Muslims today start with a disadvantage in relation to Christianity and the Western world. In the Christian camp, it is generally taken as a matter of course that Christianity is superior in the realm of theology, and still more superior with respect to society and culture. One reason for this preference is the current ‘war on terror,’ a war that tends to see Muslims as the culprit and the enemy. Another reason, more remote, is that the Christian observer generally takes a more forgiving view of the history of Christianity than of Islam. The Christian apologist is quick to assert that the spiritual values of Christianity were not reproduced in the social and political structures of the countries in which Christianity assumed a dominant role. Authentic Christianity, as the Christian spokesperson sees it, must not be confused with the political reality of Christendom.

Such a qualification is rarely applied in equal measure with respect to Islam. Western observers assume that the spiritual values of Islam are faithfully reflected in the social and political structures of the countries in which Islam is the dominant religion. Few scholars have approached Islam on the assumption that the spiritual aspirations of Islam may have been compromised in its history as much as Christianity often has failed to reflect the values of the New Testament.
Seventh-day Adventists are not immune to this bias. When a Seventh-day Adventist looks at the history of the Christian Church, he or she will do so through Adventist glasses, but when the same person looks at Islam alongside Christianity, he or she is prone to see Islam through the same glasses as any Westerner. The result is a comparison between the best of Christianity, meaning its biblical ideal, and the worst of Islam, meaning Islam as we have come to see it through the news media or sources of information that keep the ‘war on terror’ on the front burner.

In no area of theology will the Christian sense of superiority be more apparent than with respect to Christology and the way of salvation. Whatever grey zones there might be in other fields, this one is thought to be clear-cut. Muslims lack a Savior. From the Christian point of view, the Muslim deficit will not be negated by any of the positives that might otherwise be brought to bear on the discussion. Christology is the non-negotiable item that highlights the Christian advantage.

In the following, I wish to question these assumptions. I do not write as a scholar of Islam and will therefore not challenge the alleged Christian advantage by raising the profile of Christ in the Muslim paradigm. My concern is mostly the Christian Christological deficit. I will argue that Christology is no less a challenge in the Christian paradigm than it is to Islam. My choice of emphasis in this respect is deliberate even though it might leave the impression that Islam is treated more leniently. This apparent ‘unfairness’ is unavoidable because a defect in Christian behavior can more easily be represented as a Christological deficit than a similar defect in Islam. First, I will discuss defining moments in Christendom prior to the rise of Islam. Second, I will look at some of the main features of Islam as seen through the eyes of historians of late Antiquity. Third, I will specify the most glaring Christological deficit in Christianity. Finally, I will discuss a text that proposes an overlooked Christological priority in the New Testament.

**Defining Moments in Christendom Prior to Islam**

The cradle of Christianity stood in the Near East, yet Palestine, Syria, and Egypt were the first countries to come under Muslim dominion. The transformation of the political landscape was soon followed by a profound shift in religious affiliation. Contrary to a view still widely held in the West, this shift did not come about because of forced conversions under the menace of advancing Muslim armies. Historians have long pondered the factors that caused the majority of the Christian population in these countries to turn
their back on their religion, adopting in its place the new faith emerging from the Arabian Peninsula. In the eyes of the common person, including the middle class, the new religion appears to have been seen at least as an equal to the old one. In some respects it was regarded as more simple and straightforward and thus better suited to meet the needs of ordinary people.

Several features of Christian culture and history in the Byzantine Empire prior to the birth of Islam are likely to have contributed to this religious shift. Among noteworthy trends in Christianity are (1) the Christian monastic ideal of withdrawal from the world, (2) endless and fierce theological squabbles, and (3) ruthless persecution of heretics and dissenters during the long reign of the emperor Justinian (527-565), hitting precisely the areas that were first to turn Muslim. These developments can all be represented as a compromised Christology in Christianity.

**Monasticism**

Christian monasticism was in the beginning a phenomenon of Eastern piety more than of the West. Its theological underpinnings were platonic. The most influential church fathers, Clement and Origen, had adopted from Plato a dualistic view of reality. They saw the physical body as a transitory stage of human existence within which the immaterial soul was the true expression of the divine intention, temporarily imprisoned in the body of flesh. Withdrawal from the business of the world, while not the choice of all who professed Christianity, was nevertheless the ideal embraced by those who came to be seen as the most dedicated followers of Christ. In their wholehearted otherworldliness they were the ones who truly lived the Christian life.

During the fifth century the monastic movement attracted a huge number of followers to make it a highly visible feature of life in the East. One of the early pioneers, Pachomius, founded eleven monasteries in Upper Egypt before he died in A.D. 346, claiming a total of 7,000 adherents by that early date. Less than one century later Jerome claimed that nearly fifty thousand monks took part in the annual convention of this order alone. In the area of Oxyrhynchus, also in Upper Egypt, it has been estimated that there were ten thousand monks and twenty thousand virgins (Frend 1984:746). It goes without saying that such huge numbers, replicated in cities and communities throughout the Near East, expressed an ideal that would be hard to sustain, let alone an ideal that ordinary believers would be inclined to emulate. Nevertheless, the movement attracted a huge following throughout the East Mediterranean
countries. Thousands of people withdrew to the Syrian Desert during the fifth and sixth centuries, dedicating themselves to a life of contemplation. One, Simeon Stylites (d. 459), earned his name because he spent thirty-nine years of his life on top of a column fifty feet high in the desert in the vicinity of Aleppo, exposed day and night to the elements. Simeon’s spiritual pursuits attracted such fame that the pilgrim church built on the site of his pillar became the second largest church in Eastern Christendom, surpassed only by the gigantic Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. The monastic movement was not a monolith, but its dominant tenor was withdrawal from the world.

Islam, by contrast, did not take a negative view of the body or the world; it did not preach withdrawal. The ideals of Islam were simpler, less philosophic, and far more earthy and practical. Islam presented an ideal that lay within the reach of the ordinary person, and one that could be fulfilled without committing to a life of celibacy or by turning one’s back on family and society. While monasticism hardly represents all of Christianity in the immediate pre-Islamic period, it is a marker of an orientation that affords a striking and representative contrast between two conceptions of the believer’s life and commitment.

The alien anthropology of the Early Church colluded with a bleached Christology to make this development possible. The Gospel of John says that “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). “The Word” represents Jesus in his pre-existence. In John’s account this Word became flesh (Gr. sarx), adopting and embracing human existence in its most material and physical expression. This Word “lived among us.” The disavowal of the flesh and withdrawal from the world that characterized the monastic movement went in the exact opposite direction of the movements described in this text. Indeed, withdrawal compromises a central tenet of the Christology of the New Testament.

Theological Disputes

The theological disputes of Christianity began early and consumed enormous attention and energy. No subject was more controversial than the nature of Christ. Was he a created being, or was he not? That was the controversy to be settled at the council in Nicaea in A.D. 325 (Ayres 2006). What kind of human nature did he have? Was he a real human being, or did he merely appear as one? And how did his divine nature blend with his human nature? Were the two natures fused into one, or did he have two natures in one body? What happened to his divine nature when he died?
Did he really have two natures in one body or just one single divine-human nature? Another ecumenical council met at Chalcedon in 451, determined to resolve these questions (Frend 1984:741-785).

The problem was not only that the path to orthodoxy was fraught with endless controversy and impending schisms. It was also that theology, in the experience of ordinary believers, raised issues that had little bearing on people’s daily lives. Monasticism beckoned with the intimidated ideal of celibacy and withdrawal from the world. Theology offered a mental and spiritual menu whose intensity of feeling was only exceeded by its complexity. In short, the preoccupation of the church was drifting away from the common person, setting the stage for people to welcome a new faith whose tenets of belief were more concise and to the point than in Christianity, and whose general standard of behavior was seen as its equal.

Christology was not compromised in the sense that the subject was neglected but rather because it was pursued to excess, vastly exceeding the narratival parameters given by the New Testament and rarefying the subject by abstruse philosophical concepts.

**Persecution**

It did not help matters that once the church councils came to a decision on controversial issues it was binding on the members of the church whether or not they personally concurred. Large segments of the Eastern Church certainly did not abandon the teaching of Arius even though the council of Nicaea declared it to be heretical. Constantine was convinced that the survival of the state required unity of belief. It followed that unorthodox belief was a crime against the state, and thus civil sanctions of varying degrees of severity were legitimate. Stamping out dissent was accepted as the God-ordained duty of the emperor.

When all tyranny had been purged away, the kingdom that belonged to them was preserved for Constantine and his sons alone; who, when they had made it their very first action to cleanse the world from hatred of God, conscious of the good things he had bestowed upon them, displayed their love of virtue and of God, their piety and gratitude towards the Deity, by their manifest deeds in the sight of men. (Eusebius 1927:9: 9)

This tribute, greeting the founding of the Christian Roman Empire under Constantine as the culmination of divine design, comes to us from Eusebius, the leading historian of that period, who died as bishop of his native city,
Caesarea, in A.D. 339. He wrote as Constantine's contemporary, and the unreserved acclamation reflects the church's enthusiastic embrace of the emerging union of church and state. He saw the emperor as God's chosen vessel to bring about the reign of Christianity on earth. Though a man of the church, as propagandist and historian, he founded the political philosophy of the Christian state. However, his vision of this state was more indebted to the Roman Empire than to the New Testament. It has been noted that Eusebius' perspective is thoroughly politicized; his accolade to Constantine contains "no wistful regret at the blessings of persecution, no prophetic fear of imperial control of the Church" (Greenslade 1954:10). It was outside the mental perception of this uncritical apologist that protection by the state leads to religious servitude on the part of the church and that persecution of dissenters leads to religious hypocrisy even though both of these pitfalls could easily be discerned in his own day.

Christianity adapted itself to become the religion on which society would be built at the cost of shedding fundamental principles, one of which was its view of the state and the commitment to religious liberty. Under the emperor Theodosius I (379-395) the basic elements of the Christian empire fell into place. Even at such an early stage and even after the cessation of pagan imperial persecution of Christians, new incentives for persecution emerged, this time under the auspices of the Christian state. Heretics, as people who held dissenting views were labeled, were forbidden to assemble. Their churches were confiscated, and their members lost the right to inherit property. Theodosius II (408-450) followed suit by enforcing even stricter measures. He "inflicted the death penalty on those who denied the Trinity (the Arians) and on those who repeated baptism (the Donatists)" (Bainton 1966:1:103). Although it might seem strange to us, the crimes that were prosecuted with such vigor and with such fateful consequences, were tenets of beliefs judged to be aberrant.

Persecution on a large scale did not happen till the reign of the emperor Justinian (527-565). Arians, Montanists, Sabbatarians, and other dissenters were ordered to renounce their beliefs under threat of severe penalties. According to his contemporary, the historian Procopius, Justinian "engineered an incalculable number of murders. His ambition being to force everybody into one form of Christian belief. He wantonly destroyed everyone who would not conform, and that while keeping up a pretence of piety. For he did not regard it as murder, so long as those who died did not happen to share his beliefs" (Procopius 1966:106, emphasis supplied).

From the fourth century onward the official church adopted a policy of
coercion against dissidents, regarding it as a legitimate method of dealing with resistance. According to the philosopher Karl Popper, “it can hardly be doubted that with Justinian’s persecution of non-Christians, heretics and philosophers the dark ages began” (1966:2:24). Popper proposed the year A.D. 529, a year not very distant from a traditional Seventh-day Adventist marker for this period—A.D. 538 (cf. Smith 1944:590). Two items in Popper’s paradigm deserve to be highlighted. First, his criterion for calling this period ‘the dark ages’ refers to the consolidation of practices that effectively curtailed independent inquiry and the right to dissent. A coercive rule was now solidly in place in the Christian realm. Indeed, as Frend points out, the Christian Roman Empire was more intrusive and less tolerant than its pagan predecessor. “In practice, the ancient world has exchanged the guardianship of one set of divine masters, capricious but generally benevolent, for another that would brook no opposition” (Frend 1984:505).

The second point relates to the timeline of these events. If ‘the dark ages’ began roughly around A.D. 530, we are almost within sight of the rise of Islam. Less than a hundred years later the stirrings that swept the Arabian Peninsula spread to territory that had been badly bruised by the Christian internecine conflict. The call to withdraw from the world, as represented by the monastic movement, proposed an ideal for piety that was neither realistic nor sustainable. The quest for orthodoxy and unity of belief had led to a preoccupation that to the theologically austere monotheism of Islam seemed esoteric, impractical, and even unorthodox. Controversies regarding Mary and wide acceptance of the concept of the Theotokos, the mother of God, exposed additional weak spots in the Christian armor with respect to monotheism. A growing veneration of icons was gaining ground among Christians well before Muhammad began calling on his kinsmen to give up their idolatrous superstitions. In Muhammad’s original context, where the leaner monotheism of Judaism constituted another point of reference for the religious reformer, the trend in the Christian church stood in sharp contrast to the stern monotheism that would characterize Islam. In fact, the expanding Christian pantheon might even invite the thought that the monotheism of Islam arose as a necessary reform.

Persecution of Arians under Justinian, successful though it may have been in terms of decimating the numerical strength of the followers of Arius, weakened the church in the East. It is more than a curious historical quirk that the spread of Islam began where the persecution of Arians under Justinian had been most severe. The new religion adopted the spiritual ancestry of Judaism and Christianity, spoke with deference of “the people
of the book” while offering its own book alongside it, and it shared a similar view of reality. Islam might have been orthodox Christianity all the same except for the fact that its Christology, in the most accommodating view of its ambiguity on this point, was Arian.

But this Christological deficit in Islam, so incriminating in the eyes of orthodox Christianity that it had warranted the death penalty within the Christian context, is itself the item that shouts the Christian Christological deficit from the rooftops. In the very triumph of Christian orthodoxy is a Christological deficit that will prove impervious to correction because it is oblivious to the notion that there is anything to correct.

**Defining Characteristics of Early Islam**

It is impossible in a few pages to do justice to the vast literature dealing with Muhammad and the rise of Islam. Here we must be content to extract a few morsels from selected sources. The closing chapter in Peter Brown's little book *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971) gives the salient points necessary for the present purpose. While far from exhaustive, the book is very easy to read, and it offers conclusions that other scholars have generally supported.

First of all, Brown points out that Islam represented a break with the tightly knit, traditional tribalism of Arab culture. The Muslim believer, by contrast, was an individual, living his life, not as a member of the tribe, but as a finite atom before the Almighty. “Whatever he may have thought about the Christian church, the Muslim guided his conduct by exactly the same considerations as did any Christian or Jew throughout the Fertile Crescent. He, too, was a ‘God-fearer’. He, too, had faced the terrible choice of the Last Judgment, infallibly revealed to him in a Sacred Book. He, too, must think on it day and night” (191).

Muhammad, initially driven from Mecca in 622, was ultimately hailed as the one who had brought peace and unity among the feuding parties of his countrymen. When his followers decided to extend the boundaries of the house of peace after the prophet’s death in 632, it should not be seen as though they thereby embarked on a heaven-ordained conquest intrinsic to Islam. With growing influence came an increased tendency to pursue other considerations than those of the spirit. According to Brown, there was a shift in the focus of Islam just as there had been in the focus of the Christian church once it rose to political prominence. “It was the chieftains of the Bedouin tribes who created the Arab war-machine with their rude followers, and it was the style of life of this warrior-aristocracy—and not the sheltered
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piety of the core of devout Muslims—that held the empire together” (Brown 1971:194).

This is a remarkable statement, deserving of thoughtful reflection. Brown spots a spiritual aspiration, a genuine God-orientation, in Islam. This aspiration does not fully carry over into the early Muslim conquest, the latter driven by forces that are not intrinsic to the original Muslim piety. If the original piety provides a close-up of the Muslim ideal, exposing a commitment that had nothing to do with conquest or militancy, it follows that we must look elsewhere for the source of the subsequent conquest. But this also means that the evolution of Islam as a political-religious entity has been subject to erosive forces not unlike the ones that Christians will recognize in the history of Christianity. Moreover, the quest for Muslim hegemony will match up against a religious structure that was hell-bent on preserving its hegemony. In short, Islam early on adapted to the prospects brought by its increasing power and not necessarily according to a trajectory that was dictated by its spiritual aspirations.

The exact nature of the Muslim conquest nevertheless warrants a closer look. To begin with, the facts break with the stereotype of the radical Muslim in Western eyes today. According to Brown, Muhammad “had created a religious empire in Arabia almost exclusively through negotiation” (1971:193). Diplomacy rather than bloodshed also marked the Muslim advance into Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. “In the first decades of their conquests, the Arabs gained as much by treaty as by the sword: key cities, such as Damascus and Alexandria, fell because the Muslim High Command was instantly prepared to offer generous terms—protection and toleration in return for a fixed tribute” (193).

Peace and tranquility were the lot of those who lived within the walls of the growing Muslim empire. Trade, craftsmanship, scholarship, and culture blossomed. “As the storm of the Arab armies rolled over the horizon, the population of the Near East sat back to enjoy the sunshine,” (197) writes Brown. Eventually, the privileges of prosperity diffused to other layers of culture than that of the Arab conquerors. The quest for prosperity also offered an economic incentive to conversion. In what might be seen as a giant project of assimilation akin to what the United States has been in modern times, the emerging Muslim culture in the Near East became an energetic melting pot for diverse peoples throughout the empire. The door of opportunity was thrown open because “Islam made all its converts equal, whatever their racial origin” (198).

The view that Europe was saved from the Muslim menace by the victory
of Charles Martel at Tours in 732 is not shared by Peter Brown. Perhaps the notion of the Muslim menace is a fiction of the Western imagination as much as the notion of its great victory. The defeat in the West had been preceded by the fact that the Muslim center of gravity had turned eastward. Leaving Damascus behind as its capital, the Abbasid dynasty established instead its new home in the immediate vicinity of the capital of the late Persian Empire, in Bagdad, where it also felt more at home. The shore of the Mediterranean was already far from the new seat of the empire, not to speak of the outer extremity of its acquired territory such as Spain or France. Thus, “it was not the Greek fire of the Byzantine navy outside Constantinople in 717, nor the Frankish cavalry of Charles Martel at Tours in 732 that brought the Arab war machines to a halt. It was the foundation of Baghdad,” (202) says Brown.

There is more to this story than the notion that a civilized and Christian Europe successfully faced down the crude Muslim menace. The struggle was hardly a simple confrontation between good and evil. Bagdad was in 781 the site of a remarkable conversation between Mahdi, the third of the Abbasid Caliphs at Bagdad, and Timothy, the Patriarch of the East Syrian Church and the recognized head of all Eastern Christians (Jenkins 2008:16-21; cf. also the primary source, Timothy’s Apology 1928:1-90). Prominent in his own right, the Caliph is best known to history through the fame of the second of his sons, Harun al-Rashid. His conversation with Timothy is remarkable for its tone as well as its substance.

As to tone, neither of the discussants strikes a tone of superiority or condescension. On matters of substance, Timothy tries valiantly to explain the doctrine of the trinity and the person of Christ. How can God be three persons and yet one? How can Christ be a son without having a beginning? How can he be one person with two natures, one with a beginning in time and one without a temporal beginning? The philosophical categories of the Christian beliefs are daunting, such as Timothy’s careful attempt to show Christ as one begotten of God and the Spirit as a procession of God, precise language that will defy the comprehension of many even today. Daunting, too, is Timothy’s defense of God as a being without matter or form, and his apology for the immortality of the soul.

But it is the tone that should interest us the most, the tone of mutual respect, of trying to find common ground and to acknowledge it when it is found. Timothy will not yield ground on his conviction that God is revealed in Jesus, but he proves that it is no easy task to express distinctive Christian tenets of belief in comprehensible (let alone persuasive) philosophical terms. Listening to Timothy, who does most of the talking, one might wonder
whether Christians on this point have taken on an explanatory project that goes beyond the simpler narrated Christology of the New Testament. Christology certainly does not seem like a project that can hope to achieve the degree of certainty that merited capital punishment for getting it wrong, as was the case during the reign of Justinian. Nevertheless, at one point the Caliph is so impressed with Timothy’s articulation of his faith that he fairly exclaims, “If you accepted Muhammad as a prophet your words would be beautiful and your meanings fine” (Timothy’s Apology 1928:54).

When the Caliph asks him point blank, “What do you say about Muhammad?” Timothy puts Muhammad in a context that makes the latter a spiritual reformer if not quite the singular prophet that the Caliph wishes to have acknowledged.

Muhammad is worthy of all praise, by all reasonable people, O my Sovereign. He walked in the path of the prophets, and trod in the track of the lovers of God. All the prophets taught the doctrine of one God, and since Muhammad taught the doctrine of the unity of God, he walked, therefore, in the path of the prophets. Further, all the prophets drove men away from bad works, and brought them nearer to good works, and since Muhammad drove his people away from bad works and brought them nearer to the good ones, he walked, therefore, in the path of the prophets. Again, all the prophets separated men from idolatry and polytheism, and attached them to God and to His cult, and since Muhammad separated his people from idolatry and polytheism, and attached them to the cult and the knowledge of one God, beside whom there is no other God, it is obvious that he walked in the path of the prophets. Finally Muhammad taught about God, His Word and His Spirit, and since all the prophets had prophesied about God, His Word and His Spirit, Muhammad walked, therefore, in the path of all the prophets. (61)

There is a sense of confidence in Timothy’s apology, and yet his tone is not predicated on disparaging the convictions of the Caliph. Actually, the decadence of the Christian profession that I intimated at the beginning of this chapter is mitigated by Timothy’s winsome presentation: He does not come across as a person who has lost faith in the Christian confession. Throughout, however, he speaks as a person who does not think that the Christian claim to truth makes all other claims irrelevant. The level playing field that is denied to the Muslim in our time is granted to him by Timothy.

O our victorious king, in this world we are all of us as in a dark house in the middle of the night. If at night and in a dark house a precious pearl happens to fall in the midst of people, and all become aware of its existence, every one
would strive to pick up the pearl, which will not fall to the lot of all but to the lot of one only, while one will get hold of the pearl itself, another one of a piece of glass, a third one of a stone or of a bit of earth, but every one will be happy and proud that he is the real possessor of the pearl. When, however, night and darkness disappear, and light and day arise, then every one of those men who had believed that they had the pearl, would extend and stretch his hand towards the light, which alone can show what every one has in hand. He who possesses the pearl will rejoice and be happy and pleased with it, while those who hand in hand pieces of glass and bits of stone only will weep and be sad, and will sigh and shed tears. (Timothy’s Apology 1928:88)

Timothy’s analogy is more all-or-none than the subject warrants, but it has a tone of humility; it seeks to entice more than to dictate. In a subtle sense, the argument anticipates one of the keenest thoughts in the writings of Martin Luther: “Every man runs his own risk in believing as he does, and he must see to it himself that he believes rightly” (Luther 1999:108).

The Caliph at this point makes a comment that should probably be heard more as a question than as a statement of fact, “The possessors of the pearl are not known in this world, O Catholicos” (Timothy’s Apology 1928:89). To Timothy, however, such a conclusion would be too pessimistic and unwarranted. And so he answers, “They are partially known, O victorious King” (89).

How, then, are they known, the Caliph wants to know. As the conversation winds down, Timothy, in seeming harmony with the Caliph, commits to a test of true belief that transcends doctrine. “By good works, O our victorious King, and pious deeds, and by the wonders and miracles God performs through those who possess the true faith. As the luster of a pearl is somewhat visible even in the darkness of the night, so also the rays of the true faith shine to some extent even in the darkness and the fog of this present world” (89). Timothy continues by recapping some of the tenets of Christian belief, but he has put in place a test that values practice as much as profession.

At the very end of the exchange, the two parties seem won over to the imagery of the pearl and the value of possessing it. The Caliph says wistfully, “We have hope in God that we are the possessors of this pearl, and that we hold it in our hands” (89). And Timothy answers, “Amen, O king. But may God grant us that we too may share it with you, and rejoice in the shining and beaming luster of the pearl! God has placed the pearl of His faith before all of us like the shining rays of the sun, and every one who wishes can enjoy the light of the sun” (89, 90).
Less circumspect persons than the Patriarch Timothy and the Caliph Mahdi will eventually take command of the dialogue on both sides of the Christian-Muslim divide. There can be little doubt that the watershed in their relationship, the defining moment *par excellence*, came with the Christian Crusades. This initiative began at the behest of Urban II in the year 1095, carefully planned and choreographed in person by the pope. Here was one militant religion mobilizing to face another, also militant, but no more so than the Christian renegades that heaped terror and bloodshed on people on their way to the Holy City. In point of fact, the Muslim regimes that controlled Palestine at that time represented a benign rule, and the prosperity of Jerusalem itself was considerable.

The immediate antecedent to the Crusades combined misinformation, prejudice, and fanaticism. For one thing, the West had never accepted the loss of the Near East, but it had not been in a position to challenge the superior forces of the Omayyads and the Abbasids during the first four centuries of Muslim dominion. With Muslim states at increasing loggerheads with each other, the prospect of a holy Christian war seemed less daunting. Christian pilgrims had for centuries made their way to the city of their Lord, usually without incident. Beginning in the tenth century, the desire on the part of many people to travel to Jerusalem increased greatly. When some pilgrims brought back reports of problems on the way, the accounts became a pretext for action. The pope also welcomed the prospect of asserting his influence more directly in the Eastern churches. This was the background when Urban II called on the faithful to make Holy War on the Muslim infidels, proving, incidentally, that the concept of jihad, holy war, is not unique to Islam. The cause was God’s own, and for those who might die in battle, the pope promised full absolution of sin.

When Jerusalem was conquered after a protracted siege in 1099, the Christian crusaders massacred the entire population of Muslims and Jews, not sparing women and children. Steven Runciman writes that when one of their leaders, Raymon of Aguilers, went to visit the Temple area on the morning of victory, “he had to pick his way through corpses and blood that reached up to his knees” (Runciman 1980:188). For all the savagery seen in the Holy City throughout its bloody history, this massacre has hardly been surpassed. Its details are vividly portrayed to this day in history books throughout the Middle East, and its fruit was both immediate and lasting. “It was this bloodthirsty proof of Christian fanaticism that recreated the fanaticism of Islam” (188), says Runciman.
This, too, is a telling statement that we should pause to ponder. What might seem like Muslim extremism, then and now, does not happen in a vacuum. Fanaticism is not intrinsic to Islam any more than it is intrinsic to Christianity. The notion that Muslim fanaticism was ignited by a Christian antecedent fully as savage as its Muslim progeny reduces the Christological advantage of Christianity to rubble. In thought and practice, Christians had wholeheartedly embraced the concept of Holy War.

For the next two centuries crusader citadels throughout the Middle East held their ground in a sea of hostile Muslim territory, adding to the hostility with each passing day. The impressive ruins of these fortifications may still be seen by Western tourists even though their significance largely eludes them. But even as a military conquest, the Crusades ended in failure. “Within two centuries the last Crusader settlement on the Asian mainland had fallen back into the hands of Muslims, Muslims more bitter and hostile than any had been before the Holy War” (192). The moment of revenge did not come until Constantinople fell in 1453, and the atrocities then committed by the Ottoman forces must be understood against the backdrop of what Christians had done to Muslims in Jerusalem several centuries earlier (Wheatcroft 1995:1-22).

Even with the subsequent radicalization of Muslim rule, especially during the Ottoman centuries, the record of Islam in many respects surpasses that of Christendom. The Islamic civilization of the Omayyads, and even the less tolerant Abbasids that succeeded it, developed a more tolerant and sophisticated culture than the Christian West. Bernard Lewis writes that “in most respects the position of non-Muslims under traditional Islamic rule was very much easier than that of non-Christians or even of heretical Christians in medieval Europe, not to speak of some events in modern Europe or, for that matter, the modern Middle East” (1984:62).

As noted earlier, the emperor Justinian closed the Academy in Athens in 529 and burned all its books. Some of those books on philosophy and on natural science had been in circulation for a thousand years, and their destruction represents an incalculable loss to civilization. What remains of this heritage was chiefly preserved by the more inquisitive and tolerant Muslim rulers. Many of these rulers distinguished themselves favorably in contrast to their Christian counterparts. When the last ruler of the Muslim Moors was expelled from Spain in 1492 by the forces of Ferdinand and Isabella, his Christian successors proceeded with a ceremony taken straight from a page of Justinian 900 years earlier: They emptied the great library in Granada and burned all its 80,000 volumes in the public square.
Muslim tolerance did not extend only to books. Muhammad had preached respect for Christians and Jews, and his followers practiced his maxim of tolerance, tentative though it was, with greater care than Christians did despite the far more explicit injunction of tolerance preached by Christ. A case in point may be found in the large Jewish community in Spain. When Muslim warriors marched into the Iberian Peninsula less than one hundred years after the death of the prophet, they were greeted as liberators by the Jews (Cantor 1993:133ff.). Malcolm Hay writes that “while the Spaniards in general were naturally a tolerant people, hatred against the Jews was primarily the product of clerical propaganda” (Hay 1992:35). The Christians had embarked on a program of forced conversion, an idea that the Muslims, for their shortcomings otherwise, rarely seriously contemplated. When the Muslims at last were expelled from Spain during the fifteenth century, the church revived and intensified its efforts at coercing conversion (Pérez 2005; cf. Reston 2006). With the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition thousands of Jews saw their synagogues burned, their property confiscated, and their rights to practice their faith revoked on penalty of death. Many Jews fled, finding a haven of refuge in the Muslim Ottoman Empire in the East. The true friends of the Jews during this period, if they had any, were the Muslims. From the vantage point of our time, it might be well for intolerant Muslim countries today to revisit Islamic history on this point and to relearn the policy of tolerance that was practiced by Muslim rulers in earlier times.

The Christian society of Europe became everything Christ had refused to be, intolerant, oppressive, and cruel. With reference to the Middle Ages it is not an overdrawn assertion that the Creator was presented to people “as clothed with the attributes of the prince of evil himself—as arbitrary, severe and unforgiving,—that He might be feared, shunned and even hated by men” (White1948:5:738). Those who did not submit to the official faith were discriminated against, harassed, or killed. To dissenters such as Jews and Christians, speaking of the condition of these communities under Muslim dominion, the Muslim rule was generally more benign.

Islamic ideology differs from the Christian ideal that is found in the Bible because Muhammad carried a sword. If we are to believe the caretakers of the heritage of Islam, the sword is still on display today as one of the chief treasures of the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. Muhammad was an acknowledged political leader as much as a religious reformer. But many of the most important Christian leaders who are credited as great reformers were also political figures. Ulrich Zwingli became a city magistrate in Zürich, and his Protestant city council voted to drown the Anabaptist reformer Felix
Manz. According to William Estep the execution of Felix Manz marked the beginning of Anabaptist martyrdom (1996:43-48). It is fascinating that one recent Zwingli biographer merely refers to the Zwinglian reaction to Anabaptism as “harsh measures,” failing to inform the reader that the harsh measures were capital punishment (Gäbler 1986:125-131). Another Protestant reformer, John Calvin, became the equivalent of city mayor in Geneva, where he imposed a strict and intolerant rule. The most searing blight on Calvin’s Genevan rule is the burning of Michael Servetus on the charge of heresy (McNeill 1954:174). It is more than a moot point in the present context that Calvin thought the condemnation and execution of Michael Servetus justified precisely on the ground of the latter’s semi-Arian Christology (176). Servetus was willing to die for his convictions, maintaining sufficient composure in the face of the flames to hold his denial of the Trinity till the end. Servetus is said to have prayed, “Jesus, Son of the Eternal God, have mercy on me,” not “Eternal Son of God” (McNeill 1954:176).

Martin Luther was zealous for political control where his doctrine was ascendant, and there is no Muslim counterpart to Luther’s diatribe against the Jews in Luther’s day or even to this day (Luther 1971:278). When Martin Luther in 1543 wrote his blood-curdling denunciation against the Jews it caused widespread dismay even among people accustomed to shrill rhetoric. In addition to advocating the burning of Jewish synagogues and books, their forced attendance at church, and what has been seen as an understated prescient hint at a ‘final solution,’ Luther summarized that “next to the devil, a Christian has no more bitter and galling foe than a Jew” (Luther 1971:278). These Christian leaders are regarded as important messengers of truth even though they had in common the fact that important truth also eluded them. To the extent that they merit the status of religious reformers, one might do well to extend the courtesy of such a possibility even to Muhammad. No group professing Christianity might be in a position to do so with greater humility and sensitivity than Seventh-day Adventists, conscious that we, too, began our witness to Christ with a Christology that was deficient. With this background in mind it may also be possible to look with patience and generosity on our Muslim brothers and sisters who are seeking more fulfilling answers and a clearer picture of God within their own religious context.
Christological Deficits and Priorities

According to the Koran, “the Jews say, ‘Ezra is the Son of God’; the Christians say, ‘The Messiah is the Son of God.’ That is the utterance of their mouths, conforming with the unbelievers before them. God assail them! How they are perverted!” Sura 9:30 (Arberry 1955:210). Incriminating evidence like this has led many Christians to regard Islam as a religion that is incurably hostile to Christ, ignoring the sometimes ambivalent and sometimes affirming statements concerning Christ found elsewhere in the Koran. Nevertheless, to the question of whether this represents a Christological deficit in Islam, the answer must be yes.

As suggested earlier, however, the blind spot in the Christian perspective is the assumption that Christian history vastly surpasses Islam with respect to Christology. Occasional Christians have had the perception and courage to admit otherwise, pointing out that the significance of the incarnation is not simply a matter of creed or profession. In the booklet The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience, published in 1644, Roger Williams asserted as his tenth tenet that “an enforced uniformity of religion throughout a nation or civil state, confounds the civil and religious, denies the principles of Christianity and civility, and that Jesus Christ is come in the Flesh” (Williams 1842:2). Enforced uniformity means a system making use of coercion and civil penalties in matters of faith and conscience, a practice to which the church has been committed throughout much of its history and from which it has only desisted when pushed to do so by other influences. Williams’ insight means that Christianity, too, in its historical record, has a Christological deficit. It has, de facto, denied “that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh.” Denying the incarnation, assessing the depth of this belief in practical terms, is not a sin unique to Islam.

A Christology pursued on the terms of the New Testament would cut a wider swath and would not content itself merely with definitions and doctrinal formulations. In the Gospel of John, Jesus sets forth a vision in regard to his person that makes Christology subservient to theology and not an end in itself. At a critical point in the heated Christological debate of this Gospel, Jesus says to his critics, “If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father” (John 10:37-38).

The pointed hypothetical negatives in this statement set priorities for what can and what cannot be surrendered in Jesus’ give-and-take. Jesus is willing to forgo the honor of being the object of their belief, even offering to
remove himself from the picture, hypothetically speaking, if only his works are allowed to shape their view of God. His works are “the works of my Father.” As these works bring to light what God is like, they take priority over other things that this Gospel would like people to believe. Indeed, the works are placed in the category of self-evidence, less subject to bias or subversion than anything else. On the one hand, Jesus will surrender everything but the works, including the prospect that people will believe in him. On the other hand, when the works are given their due, they will bring everything else with them, obviating the need to surrender anything (John 10:38d). In the context of John’s unfolding story, this statement is a last straw offer. John thus makes the Christology of John subservient to its theology. The works of Jesus are the lingering image on the screen that is meant to transform the believer’s picture of God and shape the believer to the same image. In light of this priority, the most glaring Christological deficit in Christianity has been to downplay this point or ignore it completely.

Adding this up, we see that monasticism, theological controversy, and an evolution of belief and practices that were offensive to true monotheism preceded the emergence of Islam in the countries that constituted the cradle of Christianity. Fierce persecution on behalf of orthodox belief may also have conditioned the non-orthodox to yearn for a more tolerant rule. It is well documented that Islam, though militant, gained a foothold in these countries by methods that made it look more attractive than the Christian political dominion.

The Crusades stand to this day as a defining event for later Muslim-Christian relations. Its record has poisoned the relations between the two blocs almost irreparably, precluding posturing on the part of Christians as the representatives of a theologically and morally superior religion. A Seventh-day Adventist outreach to Muslims need not carry the burden of this Christian heritage, as is bound to happen if Adventists present themselves chiefly as a Protestant denomination, a member of the Christian bloc of power in the world, and with a Christology that is blind to the Christological deficit in Christianity. It was the vision of Robert Darnell, one of my former teachers and a pioneer with respect to Muslim-Adventist relations, that the Adventist mission must shed the trappings of such a narrow perspective. He saw in Islam, too, a genuine spiritual yearning that has been blunted in its history. This has also been the vision of Jerald Whitehouse, the leading Adventist pioneer to implement Darnell’s vision. For years, Jerald has tirelessly engaged Muslims in dialogue, respectful of their faith commitment and solicitous of embarking on a forward spiritual journey together.
“Surely they that believe, and those of Jewry, and the Christians, and those Sabaeans, whoso believes in God and in the Last Day, and works righteousness—their wage awaits them with their Lord, and no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow,” Sura 2:59 (Arberry 1955:36). Such signals, and Jerald Whitehouse’s understanding of the prophetic mission of his own community, has strengthened the conviction that the Adventist outreach must proceed quietly as a third way, conscious that true believers exist in these communities. Beginning with the acknowledgment of common ground, the call to the teachable remnant to follow him whose kingdom is not of this world applies to all believers. As I have intimated in the foregoing, a reorientation in this direction will hardly be possible unless the Christological deficit in Christianity is acknowledged and rectified. At a time of increasing polarization and militancy on both sides of the great historic divide, Jerald Whitehouse’s pioneer work toward this end represents a legacy to be safeguarded and a treasure for which Seventh-day Adventists should be profoundly grateful.

Works Cited


