**WHY I AM AN ESSENTIALIST ABOUT ISLAM AND WHY
THAT IS IMPORTANT?**

ANONYMOUS THREE

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INRODUCTION

A few years ago, a book reviewer decried the fact that in the book he reviewed, Islam was "described in terms of a particular set of classical interpretations of Islamic sacred and legal literature." The reviewer lamented that "...defining a world religion like Islam in an essentialist manner is problematic" and that the book's "essentialist view of Islam causes him to conceptualize and define Islam in a monolithic manner and disregard the significance of the actual diversity in faith and practice that exists within and across Islamic communities."[1]

WHAT IS ESSENTIALISM?

Essentialism is the idea that a philosophy, ideology or religion has a set of defining characteristics, and that without those characteristics, one cannot say that a particular stance belongs to that philosophy, ideology or religion. For example, communism is usually defined as a political system in which the state owns the primary means of production. Thus the system now in power in China is increasingly questioned as to whether it can be described as communism, since so much production there is in the hands of private corporations. Christianity is defined in part as a belief that God is a Trinity, composed of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Groups that reject the Trinity are questioned as to whether they are truly Christian, according to an essentialist perspective.

The opposite view could be termed "nominalism." If held strictly, this view holds that whatever a person or group names themselves is valid. If the Chinese government describes itself as communist, then "communism" includes whatever the Chinese system is today. If anyone calls himself a Christian, then "Christianity" includes the beliefs held by that person.

The negative view of "essentialism" in regards to religion shown in the book review above is widespread today in literature and the media. Indeed, essentialism in any sphere of study today is being questioned. Even the definition of "truth" has been made relative and turned into a fuzzy line. Commentators have characterized the recent presidential election campaign as being "post-truth."

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[1] Bradford Greer: review of "A Theological Analysis of the Insider Movement Paradigm from Four Perspectives: Theology of Religions, Revelation, Soteriology and Ecclesiology, by Doug Coleman (Pasadena: EMS Dissertation Series, William Carey International University Press, 2011) in *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 28:4 (October-December 2011).

Extremists on one side decry any kind of boundaries to a concept, which can lead to chaos in communication and an inability to communicate rationally about any topic. One could not talk about "Islam" or "Christianity" or "communism" without some kind of definition of the issue at hand. On the other side, if definitions are too strict, then every individual or item becomes his own strictly defined type, again making it nearly impossible to compare groups. There would be no "Christianity" but only "conservative pretribulationist premillenial Southern Baptists," "postmillenial paedocommunion unregistered Orthodox Presbyterians" and the like.

Thus, in the sphere of religion, if either essentialism or nominalism were pursued to an extreme, then fellowship in Christianity, and the *ummah* in Islam would cease to exist. A strict essentialist might divide the religion into so many sects and denominations that each person becomes his own group. At the other end, an extreme nominalist would allow anyone be self-identified as part of the religion, and the lowest common denominator would be close to zero. Anyone could be a "Christian" or a "Muslim," and the terms would be stripped of their meaning.

So in practice, few people are strict essentialists or nominalists. Most are moderate, and the differences are a matter of degree. But there is a trend among social scientists and religious writers to favor a more nominalist stance. I would like to counter that trend and offer here a defense for a more essentialist position. This will be done using the examples of Christianity and Islam, and offer examples of how this position assists those who are engaged in mission among Muslims.

To do that, let us examine first the legitimacy of essentialism on the bases of Christianity and Islam claiming to be revealed religions, and the history of boundary determination in Christianity and Islam. Secondly, let us examine the utility of essentialism in the spheres of evangelism and prophetic influence on public policy.

LEGITIMACY: REVEALED RELIGIONS

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are what theologians call "revealed religions." That is, they hold themselves out as originating not with any human founder, but with God, who revealed Himself through prophets, as recorded in particular books. This is in contrast to Buddhism, for example, where there is no one canonical book, but many books written by various philosophers, all with equal claim to represent Buddhism.

According to these three revealed religions, God revealed Himself to Abraham, whose descendant Moses recorded what God had revealed to him in the Torah. Later prophets added to this record, which is the foundation for Judaism. Then God sent Jesus, and His disciples recorded His words and actions for us in the Gospels. Shortly after this, apostles added to this record in the New Testament, the foundation for Christianity. Then from the year 610 to 632 CE, Muslims believe that God (Allah) revealed Himself to Muhammad, and these revelations are recorded in the Qur'an. Later, people wrote down the actions and words of Muhammad in books known as Hadith (traditions). These books, the Qur'an and Hadith together, form the foundation of Islam.

In all three cases, no one can add anything to the founding books. The canon is closed for all three religions. If someone does add to them, they thereby create a new religion. Messianic Jews add the New Testament, and are not accepted by the various denominations of Jews, nor by the

State of Israel, even though they describe themselves as Jewish. Mormons add the Book of Mormon, and are therefore not counted as Christians, even though they describe themselves as such. The Ahmadiyya add the revelations supposedly given to Ghulam Ahmad (1835 – 1908), and are not counted as Muslims by all the sects of Islam, even though they vociferously describe themselves as Muslims. The Druze add the writings of their prophet, Hamza ibn Ali (985 – 1021), but in contrast to the Ahmadiyya, do not count themselves as Muslims, although their group could be considered as an offshoot of Shi'a Islam.

Thus, simply by the fact of being founded on a fixed canon, all three religions are, to some degree, essentialist in nature. The founding books create a boundary, which no one can cross without creating a new religion.

LEGITIMACY: CHRISTIAN ESSENTIALISM

However, in all three religions that claim to be revealed, there is room for interpretation of the founding documents. The Jews today have a number of denominations, including Reform, Conservative and Orthodox, as well as sects such as the Hasidim. Christians are divided into Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, and the Protestants are further divided into innumerable denominations. This leads some to say that the boundaries of Christianity are very fluid, and adopt a nominalist stance. However, before there were any of the modern divisions and denominations, there were statements ("confessions") of faith defining the limits of interpretation, and thus the boundaries of Christianity.

Since the year 325, Christians have defined the boundaries (or, the "essence") of Christianity through the calling of Councils, and their approval of statements of faith. Many of these statements articulated both what Christianity believed and, in contrast, what it did not believe. In each case there were people at that time calling themselves Christians who were outside the stated boundaries. For example, the first Council of Nicea in 325 affirmed that Christ was "of the same substance as the Father," and always existed, and anathematized those who said Christ was a creation of the Father, the position that became known as Arianism. Of those attending the council, 318 signed the statement and five refused, although two of those five signed later. The main opponent, Arias, who did not attend, was banished from the Empire, and through the Nicene Creed, Arianism was declared to be outside the boundary of Christianity. The whole idea of church councils and the resulting creeds is an exercise in essentialism.

There were seven so-called "ecumenical" councils, culminating with the Second Council of Nicea in 787. The Church of the East accepted the results of only the first two councils, and the Orthodox churches only the first three. Thus, after the Council of Ephesus (the third Council) in 431, the boundary began to be more fuzzy.

In 1054, the boundary became even more fuzzy when the Orthodox and Catholic churches split and anathematized each other. There have been moves toward reconciliation since 1965, but no complete restoration of fellowship.

With the Reformation, other difficulties is drawing a sharp boundary appeared. Until this last century, the Catholic and Protestant churches have often not recognized each others' members as being true Christians, and Orthodox churches still do not recognize the other two branches. Thus one's definition of "Christian" or "Christianity" is dependent upon where one stands.

Since the early 1800's, the number of cult groups has multiplied, particularly in the relatively tolerant religious environment of the United States. Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Science and others started in the 19ᵗʰ century. This has done two things in regards to boundaries. First, it has caused Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Christians to redouble their efforts to draw boundaries, even in the absence of Church Councils, official creeds, or other authoritative statements. The modern Christian classic *Kingdom of the Cults* by Walter Martin (published in 1965) is an effort in this direction. It details how and why the LDS Church, the Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Science, Unitarians, The Unification Church, Swedenborgianism, Rosicrucianism and others are outside the boundaries. (He also included Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Baha'i and other obviously non-Christian religions, but these do not help us establish boundaries, since they do not claim to be Christian.)

Many books of this type have been written since. Nevertheless, the boundaries are still fuzzy, because the *Kingdom of the Cults* said that a member of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church could be "a true follower of Jesus Christ despite certain heterodox concepts" maintained by that church.[2] orthodox by other writers. The Worldwide Church of God is included in the new edition as an example of a group that was heterodox, but came back within the boundary.

Walter Martin described the boundary (or, the essence of Christianity) in this way: "By cultism we mean the adherence to doctrines which are <u>pointedly</u> contradictory to orthodox Christianity and which yet claim the distinction of either tracing their origin to orthodox sources or of being in essential harmony with those sources. Cultism, in short, is any <u>major</u> deviation from orthodox Christianity relative to the <u>cardinal</u> doctrines of the Christian faith" (my emphasis).[3] The emphasized words here indicate that the deviation must be in an important doctrine, and must be egregious in order to be counted as outside the boundary. Of course, "important" and "egregious" will be in the eye of the beholder.

The rise of cults and the theological struggle against them in our era has also caused the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Churches to realize how much they have in common, and to work together in areas they agree on. They are all members of the World Council of Churches, and other international and interdenominational bodies. They have also worked together in such areas as Bible translation, disaster relief, and care for the poor. Interdenominational mission agencies have been on the forefront of missions for the last 100 years, eclipsing the efforts of denominational bodies.

In the realm of mission, the Lausanne Covenant has become a boundary for Protestants. Approved at the International Congress on World Evangelization which took place at Lausanne, Switzerland in July, 1974, it has become the touchstone for orthodoxy among missionary organizations.

LEGITIMACY: ISLAMIC ESSENTIALISM

Muslims have also created boundaries beyond which their faith is no longer called Islam. Islam has not convened councils like the early Christian councils, and the majority Sunni Islam does not have any individuals who can speak for it the way that Popes have spoken for Catholics.

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2 Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 1965, Bethany Fellowship Inc., p. 360.
3 Walter R. Martin, *The Rise of the Cults*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955, pp. 11-12.

However, it is clear that boundaries have been created through the universal acceptance of the famed "Five Pillars" of Islam, as well as the six basic beliefs.

The first pillar is the Shahada - "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah." The boundary created is that anyone who believes in a god other than, or in addition to Allah is not a Muslim. The second part of the statement has an implied addition – that Muhammad is the final prophet. Thus any person claiming that there has been a prophet after Muhammad is a heretic, and outside the boundary. I have already mentioned the Ahmadiyya Movement, and their prophet's writings. Mainly for this reason, the Ahmadiyya movement was declared to be non-Islamic by the government of Pakistan in 1974, and by numerous Islamic authorities.

The other four pillars are more in the nature of practices rather than belief – *Salat* (ritual prayers), *Zakat* (alms), *Saum* (fasting during the month of Ramadan) and *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). The Hajj is acknowledged in Islamic law to be a conditional requirement, based on one's physical and financial ability, and so cannot be a strict boundary. More generally, Muslims have historically been loath to condemn another Muslim as a heretic for lax practices. But if someone publicly proclaims that one of the pillars is not necessary, he would have passed a boundary. This statement becomes a "belief" rather than a "practice."

It is similar with the six basic beliefs: the unity of God (covered also by the *Shahada*), Angels, Holy Books, Prophets, Day of Judgment, and Predestination. Anyone publicly doubting any of these doctrines is in danger of being accused of heresy, a capital crime in some Islamic countries. We have seen this in recent years when someone even allegedly mistreats a Qur'an, one of the Holy Books, or supposedly says something negative about Muhammad, considered a prophet. There is an immediate, serious and even violent reaction.

Salmon Rushdie violated the boundary regarding Holy Books. His novel *Satanic Verses* called into question the divine origin of the Qur'an, by repeating the idea that some of the original verses of the Qur'an were Satanic. There was a *fatwa* (legal/spiritual judgment) of death against him by a number of Islamic institutions, and he went into hiding for decades. He had crossed a boundary.

THE BOUNDARIES ARE DEFINITE, BUT NOT SHARP

On the other hand, Islam has hesitated to draw the boundaries too strictly. Early in the history of Islam, the Kharijites (lit. "seceders") arose in opposition to both Ali (leader of what became the Shi'a) and Mu'awiyah (leader of what became the Sunni). They felt that differences between the two groups could not be decided by compromise, but only by God. They supported a doctrine that any major sin forfeits salvation with no remedy. Few Muslims followed the Kharijite movement, and it essentially died out. Their doctrine of sin was specifically denied by Abu Hanifah (699 – 767, founder of the Hanafi school of Islamic law, a subset of the Sunni), who said in his *al-Fiqh al-Akbar* (The Greatest Collection of Canon Law) "no one is to be considered an infidel on account of sin."[4] Muslims from a variety of viewpoints have condemned *takfiri* movements and teaching – those who are too quick to condemn a self-proclaimed Muslim as being a *kafir*, or unbeliever.

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4 Cyril Glasse, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam, p. 223.*

Christianity has also drawn back from drawing the line too strictly. The World Council of Churches draws from a very wide spectrum of churches. Various published statistics of religious affiliation count about two billion people in the world as "Christian" in some sense.

The key concept is that we must separate the religion as a concept from the self-proclaimed followers of that religion. We must separate "Christianity" from "Christians" and "Islam" from "Muslims." Christianity is what the Bible says it is, with some allowances for interpretive differences, but self-proclaimed Christians could be way beyond that boundary. Islam is what the book (the Quran) and Islamic legal literature says it is, with some allowances for interpretation, but Muslims are all over the map. Therefore, when the reviewer quoted in the first paragraph said "essentialist view of Islam causes him to conceptualize and define Islam in a monolithic manner and disregard the significance of the actual diversity in faith and practice that exists within and across Islamic communities," this happens only if one assumes an identity between "Islam" and "Muslims." Actual faith and practice is indeed extremely diverse. But in contrast, Islam as a concept is not – it has real, if sometimes fuzzy boundaries.

So, there is indeed great "diversity in faith and practice" among Muslims, but this diversity has a center, and somewhere in that diversity there is a distinct but fuzzy line separating those who are truly in the religion of Islam from those who are not. But what is the usefulness of this separation between the ideal concept of a religion, and how it is actually believed and practiced?

AN ANALOGY FROM SPORTS

In a book review of *The Creed* by Luke Timothy Johnson, David Neff in *Christianity Today* says "Positively, Johnson says the Creed defines the Christian faith in much the same way that the rulebook defines baseball. The rules of baseball distinguish 'the game from other team sports played with balls, but [do] not exhaust the possibilities of excitement, valor, excellence, and failure inherent in the sport as actually played.'"[5]

Moving the example from baseball to football provides an example. Leaving aside the fact that most of the world uses the term "football" to refer to the game Americans call soccer, there are other types of football – specifically Canadian Football and "Australian Rules" Football. The game in Canada is very similar to the game in the United States. The field is slightly longer and wider, there are three instead of four downs to attain ten yards, and there are 12 as opposed to 11 players on each side. There are some other minor rule variations, but someone who played in one country could easily play in the other.

The game is Australia is completely different. The field is oval, not rectangular. There are 18 players on each team, and points are scored mainly by kicking the ball through the uprights. The ball is not allowed to be thrown, but may be kicked or punched at any time by any part of the body. The action is continuous, like soccer or rugby, rather than punctuated like American or Canadian Football.

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5 David Neff: "Ground Rules – The Creed defines the game of faith without exhausting its excitement" *Christianity Today,* November, 2003, p. 77.

So it is not surprising that football in both countries of North America is simply called "football," with no explanatory adjectives. But if North Americans were in a sports conversation with Australians, they would have to use the adjective "Australian rules" to describe the game as played there.

So football as played in the United States and Canada is like talking about two different denominations of Christianity, like Baptists and Presbyterians. But Australian Rules Football is a different game altogether, like Christianity is different from Islam. There are some similarities, like the shape of the goalposts and the ball, but the game is very different.

UTILITY OF ESSENTIALISM: EVANGELISM

Those who champion a more nominalist approach first and foremost do this because they say it is more effective in evangelism. Matthew Stone said "I tend toward nominalism, less for metaphysical reasons and more for pragmatic reasons." Further, he says that "essentialism tends toward 'all' and 'none,' 'always,' and 'never.'"[6] He says this in the context of talking about his relationship with Muslims and persuading them about the gospel.

It is certainly true that a strict essentialist approach to a Muslim would not go well. It would be very unproductive to, for example, tell a Muslim that he was not a real Muslim if he took me, a Christian, for a friend, in violation of the Qur'an (5:31), or didn't participate in jihad. First, it is not our place to tell any particular person what he believes. Second, we want to attract them to the gospel, not repel them with insults that essentially call them hypocrites.

However, there may be some usefulness to a moderate essentialist stance in evangelism, as follows.

1. When we do apologetics for the Christian faith, we have to know the ideology for which we are doing the apologetics. If we are mistaken about the nature of it, our initial efforts in apologetics will miss the mark, or lead us to an embarrassing situation.

    For example, an essentialist would assume that most Muslims believe that Jesus (Isa) was born of a virgin. Some secular Muslims might doubt that. But it is probably safer to assume that a Muslim will believe it than to assume he does not. In any case, one might ask that particular Muslim what he believes about the birth of Isa. So the line here is fuzzy, but not absent altogether. We have to assume something, in order to begin the conversation.

2. Those who decry an essentialist view of Islam often hold up "moderate Muslims" and "moderate Islam" as a legitimate expression of Islam. By doing this, they are encouraging liberalism, rationalism and humanism as legitimate modes of thought for a monotheist. No one can be saved by such an approach. The one who rationalizes away jihad and other illiberal ideas from the Qur'an is also likely to rationalize away the virgin birth, the resurrection, and other key doctrines of Christianity. Do we really want to encourage this kind of thinking?

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6 Matthew Stone, *Reaching the Heart and Mind of Muslims*, self-published, 2012.

3. Sometimes, it can be useful to challenge a Muslim's faith by pointing out the more difficult aspects of Islam. Of course, this must be done in a sensitive way, meaning that in most cases, you must have a close relationship with the Muslim you are sharing these facts. But in the right hands, a challenge can be useful even in public.

Father Zakaria Botros has been doing this for years. He is a Coptic Orthodox priest who has an extensive website and a satellite TV program, run from exile in the US.[7] He discusses the Islamic support for sex slaves, for example, using verses from the Qur'an and Hadith, and ancient and modern scholars. But he does it in a very humble way, always admitting that he could be wrong. But his challenge is, if someone believes he is wrong, they should submit proofs and documentation from the Qur'an, Hadith, and accepted Islamic authorities, both ancient and modern. (No one has been able to dispute any of his points.) Then he shares the gospel. A Muslim speaking on al-Jazeera TV once claimed that six million Muslims a year were being converted from Islam, and most were through Father Zakaria. That figure was probably a huge exaggeration, but there is likely a kernel of truth in it.

The confrontational method can work with some people, as long as the Christian doesn't have a confrontational attitude. But those who criticize essentialism would not be likely to use any of Father Zakaria's points.

There are also successful person-to-person examples of essentialist approaches. David Wood used this approach with Nabeel Quraishi, as recounted in Nabeel's book *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*. On page 224 it describes how David "found dozens of traditions that he argued stood against Muhammad's prophethood. He compiled them in a binder and handed it to me." Later (p. 242) David also challenged him with the fact that Muhammad supported the rape of captive women. This approach was obviously successful with Nabeel. Granted, this was in the context of a close friendship. But in his online videos, David continues to do this, although this is more in the nature of a public debate, rather than private conversations.

The key here is that believers in the Messiah recognize the falseness of Islam and all other false ways, but love Muslims and all other people. Is this possible? Jesus shows us in John 4 when he very clearly told the Samaritan woman that "Samaritanism" was in error (verse 22), but He showed respect and love for her as a person. Paul was clearly provoked by the idols in Athens and publicly criticized idol worship, but treated the Athenians with respect (Acts 17). In both the cases of Jesus and Paul, they had an essentialist stance about the ideology they confronted, but a nominalist stance about the individual people they encountered.

It almost seems that Christian critics of essentialism do not believe that Christians are capable of loving a person if they know how perverted that person's theology or ideology is. I remarked to one writer of a book about Islam and how to witness to Muslims that his book seemed to want Christians to put on rose-colored glasses when considering Islam, in order that they would have the right attitude when relating to Muslims. He admitted that this was true.

I choose to believe that Christians on the whole are not that foolish. We love people not because they are loveable, sensible, or worthy of our love, but because we know we are already loved by

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7 Father Zakaria Botros, http://www.fatherzakaria.net

God even though we are sinners, and we know He also loves others in the same way. On top of this, He commands us to love them.

If we love Muslims because Islam is lovely and just like Christianity in many respects, then much of the impetus for evangelism is lost. Why should we encourage them to embrace Jesus and thus probably bring on the wrath of their friends and families, if Islam is sufficient or beneficial for them?

Knowing the essentials of Islam, one would not lecture to a Muslim about his own religion, showing him why it is violent, misogynistic and perverted. This is obviously both unloving and unhelpful for the gospel. But, at the proper time and in the proper way, we can, with humility, occasionally ask questions.

UTILITY OF ESSENTIALISM: OUR PROPHETIC ROLE IN PUBLIC POLICY

Christians, particularly knowledgeable ones, have a prophetic role in the public, political sphere in all matters of morals. Political leaders of both parties assume that Islam is a benign, peaceful religion that has been hijacked by extremists. They come to this conclusion because they know many American Muslims who are peaceful. They assume that these Muslims accurately represent Islam. A nominalist perspective of both Muslims as people and Islam as a religion and ideology is assumed. Thus they think that all viewpoints are possible in Islam. They identify with the peaceful viewpoint of their Muslim friends, and therefore label it as normal (or normative), and label the violent viewpoint as "extremist" or even "not Islamic." Our political leaders are not hearing the truth about the essential nature of Islam from knowledgeable Christian leaders.

Then our political leaders have designed programs to counteract extremism, based on the assumption that Islam is peaceful. The programs aren't working, because the underlying assumption about Islam is faulty. The programs cannot show rank and file Muslims that ISIS has a wrong interpretation of the Qur'an, because the classic interpretations that have been around for more than a millennium show that ISIS is not far off the mark. The only thing they can do is use the same arguments that liberal Christians have used against Christianity – that their Scriptures (the Qur'an in this case) need to be revised or re-interpreted to reflect modern rational and humanist philosophy. These arguments don't carry much water anywhere in the Islamic world, except perhaps among very liberal Muslims living in the West and infected (like Western leaders) with western rationalism.

Who is going to tell our political leaders, as well as the general public, the true, classical nature of Islam?

Of course, the way we do it is crucial. We can't just pontificate – no one would believe us, and everyone would take offense. But as in evangelism, we can ask the right questions, with the right attitude, at the right time and place in order to make people think.

Since radical Muslims are on record as supporting their actions by copiously quoting from the Qur'an and Hadith, this gives a Western political leader a lot of material to use. Here is a hypothetical example of a question our leaders could pose:

(Below is an extensive comment by the author)

"Al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State, recently issued a paper supporting the concept of sexual slavery of non-Muslim women from Islamic law. He cited Surah 4:3, 4:24, 23:1-6 and 33:50 from the Qur'an, all of which refer to the *milk al-yamin* - those whom your right hand possesses. Now in my copy of the Qur'an, obtained from a mosque here in America, in parallel columns of Arabic and English translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, there is a footnote saying that the *milk al-yamin* are female captives who are taken during a jihad, which he explains is a conflict with unbelievers. These verses seem to say that any Muslim can have sexual relations with these women in addition to their wives, which is what men in the Islamic State (ISIS) have been doing. So I am asking the worldwide Islamic community, is this interpretation of the Qur'an correct? If it is not correct, please let the world know exactly <u>how</u> it is not correct, and how instead these verses, and the Hadith associated with them, should be interpreted. Please do not just give your own opinion and say "This is what it means." Show us from other verses in the Qur'an, from Hadith, and from accepted scholars, both ancient and modern. We want to find the truth, and not simply hear opinions."

More generally, if a person denies some of the essential truths about Islam, he will continuously be blindsided by events out in the real world. This is why U.S. foreign policy always misses the mark regarding the Islamic world. The U.S. State Department tends to listen to the small minority of the secularized ("moderate Muslims") elite, and then wonder why the revolutions run the other way. They assume that Muslims, like themselves, are motivated only by sociological, political and economic concerns, and not by religious or theological ideals (the essentials of the religion). Then they are always surprised when things go wrong. They don't recognize religious zealotry when they see it, because they assume that Muslims are like Westerners – rationally assessing the application of Qur'anic texts according to modern liberal criteria. According to these criteria, verses calling for violence or Islamic hegemony cannot be accepted at face value.

For example, Khaled Abou El Fadl, a law professor at the University of California in Los Angeles, wrote a book called *The Great Theft – Wrestling Islam from the Extremists.* El Fadl calls himself a "moderate" but not a secularist, and he calls his opposition "puritans." His assumption is that "Islam is a message of compassion, mercy, love and beauty, and that these values represent the core of the faith."[8] Therefore, teachings that violate these values must be mistaken, no matter how much they are backed up by Quranic verses. He specifically mentions avoiding friendship with non-Muslims, cruelty to criminals and rebels, and stoning adulterers as being puritanical, despite the fact that they are clearly supported in the Qur'an and Hadith. He offers no method of interpreting the Qur'an and Hadith that preserves their integrity and yet avoids mandating these practices.

If a person were not in some measure an essentialist, he would have to take El Fadl at face value and accept his truncated view of Islam as valid. This person would then be in continual wonder and surprise as new converts to Islam "self-radicalize" and become violent jihadists.

It is a continual wonder to me that when I suggest that Islam teaches certain practices, that I am criticized because they say Islam is a very broad concept, a classic nominalist stance. But these

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8 Khalid M. Abou el Fadl, The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), p. 25

very same people are <u>very</u> sure that Islam does <u>not</u> include the beliefs and practices of ISIS, or they characterize those practices as "extreme." It seems that they are trying to have the argument both ways. If they take the nominalist stance and say that Islam is a very broad concept, then how can they turn around with what appears to be an essentialist stance and say that the interpretation of ISIS is any less legitimate than others? When they say the ISIS position is "extremist," by implication it is less legitimate, but a consistent nominalist stance does not allow for that. When an ideology is "extreme," it means that it is further from some ideology posited to be at the center, by some criteria, than other ideologies. This is at least a moderate "essentialist" stance.

For example, on December 12, 2016, Attorney General Loretta Lynch said "To impose a blanket stereotype on all members of any faith because of the actions of those who pervert that faith is to go backwards in our thinking and our discourse, and to repudiate the founding ideals of this country." The unstated assumption here about Islam is that it has essential characteristics, and in her mind, supporting terrorism is not one of them. She is clearly supporting essentialism at some level.[9]

There is a center, to which Islamic theology gravitates. Some individuals, like planets, revolve very close to the center, while others revolve far away. But the texts of Islam, the Qur'an and Hadith, act as the Sun, pulling them towards a center point. Essentialism allows us to identify and describe that center, so that we can know the nature of the Islamic world we are viewing.

CONCLUSION

Essentialism has a long history among the revealed religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This is of a necessity to preserve the nature of those religions, which are founded on the lives and writings of particular prophets. The resulting boundaries are often blurry, but they are still distinct.

The essential characteristics of Christianity and Islam are sometimes useful in the dialog between their adherents. This utility is usually in the form of sensitive and timely questions that can cause people to think and explore their commitments to their prophets and holy books.

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9 The Tribune (online edition), December 13, 2016, "US Suit over Va. County's Mosque Rejection Raises Question: Will Trump Team Do Same? http://www.sanluisobispo.com/news/nation-world/national/article120696848.html#storylink=cpy