epistemology of Revelation," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion*, ed. James Alison and Wolfgang Palaver (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 176.

role of scapegoating in the origins of culture, his claims about the Bible constitute the third (and for some, the most controversial) fundamental insight animating his work. In portraying God as siding with victims, the biblical text exposes and problematizes the workings of the single victim mechanism.⁶ With characteristic humility, Girard makes no claim to have been the first to discover that at the basis of culture and society there is a surrogate victim. He willingly concedes that this knowledge has already been revealed through the biblical text:

The revelation of the surrogate victim as the founding agent in all religion and culture is something that neither our world as a whole nor any one particularly ‘gifted’ individual can claim to have discovered. Everything is already revealed ... [The Bible] has no other function than to unearth victims of collective violence and to reveal their innocence. There is nothing hidden. There is no secret dimension that the interpreter must painstakingly seek to discover.⁷

Crucial to comprehending Girard’s theory is the recognition that collective violence works only to the extent that those who scapegoat misunderstand what they are actually doing. Persecutors do not collectively agree to destroy innocent persons; they must be convinced that they are punishing the guilty. The innocence of the victims must remain unacknowledged if scapegoating is to be effective.⁸ People do not join together to organize scapegoating expeditions, but they are quite capable of being worked into a frenzy in their zeal to destroy the perceived evildoers in their midst. In their self-understanding, mobs are never wrong, and the stories they tell about their communities and their origins are what are commonly described as myths. Myths, in Girard’s view, are stories told from the perspective of

6. René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 17. Girard distinguishes between the actual practice of scapegoating as mentioned in Leviticus 16:1–34 and the more generic colloquial form of usage in which it refers to any attempt to unify a group at the expense of someone or some few who are persecuted, expelled, or killed. In this latter sense, he refers to the practice as the “single victim mechanism.” Sometimes he uses the two terms interchangeably—a practice I will follow here.

7. René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 138. Girard’s claim that the Bible has “no other function” than to reveal the innocence of victims must be understood in anthropological rather than theological terms. He is not speaking here of the Bible’s role in salvation, but of its effects on culture.

8. René Girard, *Reading the Bible with René Girard: conversations with Steven E. Berry*, ed. Michael Hardin (Lancaster, PA: JDL Press, 2015), 54, 84; James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 10.

scapegoaters, in which the voices of victims are not permitted to emerge: they represent the persecutors' retrospective vision of their own persecution. The Bible is the quintessential anti-mythical text in that it brings the practice of scapegoating out into the open, exposes the delusions under which scapegoaters operate, and portrays God as taking the side of victims.⁹ There is a victim behind the mythic text, but the text needs to be decoded in order for this to be uncovered. It is here that the anthropological revelation of scapegoating in the Bible becomes an invaluable hermeneutical tool. Throughout the Bible, "the collective violence that constitutes the hidden infrastructure of all mythology begins to emerge, and it emerges as unjustified or arbitrary."¹⁰

In the case of the biblical prophets, Girard finds an intense focus on the plight of victims accompanied by a sharp critique of sacrifice and myth. In challenging the status quo and denouncing the aberrant practices of Israelite society, the prophets incur the wrath of kings, priests, and the people. Those who announce God's judgment on their communities are liable to become victims, and the prophets are persecuted and sometimes killed. The prophets stand out among their own people, and this in itself makes them susceptible to victimization:

It is clearly mimetic contagion that explains the hatred of the masses for exceptional persons, such as Jesus and all the prophets ... The prophets are the preferential victims of this process, a little like all *exceptional* persons, individuals who are *different*. The reasons for exceptional status are diverse. The victims can be those who limp, the disabled, the poor, the disadvantaged, individuals who are mentally-retarded, and also great religious figures, like Jesus or the Jewish prophets or now, in our own day, great artists or thinkers. All peoples have a tendency to reject, under some pretext or another, the individuals who don't fit their conception of what is normal and acceptable. If we compare the Passion to the narratives of the violence suffered by the prophets, we confirm that in both cases the episodes of violence are definitely either directly collective in character or of collective inspiration.¹¹

In Girard's judgment, the exposure of scapegoating and the identification of God with victims reaches its maximum degree of clarity in the Gospels, particularly in the Passion narratives. In these accounts, the recognition

9. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 147–8; Girard, *The Girard Reader*, 267.

10. Girard, *The Girard Reader*, 17.

11. Girard, *I See Satan*, 26.

of God's identification with the victim reaches its zenith. Treated unjustly, Jesus is quite conscious of standing within a long line of prophets who preceded him: "If we recognize in the Crucifixion what is typical, even banal, we can then understand one of the themes of Jesus, which is the resemblance between his own death and the persecution of many prophets before him ... The resemblance of Jesus to the prophets is perfectly real ... so it is necessary to interpret very concretely the statement of Jesus about the analogy between his own death and that of the prophets."¹²

Unlike myths, the gospels clearly proclaim the innocence of Jesus. The community which affirms his divinity is a minority who break with the persecuting majority, and in so doing they deprive the single victim mechanism of its ability to generate unity. In myth, it would be the persecutors themselves who would transform the victim into a divine figure; in the gospels it is those who are able to escape the centrifugal force of mimetic contagion who acclaim Jesus as divine. And whereas in myth, the transfigured, often divinized victim is often depicted as responsible for the problems which previously beset the community, in the case of Jesus the community which honors him as divine savior affirms his complete innocence. Finally, as a sign of just how much the gospels are aware of what they are doing, Girard calls attention to the passage in the Gospel according to Luke (23:34) in which the crucified Jesus says from the cross: "Father, forgive them because they don't know what they are doing." Girard highlights the importance of this passage:

If we are to restore to this sentence its true savor we must recognize its almost technical role in the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism. It says something precise about the men gathered together by their scapegoat. *They do not know what they are doing*. That is why they must be pardoned...In this passage we are given the first definition of the unconscious in human history.¹³

Elsewhere he underlines the operation of the "persecutory unconsciousness" disclosed in this gospel passage:

We should always take Jesus at his word. He expresses the powerlessness of those caught up in the mimetic snowballing process to see what moves and compels them. Persecutors think they are doing good, the right thing; they

12. Ibid., 25–6.

13. René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 111.

believe they are working for justice and truth; they believe they are saving the community.¹⁴

Again, we are reminded of how the single victim mechanism can only function smoothly as long as its practitioners are unaware of what it is they are actually doing. It is likewise the case that where scapegoating appears explicitly in a text, that text is not being controlled by the mechanism it is exposing. Summarizing this essential and important insight into the achievement of the Bible, Girard writes:

The Gospels are well aware of what they are doing. They not only tell the truth about victims unjustly condemned, but they know they are telling it, and they know that in speaking the truth they are taking again the path of the Hebrew Bible. The Gospels understand their kinship with the ancient Scripture regarding the single victim mechanism.¹⁵

Surely any reader of the Qur'an cannot help but be struck by the degree to which it is also aware of its "kinship with the ancient Scripture." In light of this awareness we can ask the following with regard to its depiction of Jesus: Does the Qur'an reveal a God who sides with victims? Are prophets often singled out for persecution, and is God shown as taking their side? Is this the case with Jesus in the Qur'an? Are the stories of the prophets meant to articulate a recurring, universal pattern revealing the operation of a "persecutory unconsciousness"? Is there evidence that the Qur'anic accounts of Jesus are cognizant of mimetic desire and how it can lead to scapegoating? Is Jesus shown to be a scapegoat in the text? And finally, can the manner in which the life of Jesus is threatened in the Qur'an be reconciled with Girard's anthropological (rather than soteriological) understanding of the persecution and death of Jesus in the gospels? These are the questions we bring to our discussion of the prophet Jesus.

JESUS THE PROPHET

Nowhere is the kinship between the Qur'an and the earlier Abrahamic traditions more evident than in its depiction of the prophets. Stories about God's messengers and their travails are found throughout the Qur'an, constituting approximately one third of the entire text. There are close to 120 references to the persecution of God's messengers and prophets; the

14. Girard, *I See Satan*, 126–7.

15. *Ibid.*, 127.

descriptions of the plight of earlier messengers are meant to encourage the early community of believers and the prophet Muhammad himself to be patient and to trust in God in the face of oppression.¹⁶ In the Qur'an, the terms "messenger" (rasul) and "prophet" (nabi) are sometimes used interchangeably, but some interpreters assign to each of these terms a more technical meaning.¹⁷ Every community receives a prophet calling the people to acknowledge God, and the Qur'an recounts instance after instance of peoples and individuals who reject both the message and the messengers: "Before them the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did the confederates after them. Every community plotted against their messenger, to capture him. And they argued with falsehood, to defeat with it the truth (40:5)."¹⁸ The Qur'anic conception of prophethood and its attendant dangers is clearly described in Surah 6:74–90. Having called Abraham to break with the idolatrous practices of his community, God declares:

That was Our argument which We gave to Abraham against his people. We elevate by degrees whomever We will. Your Lord is Wise and Informed. And We gave him Isaac and Jacob—each of them We guided. And We guided Noah previously; and from his descendants David, and Solomon, and Job, and Joseph, and Moses, and Aaron. Thus We reward the righteous. And Zechariah, and John, and Jesus, and Elias—every one of them was of the upright. And Ishmael, and Elijah, and Jonah, and Lot—We favored each of them over all other people ... Those are they to whom We gave the Book, and wisdom, and prophethood. If these [their descendants] reject them, We have entrusted them

16. Joseph Lombard, "The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions," in *The Study Quran*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), ix, 4–7, 10; Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

17. While acknowledging the interchangeability of the terms, Lombard notes how: "A prophet (nabi) is said to differ from a messenger (rasul) in that a messenger brings a new religion (din), whereas a prophet only reaffirms a previous revealed religion and reestablishes its proper observance ... A messenger thus fulfills all the functions of a prophet and is a prophet, but a prophet does not necessarily perform all the functions of a messenger and is not a messenger." Lombard, "The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions," 1771 n.14. See also Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed., *The Study Quran* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), 6:86 n. Tottoli argues that, despite the somewhat inconsistent usage of the terms in the Qur'an, the essential pattern seems to be based on the stages of Muhammad's prophetic vocation, with rasul being used in the connection with the Meccan surahs, and nabi being the preferred usage in the Medinan surahs. See Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature*, 72–6.

18. Unless otherwise indicated, the translations of the Qur'an are taken from *Quran in English*, trans. Talal Itani (Dallas: ClearQuran, 2015).

to others who do not reject them. Those are they whom God has guided, so follow their guidance ... It is just a reminder for all mankind (6:83–86, 89–90).

What is evident from this passage and what is crucial in understanding the accounts of the prophets in the Qur'an is the notion of their standing in a line of continuity with one another—the contexts in which their message is proclaimed may differ, but there is a unity to the revelation they announce. On this point Farid Esack remarks:

The fact that the Qur'an incorporates accounts of the lives of these predecessors of Muhammad and makes it part of its own history is perhaps the most significant reflection of its emphasis on the unity of *din*. These prophets came with identical messages which they preached within the context of the various and differing situations of their people. Basically, they came to reawaken the commitment of people to *tawhid*, to remind them about the ultimate accountability to God and to establish justice.¹⁹

In some instances, rejection takes the form of the slaying of prophets by the people to whom they are sent: “Is it that whenever a messenger comes to you with anything your souls do not desire, you grew arrogant, calling some imposters, and killing others? (2:87)”²⁰ In the Sufi tradition of interpretation, this passage is understood to be directed outwardly to Jews while being intended for Muslims as well; according to this interpretation, “God caused a succession of saints and sages to show right from wrong

19. Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006), 166. Esack leaves the word “*din*” untranslated in order to underscore the importance of not rendering it as “religion.” He writes: “[The] present near universal understanding of *din* as ‘religion’ and the corresponding virtual elimination of *din* as a personal response to God is unfounded in the text of the Qur'an, as well as in traditional exegesis.” Likewise with the term *tawhid*, which is often (correctly) translated as the “unity of God,” but is considered to be “the foundation, the centre and the end of the entire Islamic tradition,” as well as “the heart of a comprehensive socio-political worldview.” *Ibid.*, 129, 191.

20. Other instances of the killing of prophets can be found in 2:61, 91; 3:21, 181, 183; 5:70. In many of these passages this accusation is leveled against the children of Israel, but it should not be understood as directed solely against either the Israelites or the Jews at the time these verses were revealed. Despite there being tensions then between the Jewish tribes of Medina and the early community of believers who acknowledged Muhammad as prophet and leader, these verses are directed at those who reject God's messengers in every time and place. This is underlined by the verse which follows the charge against the Israelites in 2:61. In 2:62 it is made clear how “Those who believe (in the Qur'an), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians, and 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.”

and guide them to the straight path, but these luminaries are often called liars or are opposed because their accusers are ruled by their passions.”²¹ This recurring pattern of rejection of the prophets by the communities to whom they are sent makes clear that we are dealing here with a problem that is universal in scope—this is a *human* problem, not a description of the sins of particular historical communities. The Qur’an has little interest in the actual history behind the stories of the prophets, but in exhorting, consoling, and warning its present audience. The primary purpose of the recounting of the predicament of the prophets is pedagogical. In the Qur’an, humanity as a whole is often portrayed as being supremely ungrateful toward its Sustainer. The prophets are sent to warn people steeped in ingratitude, who, when challenged, react with hostility and sometimes violence. While the accounts of the prophets often take the form of punishment stories, they can, with equal justification, be understood as stories of collective persecution and expulsion, in which God never fails to take the side of the persecuted prophet. God, the defender of victims, is particularly solicitous toward messengers and prophets.

To a significant degree, the Qur’an’s presentation of Jesus follows the same typology evident in many of the accounts of his prophetic predecessors. He announces God’s message to his people, the message is rejected, his life is threatened, and he is ultimately vindicated.²² In their capacity as bearers of the same revelation, no distinction is to be made among the messengers and prophets; but this does not mean the Qur’an views them all in the same way.²³ Jesus is linked with Noah, Abraham, and Moses as prophets with whom God made a strong covenant (33:7; 42:13). He is unique among prophets in other important ways as well. The honorific title “messiah” is applied to him alone: “His name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, well-esteemed in this world and the next, and one of the nearest” (3:45).²⁴ As is always the case with the Qur’anic Jesus, there is a consistent emphasis on his humanity, despite his exalted status: “They disbelieve, those who say, ‘God is the Christ, the son of Mary.’ Say, ‘Who can prevent God, if he willed, from annihilating the Christ, son of Mary, and his mother, and everyone on earth?’ ... The Messiah, son of Mary, was only a Messenger, before whom other Messengers had passed away, and his mother was a woman of truth. They both used to eat food.” (5:17, 75). As messiah, Jesus readily accepts

21. Nasr, *The Study Quran*, 2:87 n.

22. 2:87; 3:52, 54–5; 4: 157–9; 5:110; 61:6–7, 14.

23. 2:136, 285; 3:84; 4:152.

24. Also 4:157, 172; 5:17, 72, 75.

his status as servant of God (4:172); which is precisely one of the reasons *why* the Qur'an does not accept his divinity. After observing how verse 4:172 has similarities to the self-emptying of Christ in Paul's *Letter to the Philippians* (2:5–11), Kenneth Cragg notes how:

[The] passage sees this servanthood as the very disqualification of the notion that Jesus is "Son." ... The logic by which, for the Qur'an, Jesus can never be "Son" to God is precisely the logic by which, for Paul and the New Testament, he is. Both Scriptures affirm his being gladly "servant to God." This is their unity. The Qur'an, however, denies his "Sonship" on the very grounds in which the Christian sees it to consist, namely a loving obedience to God ... Excluding "Sonship" rightly (as long as it is understood in status-clutching terms), the Qur'an takes a truly "Christian" satisfaction in the servanthood of Jesus. But it does not reckon with how, in fact, that servanthood was fulfilled in terms of conscious "Sonship." ... It would be fair to say that the entire course and cost of "not scorning to be a servant" are the essence of the Gospels.²⁵

The servant of God, Jesus, willingly accepts whatever may come in remaining faithful to his mission. By citing Cragg's remarks here I hope to call attention to the manner in which his comparison serves to bring out how the Jesus of the Qur'an is not a copy of Christian ideas, but rather, has his own integrity as a truly *Islamic* Jesus, whose presentation in the text follows a deeply Islamic logic. And that logic is such that (as we shall see when we consider the crucifixion of Jesus in the Qur'an), while God clearly supports and sides with the persecuted Jesus, the very fact that God takes the side of victims precludes the possibility of Jesus being God's son. Precisely *because* God takes up the cause of those who are victimized, it would be inconceivable for God to allow a Son to be harmed. If that were to happen, it would call into question God's identity as defender of victims as well God's omnipotence. Consequently, Qur'anic statements about Jesus should not be taken as Christian derivatives, but as genuinely Islamic insights:

It is no longer profitable to take Qur'anic statements about Jesus simply as distortions of, or borrowings from, the Gospels. Rather, they should be accepted as authentically Islamic statements and as expressing an Islamic view ... The Christ of Islam, we wish to insist further, must not be dismissed as a distorted image of the true Christ of the Gospels, but must rather be seen as

25. Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), 30–1.

a living and dynamic personality, addressing humanity in many languages and across the barriers of dogma, creed, and even scriptures.²⁶

In addition to being referred to as messiah, the Qur'an speaks of Jesus in several ways which set him apart from other prophets. Only Jesus is referred to as word of God and as a spirit from God. He is unique among prophets in his ability to raise the dead, give sight to the blind, and heal the sick. The divine intention behind his creation is emphasized through a focus on his miraculous birth, and the fact that he and his mother are referred to as a sign from God. In his ministry Jesus is upheld by the Holy Spirit.²⁷ The Christ of the Qur'an is "much more than a mere human being;" and while the Qur'an denies Jesus' divinity, it also affirms his singular humanity. According to Mahmoud Ayoub: "In the long drama of human prophets and a humanity challenged to seek prophetic fulfillment, Jesus plays a unique role. In him there is an originality of being akin to Adam (Q. 3:59) ... He represents a special creation; he is the Word of God injected into the human plane of existence (Q. 3:45; 4:171). Yet like all other prophets, Jesus remains a human being created by God, His servant and messenger" Acknowledging how other Muslims may find his views controversial, Ayoub goes so far as to say: "Who, then, is Jesus, the miracle of life, of love, and of healing? ... He is the savior of us all, for what is salvation but healing?"²⁸ He further emphasizes the singularity of Jesus by observing how, "When the Qur'an speaks of earlier prophets, it does so by way of examples of God's dealings with faltering humanity. Jesus alone is presented as a challenge and a judgment ... It is a fully Islamic Christology based not on distortions of early Christian heresies but on the Islamic view of man and God."²⁹

As is the case with the other prophets, the Jesus of the Qur'an engenders vehement opposition from his people. However, unlike the stories of Noah,

26. Mahmoud Ayoub, *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue*, ed. Irfan A. Omar (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 136, 56. See also Tarif Khalidi, ed. and trans., *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 7-8.

27. For references to Jesus as word of God, 3:45; 4:171; as spirit from God, 4:171; his ability to raise the dead and to heal, 3:49; as a "sign" from God, 21:91-93; 23:50; upheld by the Holy Spirit, 2:87, 253; 5:110. See also Abdullah Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach* (London: Routledge, 2014), 132.

28. Ayoub, *A Muslim View*, 152, 9, 15. With regard to his reference to Jesus as savior, Ayoub tempers and qualifies his language somewhat elsewhere in the book: "Yet Christ, as were all the messengers of God before and after him, was a savior in that he, by his message, helped to save humanity from error and to guide its steps further on the path to God ..." Ibid., 137.

29. Ibid., 158.

Abraham, and Moses, this opposition is not described in any detail. Jesus brings the same message as his predecessors, and like them he is greeted with hostility. Along with other scapegoated messengers, he is denounced as a sorcerer.³⁰ But God, the defender of victims, comes to the aid of his persecuted prophet: “And (the unbelievers) plotted and planned, and God too planned, and the best of planners is God. Behold! God said, ‘O Jesus I will take you and raise you to myself and clear you (of the falsehoods) of those who blaspheme” (3:54–55 trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali).³¹ The translation and interpretation of this passage is far from unanimous; and much depends on whether the translator chooses to depict God as promising to “take” (or “receive”) Jesus, or as directly causing Jesus to die before being raised. For our purposes it is not essential to take sides in this debate—what is important is to note God’s clear desire to rescue the prophet Jesus. This divine intervention on behalf of Jesus leads to the most controverted verses about him in the Qur’an—those revolving around the question of whether he was crucified and died.

The attempt to crucify Jesus is mentioned in verses 4:156–59, within the context of a litany of accusations against the Jews for having been unfaithful to God:

But for their violation of their covenant, and their denial of God’s revelations, and their killing of the prophets unjustly, and their saying, “Our minds are closed.” In fact, God has sealed them for their disbelief, so that they do not believe, except for a few. And for their faithlessness, and their saying against Mary a monstrous slander. And for their saying, “We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the Messenger of God.” In fact, they did not kill him,

30. 2:87; 3:52–5; 5:110; 61:6.

31. *The Holy Qur’an: Text, Translation, and Commentary*, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an, 2012). The translation of this passage has been the object of much discussion and commentary, bearing as it does on the question of whether Jesus was killed by his opponents, or even whether he actually died at all. The main differences seem to hinge on how the word “mutawaffik” is rendered. Of the fifteen editions of the Qur’an consulted in preparing this essay, five translate the term as making explicit the idea of God having caused Jesus to die prior to being raised, while the other ten speak of God having first “taken” or “received” Jesus before raising him to God’s self (without saying that he actually died). This latter interpretation has allowed some post-Qur’anic commentators to argue that Jesus never actually tasted death; but was rather assumed into God’s presence. But this view is hard to sustain in light of verse 19:33, where Jesus describes how he will one day die. For the diversity of interpretations see Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Qur’an and Its Interpreters*, vol. II, The House of Imran (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 169–83; Suleiman A. Mourad, “Does the Qur’an deny or assert Jesus’s crucifixion and death?,” in *New perspectives on the Qur’an: The Qur’an in its historical context 2*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2011), 349–57.

nor did they crucify him, but it appeared to them as if they did. Indeed, those who differ about him are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it, except the following of assumptions. Certainly, they did not kill him. Rather, God raised him up to Himself. God is Mighty and Wise. There is none from the People of the Scripture but will believe in him before his death, and on the Day of Resurrection he will be a witness against them.

Verse 4:157 is the only verse in the Qur'an which specifically refers to the crucifixion. Given the context, the attempted crucifixion is clearly not an object of importance in itself, and there is no salvific meaning attached to it; rather it appears to fit into the familiar pattern of message–rejection–rescue seen in the narratives of many of the prophets. Controversies about the passage have to do with whether it represents a categorical denial of the crucifixion and/or death of Jesus. As my concern here is to consider the issue in light of God's identification with victims, I will not wade into the debates about the meaning of the text, apart from briefly summarizing the state of the question so as to better anticipate our later discussion of how Girard's theory may be of some relevance in interpreting the passage.

Kenneth Cragg offers a useful framework for considering the crucifixion verses by identifying three relevant claims associated with the event. The first is the intention of the perpetrators to do harm to Jesus; the second is the willingness of the intended victim to be faithful to his mission regardless of the threat confronting him; and the third concerns God's salvific will as operating through the death of Jesus. Cragg correctly points out how the Qur'an clearly accepts the first two of these claims, and even if Jesus did not, in fact, die on a cross, these claims would remain true from a Muslim perspective. It is only the third, more explicitly soteriological claim which Muslims reject, whereas the other two claims, which easily admit of a possible anthropological interpretation, are acceptable. Cragg notes further how inaccurate it is then, to say without qualification, that the Qur'an denies the crucifixion, when "there are two vital senses in which it affirms it." It is more accurate to say, "What the Qur'an, and with it the whole corporate mind of Islam, denies is the third dimension, i.e. God's act. It is this which is totally precluded by every category of theology and faith. 'God was *not* in Christ reconciling the world to himself:' he was with Jesus withdrawing him to heaven."³² Christianity and Islam disagree over the *theological* meaning of the cross. To a significant degree this has to do with the Qur'an's insistence that every person is accountable to God for

32. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 167–9.

her or his own deeds, and no one else should or can suffer vicariously to free others from the consequences of their sins: “No soul gets except what it is due, and no soul bears the burdens of another” (6:164).³³ According to Ayoub, Islam “denies the expiatory sacrifice of Christ on the cross as a ransom for sinful humanity, but again denies neither the actual death of Christ nor his general redemptive role in human history.”³⁴ Suleiman Mourad likewise argues that, with regard to the crucifixion/death of Jesus, “the denial in the Qur’an is not directed to its reality, but rather to its theological implications.”³⁵ In his work on the crucifixion and the Qur’an, Todd Lawson quotes H.A.R. Gibb’s book, *Islam: A Historical Survey* in explaining how Islam: “is distinguished from Christianity, not so much (in spite of all outward appearances) by its repudiation of the trinitarian concept of the unity of God, as by its rejection of the soteriology of the Christian doctrine.”³⁶ Clearly, in the case of Qur’anic Jesus, we are not dealing with an impoverished, derivative theology drawn from Christian sources, but with a rich tradition speaking in its own voice and rooted in Qur’anic revelation.

Apart from the theological issues presented by the crucifixion, the question of the historicity of the event is left open. The relevant verse in the Qur’an is open to multiple interpretations: “In fact, they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it appeared to them as if they did” (4:157). Given the context in which the verse appears, in which the failures of the Jews are being described, the verse may be construed as saying nothing more than that *they* (Jesus’ Jewish opponents) did not, in fact, crucify Jesus. Interpreted in this fashion, it can be understood as a parenthetical remark aimed at Jewish claims to have killed the messiah. According to Lawson, “On this point there is near unanimity: they are being condemned for their boast that they were able to contravene the will of God by killing his prophet and messenger, Jesus the son of Mary. Thus, the concerns of this verse come more sharply into focus. It is not really a discussion about the historicity of the crucifixion of Jesus.”³⁷ Ayoub makes a similar point: “The Qur’an ... does not deny the death of Christ. Rather, it challenges human beings who in their folly have deluded themselves into believing that they

33. See also 17:15; 39:7; 53:38 and *ibid.*, 181.

34. Ayoub, *A Muslim View*, 159, 76.

35. Mourad, “Does the Qur’an deny or assert Jesus’s crucifixion and death?” 350.

36. Todd Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur’an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 22–3.

37. *Ibid.*, 27. Also Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur’an and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 12–3 and Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 12–3.

would vanquish the divine Word, Jesus Christ, the messenger of God.”³⁸ Mourad agrees, insisting that:

The Qur’an reflects the insistence of the early Muhammad movement that the crucifixion of Jesus does not represent a defeat of God. In other words, this movement could not accept, as a matter of basic belief, that Jesus’s career ended on the cross, with God unable to intervene. For what would that mean about God’s commitment to protecting them? Thus they argue that God was the ultimate victor because he could do something those who crucified Jesus could not: He could annul Jesus’s death by resurrecting him.³⁹

In his reflections on the passage, Cragg quotes scholar of religion Frithjof Schuon to the same effect: “When the Qur’an appears to deny the death of Christ it can be understood to mean that in reality Jesus vanquished death, whereas the Jews believed they had killed the Christ in his very essence.” Cragg also mentions other commentators who believe that in denying the act of crucifixion to the Jews, the Qur’an wishes to raise the possibility that someone else may have killed Jesus—perhaps the Romans, or even God.⁴⁰

On the question as to whether the Qur’an denies the crucifixion of Jesus, Lawson makes the following important observation:

The Qur’an itself only asserts that the Jews did not crucify Jesus. This is obviously different from saying that Jesus was not crucified. The point is that ... many Qur’an exegetes, though not the Qur’an, deny the crucifixion. The Qur’anic exegesis of verse 4:157 is by no means uniform; the interpretations range from an outright denial of the crucifixion of Jesus to a simple affirmation of the historicity of the event. The first and by far the most frequent interpretation is that God rescued Jesus from the crucifixion in a miraculous manner and that someone else was substituted for Jesus on the cross.⁴¹

Those who subscribe to the idea of Jesus being miraculously rescued from crucifixion are far from being agreed in their understanding, and there exist a number of explanations and “substitution” theories within Islamic tradition. There are several versions of this scenario. Almost all of these

38. Ayoub, *A Muslim View*, 168, 176.

39. Mourad, “Does the Qur’an deny or assert Jesus’s crucifixion and death?” 356.

40. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 169–70. Cragg rejects these possibilities because they do not accord well with either the thrust of the overall passage in which the verse occurs, or with its grammatical structure.

41. Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur’an*, 12.

have God making someone else look exactly like Jesus, so the crowd is deluded into believing it has achieved its aim. In those variants which reflect delight in the idea of evildoers receiving their just deserts, the transformed substitute can be Judas Iscariot or another one of Jesus' assailants. But there are also versions in which the substitute is one of the disciples, who willingly offers up his life in place of Jesus.⁴² I will discuss the criticisms of these substitution theories later, but before doing so, there remains another explanation of Jesus' crucifixion which has a place in Islamic tradition.

For Cragg, much hinges on how one translates the phrase "but it appeared to them" (in Arabic, *shubbiha*):

What is the hidden subject pronoun of *shubbiha*? What was it within the illusion they were under? The two possibilities are "he" and "it." Either "he [i.e. Jesus] was resembled to them," or "it [crucifixion] was made to seem so to them." On that hidden pronoun turns the decision whether we opt for a substitute sufferer, not the real Jesus, or whether we opt for an only "apparent" crucifixion for Jesus himself. All exegesis turns on one or other of these alternatives and either of them has assumed confusing forms.⁴³

On the basis of his reading of the Arabic text, he argues how the negation, "naturally read, is of the killing rather than of the victim supposed," thereby opting for a view which would maintain an "apparent" crucifixion. As with the substitution hypothesis, this view also has multiple variations. Among them is the notion that, while Jesus was, in fact, nailed to the cross, he did not actually expire as a result of his ordeal. He survived the torture, revived in the tomb, and was spirited away to the Indian sub-continent by his disciples, eventually dying a natural death many years later. Another variant relies upon distinctions between "apparentness" and "reality" in order to make the case for the "real" Jesus escaping death on the cross. Ayoub cites the Muslim philosopher, theologian, poet, and mystic Ibn Arabi (1165–1240 CE) as a clear example of this position:

They [the Jews] plotted by sending someone to kill Jesus. But God made a physical image resembling the true likeness of Jesus the Spirit of God to appear to them. They mistook this image for Jesus and killed and crucified it. God raised Jesus up to the fourth heaven because his spirit is an effulgence

42. Ayoub, *A Muslim View*, 161–2; Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 170–1.

43. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 171; Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an*, 131, 5–6.

of the spirituality of the sun. In their ignorance, the Jews did not know that it is impossible to kill the Spirit of God.

This “spiritualization” of the crucifixion as a way of accounting for the event without affirming the actual death of Jesus was another way of explaining the “apparent” crucifixion—one which was well received among many Sufis and Shiites, for whom non-literal, metaphorical, or mystical explanations were generally acceptable.⁴⁴

It may be well to reiterate here how theories which account for the crucifixion by means of substitution or apparentness are products of later Islamic tradition and are not explicitly stated in the Qur’an. Commentators have frequently taken these later interpretations and read them back into the Qur’an. These retrojections can take the form of a categorical denial of Jesus’ death, or the more specific claim that he did not die on the cross (but that he did die at some later point). The former view cannot be directly supported from the text of the Qur’an. In fact, Surah 19:33 would appear to be a clear affirmation of Jesus’ death: “So Peace is upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the Day I get resurrected alive.”⁴⁵ Such an affirmation, however, does not entail belief in Jesus’ death *on the cross*. There is a long history of Muslim interpretation which denies Jesus’ death by crucifixion, while still maintaining his eventual demise prior to being raised with the rest of humanity: “According to traditional Islamic belief, Jesus did not die a natural death; rather, *God raised him up unto Himself* (4:158; cf. 3:55). In traditional Islamic eschatology, Jesus’ return to earth is among the signs of the end of time ... at which point it is said he

44. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 172, 5; Ayoub, *The Qur’an and Its Interpreters*, II, The House of Imran, 180; Ayoub, *A Muslim View*, 170–1. Attempts to derive views such as those expressed by al-Arabi from Christian Docetism (a heresy which denied that Jesus actually suffered in the flesh, but only seemed to undergo suffering and death; the one who died on the cross was an image or a phantom) are generally rejected by both Christian and Muslim scholars. One reason is the lack of evidence of direct influence. In addition, the Docetists denied Christ’s actual suffering in the interests of privileging and protecting his divinity, while in Islam this was not the case at all. See *ibid.*, 160; Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 173; Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur’an*, 2–6, 12; Mourad, “Does the Qur’an deny or assert Jesus’s crucifixion and death?,” 139–43.

45. Cragg reads the passage as indicating “resurrection after real death”—a view he supports by appealing to what he considers to be a “normal assessment” of 3:55: “There is an immediacy about the passage in 3:55 which seems ... to require real dying and prompt resurrection ... This point was registered by the great exegete, Al-Baidawi, who included among various possibilities of the passage the idea, opposed to the ‘swoon’ theory, that God did actually allow Jesus to die on the Cross and to remain dead for seven hours, prior to rapture into heaven. A real demise seems also to be required in 5:117 [“when You did take me up”] where the same root is used in the past tense ...” Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 177.

will fight the Antichrist (al-Dajjal), eventually die, and be resurrected like other mortals.⁴⁶ At the very least, then, the Qur'an does not deny the death of Jesus, although later tradition leans heavily toward a view which rules out his having died on the cross. On this point the Qur'an is more cautious than traditional interpretations. According to Lawson, "the Qur'an simply does not say enough on the subject to either confirm or deny the event."⁴⁷ Abdullah Saeed also questions the ways in which later interpretations have been used as the lens through which the cryptic reference to the crucifixion in the Qur'an have been read:

A number of Muslim scholars today argue that there is nothing theologically difficult in accepting the idea that Jesus was crucified and that he was killed. There are many other prophets who are mentioned in the Qur'an as having been killed by their opponents, and Jesus was not an exception. Rejecting the Christian claims about Jesus and the New Testament narrative about Jesus' death largely based on a few sayings from the second-generation Muslims is highly problematic from the point of view of such contemporary Muslim scholars.⁴⁸

Neal Robinson succinctly summarizes what can be concluded about the crucifixion on the basis of the Qur'anic text:

From the above analysis, it should be obvious that the Qur'anic teaching about Jesus' death is not entirely clear-cut. Three things, however, can be said with certainty. First, the Qur'an attaches no salvific importance to his death. Second, it does not mention his resurrection on the third day and has no need of it as proof of God's power to raise the dead. Third, although the Jews thought they had killed Jesus, from God's viewpoint they did not kill or crucify him. Beyond this is the realm of speculation.

He concludes that what is denied in the Qur'an is "the ultimate reality of Jesus' death rather than a categorical denial that he died." Ayoub expresses the same insight in more explicitly theological language: "the denial of killing of Jesus is a denial of the power of human beings to vanquish and destroy the divine Word, which is forever victorious."⁴⁹

46. Nasr, *The Study Quran*, 43:61 n.

47. Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an*, 18.

48. Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an*, 143.

49. Neal Robinson, "Jesus," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill 2003), 20a; Ayoub, *A Muslim View*, 176; Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an*, 130-1.

THE VINDICATED SCAPEGOAT

We turn now to a consideration of how Girard's theory might illuminate our presentation of the Qur'anic Jesus. On the basis of textual evidence presented above, it is clear that the Qur'an views God as taking the side of the prophets in the midst of their travails. It is also apparent that the recurrent pattern of persecution of the prophets is meant to indicate how what we are dealing with here is not limited to these specific instances; but is part of the universal tendency of humanity to scapegoat the messengers sent to it by God. The Qur'an also shows how this same pattern of scapegoating is evident in the prophetic career of Jesus. What I hope has also been more than suggested by this discussion is the compatibility between the Qur'an's rendering of the figure of Jesus and the anthropological approach taken by Girard. Because his is an *anthropological* theory, it accords well with the Qur'an's estimation of the prophet Jesus. The Jesus of the Qur'an, despite his unique status, is entirely human, and whereas Girard is sometimes viewed with suspicion by Christian theologians who see his theory as being reductionist and as having insufficient regard for Christ's divinity, no such concerns arise among Muslim commentators. Here it may be well to recall Girard's insights into the crucifixion as it is presented in the New Testament: how it in one sense resembled "all other events of victimization 'since the foundation of the world,'" while at the same time revealing "the meaning of these events going back to the beginnings of humanity: 'the victimization occurs because of mimetic rivalry, the victim is innocent, and God stands with the victim and restores him or her.'⁵⁰ The Qur'an exposes precisely the same tendencies going back at least to the time of Noah, whereby God's messengers are routinely threatened and victimized by crowds who band together in solidarity in order to expel the perceived disruptor of their ancestral traditions. Jesus may not be the final messenger, but he is nonetheless depicted in the Qur'an as the penultimate prophet, with qualities not found in his predecessors. Human though he was, his exalted status can be understood as indicating a universal significance in God's plan, shedding light on the plight of all prophets and victims "since the foundation of the world." The universality of his mission is also stressed by the fact that, alone among prophets, Jesus is likened to Adam: "The likeness of Jesus in God's sight is that of Adam: He created him from dust, then said to him, 'Be' and he was" (3:59). Muslim commentators will note how this passage is meant as a corrective to Christian claims concerning Jesus' divinity, and the notion of his being

50. Girard, *The Girard Reader*, 282.

created from dust would no doubt support such a reading. But the text goes further in drawing parallels between Adam (the first prophet according to Islam) and Jesus. Having been created from dust like any other mortal, the Qur'an has Jesus being constituted in his identity by means of the divine command "Be," emphasizing the miraculous nature of Jesus' birth apart from natural reproduction—a status he shares only with Adam. Ayoub observes how, "For Islamic faith, Jesus, like Adam, is a special creation of God, but unlike Adam, he is free from sin ... Like Adam, he is the creature of God not through the law of human generation; rather, he is the object of divine *amr*, or command (Q. 3:59) ... For Muslim piety, Jesus is a model of true Islam, or total submission to God ... He is a source of hope and solace for the poor and oppressed, and a stern reproach for the rich and greedy oppressors."⁵¹ In being linked to Adam and to the oppressed in such an explicit way, Jesus the prophet transcends his mission to his own people, and becomes the embodiment of God's universal concern for victims throughout history.

Girard also highlights the role of mimetic rivalry in bringing about Jesus' death. This is not necessarily limited to explicit rivalry among individuals: it also encompasses the "cure" for social conflicts effected by the single victim mechanism. In the accounts of Jesus' prophetic precursors, the Qur'an appears to be quite conscious of the operation of mimetic rivalry and how it can escalate into acts of scapegoating. In the stories of Noah, Abraham and Moses, the "great ones" of their societies consider the prophets to be impudent upstarts, who dare to challenge authority and tradition. The people of these societies follow their leaders in their collective opposition to the messengers. They take tremendous pride in following the ways of their ancestors. Not surprisingly, they react with hostility toward any prophet who dares to criticize their ancestral beliefs and practices. Another indication of the Qur'an's awareness of mimetic escalation can be found in the repeated admonitions to the prophets to remember how they are sent as warners only—they are to announce God's message, but they are not to enter into rivalry with their opponents. They must not allow themselves to be drawn into a duel of warring doubles. Those who refuse to listen to their message will reap the consequences of their obstinacy.⁵² Given the

51. Ayoub, *A Muslim View*, 117, 58. Likewise, Droge notes in his commentary (3:59 n.86): "both Jesus and Adam were created by God's word ('Be!'). Similarly, God 'breathed his spirit into' Adam (Q15.29; 32.9; 38.72) and 'strengthened' Jesus with the 'holy spirit' (Q2.87, 253; 5.110). *The Qur'an: A New Annotated Translation*, trans. A.J. Droge (Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2017).

52. Passages exemplifying these patterns in the Qur'an include: 10:71; 23:24; 26:116; 71:21–3 (in the case of Noah); 21:51–71; 29:25 (Abraham); and 7:109, 131–3; 10:78,88; 20:63; 23:45–7; 26:20–2 (Moses).

relatively few passages in the Qur'an dealing with the adult Jesus, we do not find a significant amount of material which explicitly draws out the dangerous effects of rivalry leading to his persecution. But there are certainly places where Jesus appears in a context marked by such behavior. Consider the manner in which he is presented in Surah 43. The Surah opens with an address to the reader stating how the Qur'an has been sent to an ungrateful humanity, and its message has been repeatedly proclaimed by messengers and prophets to peoples throughout history, always with the same result: "No messenger came to them, but they ridiculed him" (43:1-7). Recalcitrant humanity is described as imprisoned in idolatry, creating and worshipping divinities of their own making. Idolaters foolishly attribute daughters to God and imagine angels as female, despite the idolaters' own disgust at the birth of a daughter. In Girardian terms, the Qur'an appears to be aware of the manner in which societies which take their bearings from sacrifice and myth frequently divinize their victims—in this case murdered daughters become angels and children of God. The mimetic and rivalrous qualities animating idolatry are elaborated as well. As is so often the case in the narratives about the prophets, the resistant communities justify their religious practices by uncritically accepting and following the ways of their ancestors: "But they say, 'We found our parents on a course, and we are guided in their footsteps'... and the wealthy among them said, We found our parents on a course, and we are following in their footsteps." They receive their desires unthinkingly from those who have preceded them, and they react angrily when their traditions are threatened. When the prophet raises the possibility that the guidance he offers is superior to that of their parents, he receives a blunt reply: "we reject what you are sent with" (43:16-24). Before introducing the prophet Jesus, the Surah continues its development of the themes of mimesis, rivalry, and persecution in its presentation of Abraham and Moses. Abraham challenges the traditional idolatry of his people, who respond by appealing to ancestral custom, but who also resist the messenger because the Qur'an is not being presented to them by a person of sufficient status: "If only this Quran was sent down to a man of importance from the two cities" (43:31). Acceptance of revelation hinges on the social standing of the human model who reveals, rather than whether the revelation has its source in God. As a further example, Pharaoh's people take their desires from their leader, who, true to character, enters into rivalry with Moses: "O my people, do I not own the Kingdom of Egypt, and these rivers flow beneath me? Do you not see? Am I not better than this miserable wretch who can barely express himself?" (43:51-2). Preoccupied with status, power, and wealth, Pharaoh further mocks Moses

by informing the Egyptians that were Moses truly a bearer of the truth he would have been showered with gold and accompanied by angels in his mission. Commenting on Pharaoh's attitude, the Qur'an observes simply: "Thus he fooled his people, and they obeyed him. They were wicked people" (43:53–4). That the Qur'an understands the pursuit of wealth and status as mimetically driven is further illustrated by this observation on the part of God: "And were it not that [with the prospect of boundless riches before them] all people would become one evil community, We might indeed have provided for who [now] deny the Most Gracious, roofs of silver for their houses, [silver] stair-ways whereon to ascend ... and [silver] couches whereon to recline, and gold beyond count" (43:33–34 trans. Asad). The blessings of material wealth do not quench, but rather exacerbate mimetic desire and conflict; left unchecked, these desires would consume humanity. Those who lose their consciousness of God and who fall into this pattern of desire are said to be under the influence of a "satan," who deludes them into thinking they are rightly guided—yet another instance of the Qur'an's consciousness of the operation of mimetic desire and its powerful hold on human behavior.⁵³

This is the context in which Jesus appears in this Surah—a situation of conflict and tension in which prophets are subject to persecution when they deliver the divine message to people consumed with rivalry and pursuit of status. He stands in a line of persecuted messengers going back to Noah. In verses 43:57–8 Jesus is brought into the present of Muhammad's time as an example to be imitated. But the idolaters of the Prophet's day, a contentious lot, reject this prophetic exemplar; they mistakenly liken Jesus to their own divinities in order to assert the superiority of their gods: "And when the son of Mary was cited as an example, your people opposed. They said, 'Are our gods better, or he?' They cited him only for argument. In fact, they are a quarrelsome people." Projecting their own competitive instincts into the divine realm, they dismiss Jesus as inferior to their own gods. Just as the prophet Jesus was rejected by his people, so in presenting the Qur'anic revelation, Muhammad faces the same hostility from the menacing crowd. Into this world fraught with competition and conflict Jesus had come with wisdom, in order to clarify that about which people disputed, with an end toward calling all to unity under a common

53. Asad understands "satan" in psychological terms, when he translates 43:36–7 as "But as for anyone who chooses to remain blind to the remembrance of the Most Gracious, to him We assign an [enduring] evil impulse, to become his other self: whereupon, behold, these [evil impulses] bar all such from the path [of truth], making them think that they are guided aright." *The Message of the Qur'an*, trans. Muhammad Asad (London: The Book Foundation, 2003).

worship of God (43:63–4). But instead of a peacefully generated unity not founded upon scapegoating, those to whom the divine guidance is offered fall into further disputes and acrimony: “But the factions differed among themselves. So woe to the wrongdoers from the suffering of a painful Day” (43:65). Most commentators interpret 43:65 as referring to either the divisions between Jews and Christians over Jesus, or the internal disputes among Christians over his dual nature. However, the text itself does not specify this, so it can be read in more general terms as referring to human patterns of conflict and rivalry. This is supported by the second half of the verse, which warns wrongdoers of the suffering they can expect. While Jews and Christians are criticized in the Qur’an, they are not, as a rule, referred to as “wrongdoers,” so it is quite possible to read 43:65 as a warning about the dangers of mimetic escalation and its attendant disorder, rather than as a criticism of the disputes among the People of the Book. This theme is further developed in 43:67, where the consequences of this self-destructive behavior and the failure of humanity to take its bearings from divine guidance reach their culmination: “On that Day, friends will be enemies of one another, except for the righteous.” Having chosen not to follow the message brought by Jesus, friendships devolve into mutual accusation and order breaks down. The disorder of the end times is not due to divine punishment but to human refusal to heed God’s message. It is not at all surprising, then, to find in the midst of this discussion of Jesus a reference to his role as portent—one who exemplifies in his person the way of God: “He is a portent of the Hour, so have no doubt about it, and follow Me. This is a straight way” (43:61). This reference is immediately followed by a mention of Satan as the avowed enemy of humankind. The juxtaposition of Jesus and Satan here is surely not accidental, and it underscores the Qur’an’s understanding of how the example of Jesus is diametrically opposed to that of Satan, who both spreads chaos and brings it to an end by means of scapegoating violence.⁵⁴

That the persecution of Jesus occurs within a context characterized by mimetic rivalry is also apparent from Surah 2:87–8: “And we vouchsafed unto Jesus, the son of Mary, all evidence of the truth, and strengthened him with holy inspiration. [Yet] is it not so that every time an apostle came unto you with something that was not to your liking, you gloried in your arrogance, and to some of them you gave the lie, while others you would slay? But they say, “Our hearts are already full of knowledge” (trans. Asad). Similarly, when Jesus claims to confirm the Torah and to give glad tidings

54. Girard, *I See Satan*, 32–46.

of a messenger to come (Muhammad), he is accused of sorcery by those of his rivals who would claim to speak for God (61:6–7). In addition, the Qur'an stresses how those who plot against Jesus have in fact entered into rivalry with God: "And the unbelievers schemed [against Jesus]; but God brought their scheming to nought: for God is above all schemers" (3:54 Asad). Asad's translation of this verse captures something of the idea that God is not simply a more devious plotter than those who would harm God's messengers; rather, God does not scheme at all in the sense that humans do, for God is "above" such behavior. This theme of humans in rivalry with God which is at work in the attempt to kill Jesus is also on display in the crucifixion verse (4:157), where the claim of his enemies to have slain Jesus is mocked. The cumulative effect of these passages is to show clearly how Jesus in the Qur'an is understood as delivering his message in a context permeated by mimetic rivalry—a rivalry which is then turned against him. The Qur'anic understanding of Jesus' ministry is well described by Cragg, who notes "The Qur'an constantly presents what perhaps we can call the occupational hazard of being a prophet," adding how this presentation reveals a Jesus "menacingly rejected by his context."⁵⁵

The New Testament and the Qur'an agree in their understanding of Jesus as a persecuted prophet. Cragg notes how in the Qur'an, "on any count he was certainly in a situation in which he was meant to be a victim, in the intention of the enmity even then laying plans against him."⁵⁶ Differences between Christianity and Islam arise over God's response to the fact that Jesus was "meant to be a victim," with the majority of Islamic interpreters insisting that in the Qur'an, God rescues Jesus from being crucified. Here, though, a Girardian interpretation may be a resource in helping Christians and Muslims find common ground. For one thing, the Qur'an's presentation of Jesus is in many ways compatible with an anthropological interpretation, since it insists that Jesus is human only. Consequently, there is no need, from an Islamic perspective, to defend Girard's analysis against the charge that the divinity of Jesus is being compromised or to have to show how a mimetic reading can be reconciled with theological claims concerning Christ's dual nature. Even more importantly, I would argue that on an anthropological level, the *intent* to crucify is most important, since this is where scapegoating shows itself: this is where the crowd marshals its forces to destroy its victims. The Qur'an is entirely in agreement with the Gospels with regard to this intent. But its significant departure from the Passion

55. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 167.

56. *Ibid.*, 158.

accounts lies in the fact that the Qur'an understands this intent as having been thwarted. Nevertheless, we must not lose sight of the essential point. The Qur'an's fundamental agreement with the Bible is overlooked if we forget that the rescue of Jesus from crucifixion occurs *precisely because God takes the side of victims*. Regardless of how the crucifixion passage in the Qur'an is interpreted, it remains the case that God comes to the aid of the prophet Jesus, whether by rescuing him from death by crucifixion or raising Jesus after he has suffered death (either due to crucifixion or by natural death). Even the minority view, which accepts that the Qur'an only denies Jesus was done in *by his Jewish opponents* (without denying he was crucified or died), would not see this as in any way thwarting God's plan to rescue Jesus from destruction:

a distinctive characteristic of Qur'anic prophethood is the unremitting opposition that greets those upon whom it is bestowed. That this opposition frequently ends in the murder of a prophet is well known ... Finally, it is clear that such a death, though seemingly the result of human perfidy, is really a work of less fallible design ...⁵⁷

"Indignation" is perhaps the word which best captures the Qur'an's reaction to the thought that God would allow Jesus to be destroyed by his persecutors. This also helps to explain why the Qur'an is adamant in denying the divinity of Jesus. For the Qur'an is at one with the Hebrew Bible (and with Girard's understanding of its achievement) in its anti-mythical aversion to any notion that God could be victimized. And even though the majority tradition of Islamic interpretation argues for God's intervention in saving Jesus from crucifixion, the very thought that God could be subject to such attempted victimization (without in fact being killed) is deeply antithetical to the Quranic worldview. Therefore, the fact that Jesus was set upon by a crowd, counts against any possibility of him being God, because such a thing cannot happen to God. While acknowledging how the Qur'an makes mention of earlier prophets having been slain (4:155), there is a strong tradition of interpretation in Islam which would see a prophet of Jesus' importance and uniqueness as being protected from harm by God:

If he were truly to have suffered and died, God must be understood to have deserted him and his whole status would thereby have been disowned. There are precedents, to be sure, in the Qur'an of lesser messengers actually being

57. Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an*, 41-2.

martyred but, in the case of Jesus, as of Muhammad, God their guardian, “has the better of the schemers and plotters.” With Muhammad there was “manifest victory” in the open arena of the political and historical order. It was not so with Jesus. Undestined as he was, in the world of Pilate and Caiaphas, to such evident success, there was all the more reason why his being *under* power as a victim, and not *in* power as a ruler, should eventuate in vindication.⁵⁸

As unique as he may be in the line of prophets, a prophet he remains—a faithful human messenger and servant who God intervenes to save from the ignominy of a shameful execution. Lawson also sees the Qur’an’s seeming denial of Jesus’ crucifixion as stemming from the Islamic conception of prophecy:

It is interesting to speculate whether or not it would have been necessary for Muslims to deny the crucifixion of Jesus if that event were a doctrinally neutral issue. In other words, it would seem that a simple crucifixion, which did not carry with it such un-Islamic concepts as vicarious atonement, could easily be accepted. In light of the almost universal acceptance that “someone” was crucified, it appears that the problem faced by the exegetes is not so much Jesus’ death on the cross, but their inability to accept this and at the same time maintain their Islamic understanding of prophecy.⁵⁹

Commenting on Gethsemane and its aftermath, Cragg expresses the Qur’an’s conviction: “Our present concern in Gethsemane, is with this deeply rooted Islamic hesitancy about seeing Jesus there—even allowing him there ... Jesus cannot have been a victim this way, not only because the Cross did not, and need not, happen but because on every count of divine power and moral meaning it should not happen.”⁶⁰

This observation can help to explain why “substitution” theories about the crucifixion have such deep roots in Islamic tradition. As inheritors of the revelation given to earlier People of the Book, Muslims may downplay the crucifixion, but it cannot be entirely overlooked. Instead, we have in the Qur’an a brief mention of the event, without an explicit answer to the question, “If Jesus was not in fact crucified, then who was?” In attempting

58. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 173–4. See also Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 12–3, who says Jesus’ vindication is required by the typology of Qur’anic prophethood; and Saeed, *Reading the Qur’an*, 132, 40, who maintains it is precisely his unique and miraculous nature which has led Muslims to insist on his being spared from crucifixion.

59. Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur’an*, 12–3.

60. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 181.

to answer this question, however, interpreters have sometimes created more problems than they have solved, and this has not gone unnoticed by those who are critical of the idea of another person being crucified in place of Jesus. The very same reason why a Qur'anic understanding of prophecy rejects the idea of Jesus' crucifixion—God, as defender of victims, would not allow this to happen to this innocent man—can be turned against substitutionary ideas. The medieval Muslim philosopher and theologian, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (1150–1210) made use of this critique among the several criticisms he brought against the idea of substitution:

God was no doubt capable of delivering Jesus from the hands of his enemies by simply taking him up to heaven. What then is the purpose of casting his likeness on another man, except to condemn an innocent man to death to no purpose.⁶¹

Razi also seems to have been sensitive to the way in which scapegoating functions, for in explaining the meaning of the phrase “but it appeared to them as if they did” with reference to Jesus' apparent death on the cross, he opts for an interpretation which describes Jewish leaders who, seeing that Jesus has been rescued from the cross, feared a riot from the crowd clamoring for his death, and had someone else crucified in his stead, while claiming to the mob that it was in fact Jesus. The phrase from 4:157 would then mean “it was made to seem so to the Jewish masses by their leaders.”⁶²

In our own day, Mahmoud Ayoub has raised similar questions about substitution theories, which lead him to wonder “Why would God cause one person to suffer the trials of another, even if for the purpose of sparing His own messenger the ignominy of a shameful death?”—and, in light of this, he concludes that substitutionary theory “makes a mockery of divine justice,” and it “will not do, regardless of its form or purpose.”⁶³ And even though he judges the idea of substitution to be unacceptable, Ayoub also notes how Muslim commentators, troubled at the thought of God arbitrarily having

61. Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters*, II, The House of Imran, 177–8. Al-Razi also sees it as unworthy of God's providential wisdom to deliberately deceive humankind in this way and for such a long time. In addition, he argues how Christians have insisted from the very beginning of their movement that some followers of Jesus witnessed his crucifixion, and consequently, “If we were to deny this, we would cast doubt on the principle of *tawatur* (universally accepted transmission). Casting doubt on this principle would also necessitate casting doubt on the prophethood of Muhammad and Jesus, and even on their very existence, as well as the existence of all other prophets, and that would be untenable.”

62. Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an*, 138.

63. Ayoub, *A Muslim View*, 160, 6.

someone else crucified in place of Jesus, have tried to salvage the theory, by having the crucified one accept death voluntarily, in order to spare Jesus a painful and humiliating execution.⁶⁴ This way of understanding substitution bears witness to the manner in which Islamic tradition, in its desire to be faithful to the spirit of the Qur'an, has the protection of victims in the forefront of its concern. It also accords well with Girard's later understanding of sacrifice as including (but not limited to) "a willingness to give of oneself to others and to commit oneself to God... out of love and faithfulness to the other."⁶⁵ The notion of "voluntary substitution" of a disciple for Jesus is not found explicitly in the Qur'an, but it certainly has affinities with the depiction of Jesus's disciples in 3:52–3, where, confronted by the hostility of his people, Jesus asks, "Who are my allies towards God?" To which his disciples respond, "We are God's allies; we have believed in God, and bear witness that we submit. Our Lord, we have believed in what You have revealed, and we follow the Messenger, so count us among the witnesses." Girard points out how in the Gospels, in order for the power of mimetic contagion to be broken, "the violent contagion against Jesus be both unanimous and not unanimous." It must be unanimous in order for the single victim mechanism to work, but not completely unanimous if the mechanism is to be exposed. In the case of absolute unanimity, everyone would be swallowed up by the crowd, and there would be no breakthrough. If a breakthrough is to occur and scapegoating revealed for what it is, there needs to be "a protesting minority" which "resolutely rises up against the unanimity of the persecuting crowd." In Surah 3:52–3 we have a description of this faithful minority stepping forward, mimetically following the example of Jesus in his own faithfulness to God. In coming forward in this way, the disciples are able to prevent the narrative around the persecution of Jesus from being controlled by his enemies. As Girard observes, the presence of a dissenting minority does not dispel the hostile majority, but it does make it "incapable from now on of totally imposing its conception of what has happened."⁶⁶ And is this not exactly what the Qur'an wishes to do in the case of Jesus, when, as we have seen, it insists that, despite their boasts to the contrary, the foes of Jesus "did not kill him, nor did they crucify him" (4:157)? The disciples of Jesus appear also in Surah 5:111–5. They are introduced into the scene

64. Ibid., 161.

65. Girard, *The Girard Reader*, 70, 177. See also René Girard, Pierpaolo Antonello, and João Cezar de Castro Rocha, *Evolution and Conversion. Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (London: Continuum, 2007), 215.

66. Girard, *I See Satan*, 188.

immediately after the mention of collective hostility toward Jesus and the accusation of sorcery against him. Unlike his persecutors, they submit to God by accepting Jesus as a divinely guided messenger. And they ask him if the God whose message he delivers is “able to bring down for us a feast from heaven.” They ask this because “we wish to eat from it, so that our hearts may be reassured, and know that you have told us the truth, and be among those who witness it.” Jesus acquiesces to their wishes, and asks God to “send down a table from heaven, to be a festival for us, for the first of us and the last of us, and a sign from You; and provide for us, You are the best of providers.” In response, God promises to send down such a feast to sustain his faithful followers. Again, we have a prophet who is threatened and a minority willing to step out from the crowd of persecutors. But what is also present here is the emergence of a community which will continue to live out the divine message embodied from this point forward in a festive meal which will encompass all, “the first of us and the last of us.” The new community will be founded by the victimized prophet and sustained by God, and it will include all those who are moved to acknowledge the God who never fails to take the side of “the last of us.” Cragg picks up on these resonances with the last supper celebrated by Jesus and his disciples in the New Testament by noting how, as the intended victim, “there is nothing unfitting in the Quranic Jesus presiding at this *ma'idah* [table] of communion with his disciples and of solace to their hearts.”⁶⁷ In reading the passage in this way, Cragg is not violating the meaning of the text by forcing a Christian interpretation alien to its spirit. As far back as the tenth century, the great exegete of the Qur'an, Al-Tabari, recounted a narrative about Jesus in which, informed by God that his death is imminent, he becomes fearful, and summons his disciples to celebrate a meal, at which he will wash their hands and wipe them with his clothes. According to Jesus, whoever among them objects to this example of service cannot be among his true followers. At the end of the meal he tells them: “What I have done for you tonight of food, service and washing your hands, is simply a good example for you to follow. Indeed, you see that I am the best one of you, so do not be proud with each other. Instead, sacrifice yourselves for each other as I have sacrificed myself for you.” This story is extra-Qur'anic, but Tabari speaks of it approvingly, and as not being at all inconsistent with accounts of Jesus in the Qur'an.⁶⁸ However differently these stories may be told in the Qur'an and the Gospels, the overarching themes of victimization, the role of

67. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 158.

68. Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an*, 133.

scapegoating, the understanding of sacrifice as self-giving love for others, and an emphasis on God's defense of victims are identical. Analyzing the Jesus of the Qur'an in light of mimetic theory can provide an opportunity for the pursuit of common ground between Christians and Muslims. As an *anthropological* perspective, mimetic theory prescind from the contested issue of Christ's divinity. Likewise, to the extent that Girard affirms as fundamental the idea of the God of Abraham taking the side of victims, his theory is at one, not only with the Qur'an's depiction of Jesus, but with the pattern found in all the stories of the prophets. And I would argue that if this is the case, then questions about substitutes for Jesus being crucified or whether *anyone* was in fact crucified are, if not rendered superfluous, then certainly relegated to secondary status. Because what is essential in all these cases from an anthropological point of view (as distinct from a soteriological one) is the depiction of a crowd mobilized against an innocent victim, the exposure of the crowd's ignorance as to what they are actually doing, and an expression of the divine intention to intervene on behalf of the victim. On these fundamental points, the Qur'an is consistently in agreement with the anthropological insights Girard derives from the Bible.

To reinforce this point, consider the following rather striking comments about Jesus from Anglo-Irish Catholic theologian Herbert McCabe O.P.:

It is not precisely because Jesus is divine that we are saved but because he was a saint. It was because he was full of grace, a human being who was utterly obedient to the will of the Father, that he earned, merited, our redemption. He was obedient to what he saw as his mission, and his mission, as I see it, was simply the mission to be human ... He was sent to be human. That this meant suffering and being murdered is entirely due to *us*. This is the world that human beings have made ... In the world we have made it is fatal to be human, to be really human, to be open and vulnerable to others, to be loving. This our world perceives as a threat and reacts accordingly ... So my thesis is that Jesus died of being human. His very humanity meant that he put up no barriers, no defences against those he loved who hated him. He refused to evade the consequences of being human in our inhuman world. So the cross shows up our world for what it really is, what we have made it. It is a world in which it is dangerous, even fatal, to be human; a world structured by violence and fear ... The cross is the sign that Jesus is the first really human being, the first one to live and die, sheerly through love ... [St. Thomas Aquinas] is very insistent that it is Jesus as a human being who does the work of our salvation, acting of course through the grace of God and acting as an instrument of God, but acting as a human being, a saint. It is this loving obedience displayed fully on

the cross that merits for Jesus his resurrection and the salvation of his followers. We are not saved by the intervention of a god but by the great sanctity of one of ourselves, a sanctity great enough for his prayer for us to be heard.⁶⁹

Most of what McCabe says here is entirely compatible with the presentation of Jesus in the Qur'an. Of course, the Qur'an denies the divinity of Jesus, and it would likewise find the Trinitarian reference to the "Father" to be unacceptable. But nearly everything else in this passage would be acceptable from a Qur'anic perspective, as well as being in accord with Girard's anthropological perspective. McCabe offers a description of Jesus that accords well with that affirmed in the Qur'an: as a human being, ever conscious of his status as a servant of God, unswervingly faithful to his mission, whose very faithfulness leads to his being threatened with death. This is the Jesus of the Qur'an. If this description does not exhaust everything the Christian tradition wishes to say about the role of Jesus in salvation, it nonetheless gives expression to an area of fundamental agreement between Christianity and Islam.

McCabe is not the only Catholic theologian to highlight this point. James Alison argues similarly. He first quotes the following passage from Girard, concerning the rationality present in the gospels:

The rationality I am disclosing, the mimeticism of human relations, is too systematic in principle, too complex in its effects, and too visibly present both in the theoretical passages on scandal and in the accounts entirely controlled by it, to be there by accident. Nevertheless, this rationality was not completely devised or created by those who put it there ... At the text's origins there must have been someone outside the group, a higher intelligence which is master of the disciples and inspired their writings. As we succeed in reconstituting mimetic theory in ... the words attributed to Jesus, we are disclosing the traces of that intelligence.⁷⁰

In Alison's view,

here Girard clearly considers that what some people would attribute to divine inspiration is entirely present as a human intelligence, that of Jesus, which

69. Herbert McCabe OP, *God Still Matters* (London: Continuum, 2002), 62; Herbert McCabe OP, *God Matters* (London: Continuum, 1987), 97–9.

70. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 163.

is made available in and through entirely human interactions and is capable of being humanly systematized⁷¹.

To those who would claim that such an understanding undermines the notion of divine inspiration, Alison insists that, for Girard, “the human intelligence in question is neither in rivalry with nor subsumed by divine inspiration.” Nothing in these observations is contrary to the understanding of Jesus in the Qur’an, whose own mission is a function of his being divinely guided. Alison then goes on to remark how Girard’s thinking is completely in conformity with the definition of the Council of Chalcedon, which affirmed both the divine and human natures of Christ. Of course, the Qur’an does not accept the Chalcedonian doctrine with regard to Jesus’ divinity, but Alison makes use of Girard’s agreement with the conciliar definition to make a point about the humanity of Jesus with which the Qur’an would concur. For in Alison’s reading of Chalcedon:

We have the strangest of situations: one where the most authentically “Christian” anthropology might *properly be expected* to be one which is most completely human, one where any potentially divine elements do not impose themselves in rivalry with the entirely human vision of what it is to be human ... We can see what traditional theology refers to as “The work of Christ” in going to his Passion in purely anthropological terms: Christ undertook that work as a human, thinking and choosing with a human intelligence, and finally undoing, indeed subverting from within, a human mechanism.⁷²

It is Alison who italicizes the phrase “properly to be expected” in order to underline an insight identical to one made by McCabe: that it is as *human* that Jesus accomplishes his mission. Understood “in purely anthropological terms,” this way of conceiving the work of Jesus is resolutely affirmed by the Qur’an.

The insights of Alison and McCabe harmonize well with the anthropology of the Qur’an: an anthropological vision which describes a humanity that has gone astray and created a world which is hostile to divine guidance, a humanity which persecutes and sometimes kills the messengers sent to it—messengers who, because they place their trust in God, refuse

71. James Alison and Martha J. Reineke, “Introduction,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion*, ed. James Alison and Wolfgang Palaver (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 171.

72. *Ibid.*, 171–2.

to be deterred from their mission, confident that they will ultimately be vindicated by God. In the case of Jesus, it is precisely in his status as an exemplary *human* being, i.e. as one who takes his fundamental orientation and identity from God, that the Qur'an locates his greatness. Nor does the Qur'an express shock when he is set upon and brought to crucifixion (indignation, yes; but not shock). For what else could be expected from a world which repudiates divine guidance? Where the Qur'an diverges from Christian tradition concerns the nature of God's response to this attempt to destroy the prophet Jesus. However, even here there is no question concerning Jesus' vindication. In the New Testament his vindication comes as result of having undergone death on the cross, whereas most Muslim interpreters of the Qur'an would see his vindication in his having been spared this horrible fate. This is an important difference which will have significant consequences for both Christianity and Islam. But this should not blind us to the fact that in both the Gospel and the Qur'an it is made strikingly clear that God takes the side of victims and vindicates them.

Here it may be worthwhile to recall Mahmoud Ayoub's comment, cited earlier, regarding his understanding of Jesus as savior. He explains why, as a Muslim, he is able to accept this affirmation with regard to Jesus: "A savior is not simply one who dies for the sins of others but also one who heals the sickness of the human soul; one who infuses life into dead spirits by his own life and spirit. The original meaning of salvation is 'to be healed,' 'to be made wholesome,' 'to be truly restored to life.' This, according to the Qur'an, was the mission of Jesus."⁷³ It may surprise some to find a contemporary Muslim interpreter seemingly in harmony with such a venerable upholder of Christian orthodoxy as Thomas Aquinas, who would insist (according to McCabe) that "it is Jesus as a human being who does the work of our salvation." If so, such surprise should prompt a thoughtful reconsideration of entrenched views among both Christians and Muslims. Perhaps Christians need to think more deeply about what they mean when they affirm Jesus as divine and acclaim him as savior. And Muslims may want to reconsider whether uncritically rejecting such terms as applied to Jesus has more to do with past polemics than with appreciating the insights the Christian tradition is trying to convey when it speaks of its founder. A hermeneutic drawing upon Girard's thought could prove useful in offering ways in which to talk about these questions. It must be kept in mind that Girard is not a theologian, but an anthropologist and cultural theorist. Therefore, when considering Jesus' divinity as presented in the Bible, he remains committed to trying to

73. Ayoub, *A Muslim View*, 115.

understand what this might mean from an anthropological perspective. I noted earlier how the Qur'an shares with the Hebrew Bible a strong sense of how God is never victimized; therefore, in the case of Jesus, the fact that there is an attempt to crucify him would rule out any possibility of his being divine. Such humiliation would be disgraceful even as applied to God's human prophets; that this could happen to God is unthinkable in the Qur'an. A crucified God is incompatible with the worldview of the Qur'an, as is the idea of atonement for humanity through the death of one man on a cross. However, Girard approaches the question of Christ's divinity in a way which is not alien to the Qur'an's concerns, and which I believe is reconcilable with the Qur'an's understanding of the human condition before God. For Girard, to speak of Christ's divinity is to highlight his status as one who transcends the violence in which all human culture has been previously ensnared. The Qur'an understands humanity as having fallen into destructive patterns of rivalry and violence from which it needs to be freed by divine guidance. Mired in willful ignorance, humanity rejects God's messengers. Only someone gifted with insight granted by God would be capable of breaking out of this ignorance. The prophets are those who are so gifted, but even among prophets (other than Muhammad), Jesus appears to be unique in his role as messenger and model. He is specially graced; a word of God; born into the world without human father, through God's immediate creative act; capable by God's leave of healing the sick and raising the dead. He embodies the message humanity desperately needs, and the Qur'an could not be clearer in its affirmation that this capacity in Jesus comes entirely from God. Girard argues that, at least from an anthropological and cultural perspective, this is what the New Testament wishes to recognize when it points toward (without explicitly defining) the divinity of Jesus:

To proclaim his divinity is to recognize him as the only being capable of rising above the violence that had, up to that point, absolutely transcended mankind. Violence is the controlling agent in every form of mythic or cultural structure, and Christ is the only agent who is capable of escaping from these structures and freeing us from their dominance. This is the only hypothesis that enables us to account for the revelation in the Gospel of what violence does to us ... We do not have to adopt the hypothesis of Christ's divinity because it has always been accepted by orthodox Christians. Instead, this hypothesis is orthodox because in the first years of Christianity there existed a rigorous (though not yet explicit) intuition of the logic determining the gospel text.⁷⁴

74. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 219.

My point here is that this same “logic,” and the same appreciation for the role of Jesus in transcending the violent context in which he lived, are also present in the Qur’an. An awareness of the pervasive violence of scapegoating which clouds human judgment and distorts society is found throughout the text. We need only recall how often messengers and prophets are presented there as being confronted by hostile crowds who invoke the practices of their ancestors in order to justify their violent intentions. In both the Qur’an and the Bible, this false transcendence, generated by violence, is exposed. Understood in the manner in which Girard understands it here, the divinity of Jesus is an important element in the overcoming of this false transcendence. At the very least, Girard’s insight opens up a possible way for Muslims to think about what Christians mean when they speak of Christ’s divinity, without having to deal with more explicitly theological claims regarding the pre-existence of Christ as the divine logos. An appreciation of Girard’s point could allow for conversations between Christians and Muslims—conversations which might free the participants from mutual incomprehension regarding the nature of Jesus, and also allow for the possibility of gaining insight both from and into one another’s traditions. This is not to say that the differences between Christianity and Islam are based entirely upon historically conditioned misunderstandings which can be dispelled through interreligious dialogue. But I would argue that the two traditions are closer to one another than some (perhaps many) of their adherents believe them to be with regard to their beliefs about Jesus the prophet, messiah, and scapegoat. He can and ought to be seen as a bridge rather than as an obstacle.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation, and Commentary*. Translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali. New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 2012.
- The Message of the Qur'an*. Translated by Muhammad Asad. London: The Book Foundation, 2003.
- The Qur'an: A New Annotated Translation*. Translated by A.J. Droge. Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2017.
- Quran in English*. Translated by Talal Itani. Dallas: ClearQuran, 2015.
- Alison, James. *The Joy of Being Wrong*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998.
- Alison, James, and Martha J. Reineke. "Introduction." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion*, edited by James Alison and Wolfgang Palaver, 169–72. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Ayoub, Mahmoud. *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue*. Edited by Irfan A. Omar. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007.
- Ayoub, Mahmoud M. *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters*. Vol. II, The House of Imran, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992.
- Cragg, Kenneth. *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999.
- Daly, Robert J. "Girard and World Religions: The State of the Question." In *Mimetic Theory and World Religions*, edited by Wolfgang Palaver and Richard Schenk, 181–93. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018.
- Esack, Farid. *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006.
- Girard, René. *Battling to the End: Conversation with Benoît Chantre*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010.
- . *The Girard Reader*. Edited by James G. Williams. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996.
- . *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. Translated by James G. Williams. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001.
- . *Reading the Bible with René Girard: Conversations with Steven E. Berry*. Edited by Michael Hardin. Lancaster, PA: JDL Press, 2015.
- . *The Scapegoat*. Translated by Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.
- . *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. Translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987.
- . *Violence and the Sacred*. Translated by Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.
- . "What Is Occurring Today Is a Mimetic Rivalry on a Planetary Scale: An Interview by Henri Tinq," *Le Monde*, accessed November 6, 2001, trans. for COV&R by James Williams https://www.uibk.ac.at/theol/cover/girard/le_monde_interview.html.
- Girard, René, Pierpaolo Antonello, and João Cezar de Castro Rocha. *Evolution and Conversion. Dialogues on the Origins of Culture*. London: Continuum, 2007.
- Khalidi, Tarif, ed. and trans. *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Kirwan, Michael. "René Girard and World Religions." In *Mimetic Theory and World Religions*, edited by Wolfgang Palaver and Richard Schenk, 195–213. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018.
- Lawson, Todd. *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2009.

- Lumbard, Joseph. "The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions." In *The Study Quran*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 1765–84. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002.
- McCabe OP, Herbert. *God Matters*. London: Continuum, 1987.
- . *God Still Matters*. London: Continuum, 2002.
- Mourad, Suleiman A. "Does the Qur'an Deny or Assert Jesus's Crucifixion and Death?" In *New Perspectives on the Qur'an: The Qur'an in Its Historical Context 2*, edited by Gabriel Said Reynolds. London: Routledge, 2011.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, ed. *The Study Quran*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015.
- Palaver, Wolfgang. "The Abrahamic Revolution." In *Mimetic Theory and World Religions*, edited by Wolfgang Palaver and Richard Schenk, 259–78. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018.
- Ranieri, John. "An Epistemology of Revelation." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion*, edited by James Alison and Wolfgang Palaver, 173–8. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Reynolds, Gabriel Said. *The Qur'an and the Bible: Text and Commentary*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.
- Robinson, Neal. "Jesus." In *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill 2003.
- Saeed, Abdullah. *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach*. London: Routledge, 2014.
- Tottoli, Roberto. *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2002.