



A WIDER ROLE FOR THE GÜLEN MOVEMENT CONSISTENT WITH THE PLACE OF THE QUR'AN AND ISLAM IN THE EVOLUTION OF RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING: A FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGICAL REASSESSMENT

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Abstract

This paper contends that the ideal of dialogue between people of the Abrahamic faiths is consistent with Qur'anic teaching and the essential role of Islam in religious evolution. The Qur'an provides the incentive, and a template, for faith traditions to collaborate to alleviate the current crisis of conflict. It is also the imperative for a process to reassess foundational theological concepts that inform the self-understanding of each tradition. The circumstances in which Fethullah Gülen pursued dialogue with other faith communities rather than political initiatives to protect and selectively benefit Muslim communities are considered in the context of the relationship between Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Universal history, population growth and science establish that current religious beliefs and practices are not absolute or final. Each world faith exists to provide guidelines for humanity to live in harmony and stability. The Abrahamic faith communities have an additional responsibility: to enable humanity to understand its relationship with the Divine. Regrettably, conflict between them undermines both roles. Being bound to their obligations under covenant they might precipitate changes consistent with Divine intention in spite of pursuing self-interest in exercising total free will, through negative conduct. If so, circumstances suggest it will be concurrent with Divine Judgment invoked upon themselves. It is surely better to achieve such changes through reassessment. Islam came into existence as a challenge to its pre-existing partners and to encourage reassessment of their self-understanding and practices. Its reforming role has not changed and its leaders should not be distracted by current disputation. Continuing dialogue is vital – but in parallel with a global programme of collaborative reassessment. The Gülen Movement can become the launch pad for that programme because of initiatives it has already taken: notably its education and conference programmes and proposals to establish joint Muslim–Christian universities.

²³² Preparing a doctoral dissertation at the Melbourne College of Divinity, having been admitted in recognition of prior research publications. With a Diploma in Agriculture (Roseworthy), his career was in advisory work and chemical marketing until he joined the Presbyterian Board of Local Mission, Victoria, as communications officer. On the outbreak of the Ramadan or Yom Kippur War he proposed a reassessment of theological concepts with Christians, Jews and Muslims working in collaboration. Denied support, he undertook personal research and turned to journalism. His past international conference papers have concerned Muslim–Christian relations; intertextuality of the Holy Books; globalization; and interfaith collaboration in reassessment of theological concepts. His *Trouble in the Triangle* (Compton Arch: Fitzroy, 2000), is a critical review of relations between Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Formerly founding secretary of the Jewish–Christian–Muslim Association of Australia, he is a member of the Interfaith Commission of Council of Churches in Victoria.



1. Introduction: An overview

Units of the Gülen Movement have earned a worthy reputation for openness, ready hospitality, and readiness to engage in dialogue with people of other faiths on the home grounds of other communities as well as within their own comfort zone at a time of raging international crisis. Their policy has encouraged reciprocal readiness to dialogue, and has achieved success in educational and cultural programs which was rare only a few years ago. This is consistent with the principles enunciated and pursued by Fethullah Gülen in his relations with people of other faiths throughout his career, and with his clear awareness that Islam was called in to existence with the purpose of reform through dialogue.

In his paper 'Islam's Ecumenical Call for Dialogue' (June 11, 2003) he noted that Islam made the greatest ecumenical call the world has ever seen in seeking to bring Christian and Jews together as People of the Book some fourteen centuries ago. He then confirmed that the urgency of the ecumenical task is as great now as ever. "Interfaith dialogue is a must today, and the first step in establishing it is forgetting the past, ignoring polemical arguments, and giving precedence to common points, which far outnumber polemical ones," he said. ('Dialogue is a Must', also June 11, 2003)

However, the subject of this conference, peaceful coexistence, is not an adequate aim. Our aim must be to overcome current circumstances of crisis, to establish and then maintain circumstances of harmony and stability for whatever may be the term of humanity's divinely ordained existence. This requires an understanding of the historical basis of current circumstances of crisis. Therefore, although it is important that past wounds should be set aside in pursuing dialogue at community level, history, with all the blemishes of human nature and dastardly conduct that it exposes, must be considered openly, fully and frankly in moving to another stage: reassessment undertaken by scholars and religious leaders in order to facilitate the long term aim.

An examination of its historical circumstances shows that the root cause of the current state of crisis is the development of different community self-understandings based on particular interpretations of religious belief and teaching. These self-understandings may lead to antagonistic attitudes towards people of other religious belief, and different patterns of personal and corporate conduct. It is the patterns of conduct which, in turn, result in predictable patterns of conflict. It would not matter that people held different religious beliefs if their consequent self-understanding and patterns of conduct did not lead to conflict.

Two later passages in the same statement on dialogue suggest that Gülen clearly recognizes this situation:

When those who have adopted Islam as a political ideology, rather than a religion in its true sense and function, review their self-proclaimed Islamic activities and attitudes, especially their political ones, they will discover that the driving force is usually personal or national anger, hostility, and similar motives. If this is the case, we must accept Islam and adopt an Islamic attitude as the fundamental starting point for action, rather than the existing oppressive situation...

Our beginning point must have an Islamic basis. Muslims cannot act out of ideological or political partisanship and then dress it in Islamic garb. Nor can they represent mere desires as ideas. If we can overcome this tendency, Islam's true image will become



known. The present, distorted image of Islam that has resulted from its misuse by both Muslims and non-Muslims for their own goals scares both Muslims and non-Muslims.

That statement applies equally to Christians and Jews as to Muslims. Conflict as a consequence of conduct, self-understanding and belief are intimately linked. Therefore conflict cannot be eliminated unless and until relevant aspects of religious belief have been subjected to reassessment and changes in self-understanding and patterns of conduct have been initiated.

This has been apparent since the early to mid-twentieth century, but it has been widely denied, and discussion of reassessment that might lead to a new self-understanding has been actively discouraged.²³³ [Fry, 2000 (1) P. 579] ²³⁴ [Stourton 1998 pp. 37-40] ²³⁵ [Ariarajah 1992] This reflects a fear that to admit that there may be a reason, or a need, to reassess the faith that one teaches or practices will imply an admission that one's own faith-based self-understanding may be (or might have been) a factor in generating crisis. Even to consider such an admission is a challenge to the self-understanding of dominant religious faith groups and a threat to the authority of their institutions. The perceived need to maintain institutional 'integrity' and personal authority is given precedence over enhancing prospects for world peace and stability. Contradictory responses to the conflict which is a consequence of such inflexibility may then precipitate a more pressing need to participate in dialogue.

One response — often from people who have no direct involvement in religious affairs and possibly no faith base in that sense — is based on recognition that a community is tearing itself apart, that this must stop, and that antagonism between faith-based communities must be overcome through people talking together and getting to know each other. A second response may be prompted by a sense of insecurity and fear for the stability of a system of faith that is supposed to provide the framework for a social and communal culture. This insecurity evokes a hope that through dialogue a compromise may be reached to deter a process of reassessment or make it unnecessary. A third response may be prompted by the opposite: a sense of confidence in one's system of faith and the expectation that if reassessment does result from dialogue and leads to change, the change will be consistent with divine intention.

²³³ In 1928, the International Missionary Council was widely criticized when, following its meeting in Jerusalem, it said that Christ is the revelation of what God is and what man, through Him, may become, and, referring to other religions in which Christ is not recognized as Son of God, added that "the Father had nowhere left Himself without witness."

²³⁴ In 1964 the Second Vatican Council had to consider the draft of the Catholic Church's 'Declaration on Religious Liberty', *Dignitatis Humanae*. This marked "a seismic shift" in the Church's thinking. It challenged the concept of a theocratic state and accepted limits to the Church's constitutional authority. It recognized that "men should act on their own judgment, enjoying and making use of reasonable freedom, not driven by coercion but a sense of duty"; it placed religious freedom first among all human rights, noting that "This demand for freedom in human society chiefly regards the quest for the values proper to the human spirit ... the free exercise of religion in society." The challenge to the Church's self-understanding was such that a group of senior Council Members planned a "coup" to prevent it being adopted. However an equally determined group of progressive members wrote to Pope John Paul XI that the opposition was "a source of extreme anxiety and very disquieting," and seeking his direct intervention. He appointed a special commission with "balanced" membership, and the declaration was adopted.

²³⁵ Suspicion of interfaith dialogue among some Christians surfaced in the open controversy at the WCC's fifth assembly (Nairobi 1975). For the first time, five persons of other faiths were invited to a WCC assembly as special guests and took part in the discussions of the section on "Seeking Community", where the dialogue issue was debated. Plenary discussion of the report of this section highlighted the deep disagreement within the church on the issue of dialogue. Fears were expressed that dialogue would lead to the kind of syncretism ... or that it would compromise faith in the uniqueness and finality of the revelation in Christ, or that it would threaten mission seen as fundamental to the being of the church itself.



This mix of responses and motives means that almost without exception, guidelines for dialogue programs that have been published steer participants towards getting to know each other personally, then their cultural and religious practices, and finally an overall framework for their belief. They steer people away from theological considerations which actually provide the basis for their self-understanding and, ultimately, the attitudes and conduct that results in conflict. This is illustrated by notes 1. and 4. of Guidelines issued by the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington.²³⁶

The purpose of interfaith dialogue is to increase our understanding of and respect for other religious systems and institutions, thereby increasing our appreciation of their values. Dialogue should enhance our sensitivity to the feelings of all professing religious people in their relationship with God. *Good dialogue should, in addition, result in the deepening of the faith of every participant.*

There is valid purpose in dialogue regarding an issue which could become desirable or even mandatory for interfaith action as the result of the dialogue.

There is, however, valid purpose as well in dialogue which takes place for its own sake — for the elucidation of subjects and for the forthcoming of the persons and feelings of the participants.

Participants in dialogue should represent their faith group views, but may also share their views as individuals. Thus the rich spectrum of conviction within any faith group can become manifest [Emphasis added.]

However, the stage of crisis that has been reached requires us to meet for conferences such as this and makes it quite apparent that our essential aim cannot be achieved through programs of dialogue alone. Fundamental theological reassessment is required to enable humanity to develop an understanding that humanity is one, and an enlightened understanding of the relationship under covenant between it and the Divine Creator.

This paper examines the concept of covenant, how it has come to be recognized, and the convergence of covenant-related prophesy, to establish that the Gülen Movement is an appropriate instrument through which the process of theological reassessment can be stimulated, promoted and supported. Its starting point is the place of humanity in creation. But if the Gülen Movement has a significant role to play, a brief review of the circumstances in which it has taken root is appropriate.

When Fethullah Gülen was born the world was in crisis.²³⁷ Governments and their people were preoccupied with a conflict between a dictator, Adolf Hitler, leading Germany, and a small group of other European leaders who were said to be protecting the world from the threat of Hitler's excesses. This was in sharp contrast with the adulation with which industrial leaders had greeted Hitler a few years earlier because of the economic miracle he was credited with overseeing in Germany. Few people realized that the crisis hinged around the abuse of covenantal obligations that the Christian

²³⁶ The InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington. Guidelines for Interfaith Dialogue. http://www.religioncommunicators.org/interfaith_IFCguidelines.html Accessed 3/10/2007

²³⁷ At least three dates are given for Fethullah Gülen's birth^(a), but such uncertainty is of no consequence. The immediate impact on pre-school children of the crisis of war is greater on those born in war-torn areas and seeing family and friends killed around them than on those not born in such areas. My earliest understanding of the macro-crisis environment of the mid-twentieth century dates from my primary school years towards the end of the war. ^(a)[The Gülen Movement website notes April 27, 1941; the associated Rumi Forum for Interfaith Dialogue website, November 1938; and Gulay 2007, citing Roy, April 27, 1938.]



powers claimed to live under. Even fewer were prepared to talk about it. The key circumstances are summarised thus.

The European powers had capitalized on the particular interpretation of Divine Covenant adopted by the Christian Church, its doctrinal theology and its self-understanding, in subjugating and exploiting peoples throughout the non-European world over a period of four hundred years.

During that period, due to both the dominance of the European powers and the religious self-understanding of Muslim leaders, the circumstances of the Ottoman Empire declined.

The European powers had systematically abused the same doctrinal theology over a much longer period to subjugate and oppress the Jewish communities of Europe.

That oppression reached such a level that a group of Jewish leaders established a Zionist movement to seek a homeland in which to escape oppression in Europe. They applied their particular interpretation of the Divine Covenant under which their people believed they lived, and sought to occupy the region from which their forebears had been expelled almost two thousand years earlier.

When competition between the European powers led to the First World War, the dominant colonial power, Britain, faced the real prospect of defeat. Its government and the Zionist leaders saw great mutual benefits from entering into an arrangement that had no formal agreement or documentation, initially, other than the Balfour Declaration. What it did involve was further abuse of religious understanding by both parties.

Among the outcomes from that arrangement were the entry of the United States into the war as an ally of Britain; the occupation of key oil fields in Iraq by Britain before Germany could do so; the invasion of Russia by the Allies when Russian Jews who were favoured by the Balfour Declaration failed to keep the Bolshevik Government in the war as an ally on an eastern front and thus prejudiced Britain's position; a long-drawn-out war with traumatic consequences; the provision of massive additional funds for Britain — and its survival; the degradation of both Germany and the Ottoman Empire whose leaders had aligned it with Germany out of fear of a Russian adventure in support of Britain; and the expectation that the establishment of a Jewish State would result from the allocation to Britain of a mandate over the territory of Palestine.

The Nazi Party in Germany came to power under the leadership of Adolf Hitler who experienced messianic visions after being gassed during the closing days of the war; was haunted by the tragedy of Germany's loss as a consequence of Jewish intervention through the Balfour Declaration. He made good use of nine months in prison to begin dictating his policy document, *Mein Kampf*, in which he made his intentions perfectly clear.



“I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord.” [Watt, 1969]

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While Mustafa Kemal set about restoring the pride, prestige, security and economy of a reconstructed Republic of Turkey through military success and the abolition of the Ottoman Sultanate, the Great Powers of Continental Europe, preoccupied with reconstruction and economic recovery, tried to persuade themselves that Hitler and his religious ideas were of little consequence, and Britain struggled to maintain control of Palestine – torn apart by conflict between Jewish immigrant settlers and Arabs of both Muslim and Christian heritage who saw their homeland being progressively alienated – because without it the loss of its eastern empire was almost certain. Turkey’s reconstruction was accompanied by the severing of the role and influence of Islam from state structures, a range of Kemalist social, educational and administration reforms, the Europeanization of culture and language, the substitution of civil for religious codes, and the elimination of ethnic differentiation.

That reconstruction was complete on November 10th, 1938, when Turkey mourned its founder’s last breath; Europe woke to a new phase of Hitler’s Jewish Question, and Fethullah Gülen may have been taking his first breath.

A few months earlier, at a conference at Evian, the Western powers had refused to agree to a program of Jewish resettlement to relieve Hitler of his “Jewish problem”. The Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica* immediately aggravated the situation by publishing a long study saying that the “supremacy” of Jews had become particularly “disastrous for the religious, moral, and social life of the Hungarian people” and it was therefore not a question of proposing a theory of “segregation”, but of “approving its concrete application in a country represented as being ‘the most solid and indestructible fortress of Christianity’”. [Fry 2000 (1) p. 791] Hitler responded, telling the British Government that “if there is no satisfactory solution in the near future, I will simply have to solve (the Sudeten question) by force.” [Toland 1977 pp. 637-638 ; Churchill 1948 pp.242-243] Britain obliged by forcing Czechoslovakia to accept the Munich Agreement and surrender Sudetenland to Hitler, [Bullock 1993, p. 633], and on November 9, 1938, Hitler confirmed his message to the Jews and the world with the devastation of ‘Crystal Night’ and the accelerated repatriation of Jews to Czechoslovakia and Poland.

Britain rapidly lost control of the crisis in Palestine and its grip on its empire was threatened; Hitler increased the pressure for Jewish resettlement but no country would oblige; he threatened to invade Poland and, under intense pressure from the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish

²³⁸ These selected quotations from Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* are successively from pages 103, 109, 278, 512 and 60. Having come under anti-Semitic influence from many quarters, and being steeped in the anti-Semitism that was part of the Church’s history and culture, Hitler maintained that the Protestant Churches failed to rescue Germany from “its most mortal enemy, since its attitude towards Jews just happens to be more or less dogmatically established”; that the Christian Social Party failed because its anti-Semitism was based on “religious ideas instead of racial knowledge”; that Christ “took to the whip to drive from the temple of the Lord this adversary of all humanity ... [and] in return ... was nailed to the cross”; that both Christian denominations [he meant Catholic and Protestant] looked on indifferently at systematic bastardization of the nation by the Jewish black parasites, making it every man’s “sacred duty, each in his own denomination, [to make] people stop just talking superficially of God’s will, and actually fulfil God’s will, and not let God’s word be desecrated”; and “hence today I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord.” [Watt, 1969]



Agency for Palestine, Britain gave Poland a guarantee of intervention.²³⁹ [Fry 2000 (2) pp. 960-970] When Hitler's bombs began to fall on Poland, Britain and Germany were at war. Hitler had the upper hand and pressed for negotiations to solve his Jewish resettlement problem. No one budged. Hitler overwhelmed Holland, Belgium and France, and expected Britain to negotiate. It didn't. Churchill, determined to regroup and continue the war, mounted the Dunkirk evacuation. Seeing his hopes trashed, Hitler issued instructions for "The Final Solution".

Four years and a Holocaust later, the war ended. Reconstruction began again. The Jewish community took full advantage of the intense Western Christian guilt complexes brought on by the fate of the Jews, and resettlement was agreed to with Palestine as the Jewish homeland. Another three years later, the British Government knew it faced imperial and economic collapse if it enforced the plan against the interests of the Arab people. But the United States had glimpsed the same vision of enormous benefits from assuming the role of sponsor and protector of the proposed Jewish State that had inspired the Balfour declaration thirty years earlier. It anticipated an enormous boost to its political and capital strength, and ready made access to exploit the geography and the resources of the Middle East by using Palestine as a foothold with the support of its Jewish constituency. The administration believed that such a partnership would complement the establishment of the Bretton Woods Organizations and the Marshall Plan which were planned to enable it to secure control of the international economic system, future resources and markets, and domination of world affairs with a minimal need for armed forces. [Wala 1993; Pollard 1985]

Fethullah Gülen was in the last phase of his elementary schooling when the Partition of Palestine took effect on May 15, 1948 with the Declaration of the State of Israel, and, in the wake of unprecedented political corruption and manipulation of voting in the United Nations, 32,500 troops from five neighbouring Arab nations crossed the border to confront 30,000 troops of the Jewish Hagana in the Arab-Israeli War. [Fry 2000 (2) pp. 1474-1483] The first of seven major wars directly related to the establishment of the State of Israel in less than sixty years had erupted.

But that was the lesser of two concurrent events. It was only the outward indication of the other. The principal event was the conjunction of prophetic outpourings from its two partner faiths which the Church had long maintained could never happen: the Qur'anic Night Journey and Maimonides' prediction of circumstances in which people of Israel would return to their ancestral home.

This takes us to our real starting point.

2. History and Systematic Religion

The solar system has existed for about 4.5 billion years, and universe for about 14 billion years. The current state of knowledge indicates that human habitation may be possible for about 5 billion years. (Wright, 2005)

Although evolution of the progenitors of humanity occurred over a period of four to six million years, humanity, as we understand ourselves, has been on earth for somewhat less than 200,000 years.

²³⁹ See letter, Weizmann to Chamberlain, The Times, London, Wednesday, September 6, 1939, p. 8.



Significant genetic variation dated ca. 35,000 BCE indicates continuing evolution. (Lahn 2005) The first evidence of systematic religion ²⁴⁰ is dated about ten thousand years ago: a couple of thousand years after the close of the most recent cyclical ice age, The population of the world at that time was about four million. (McEvedy 1978) It took ten thousand years to increase to about 375 million at the time of the European Christian push for colonies. That push was triggered by the occupation of Constantinople by Muslim forces and coincided with the beginning of the exponential growth phase. The tripling of the population to one billion, about 1825, then took just 15 generations. But, barring catastrophes, the nine-fold increase from 1825 to the projected peak of nine billion about 2070 will have taken a mere ten generations: 250 years.

From our vantage point two thirds of the way up the cliff face of the world population curve, chart 1, it is apparent that the development of systematic religion through an evolutionary process has been a prelude to life on the imminent human population plateau.

That development preceded the fantastic search for knowledge of how existing matter, both biological and inert, came in to existence, functions and interacts, and the consequent technological development that has provided the capacity to enable humanity to secure its future as it progresses along the plateau — at least in a physical sense.

We are at a critical stage of humanity's existence. The need for a framework of beliefs and guidelines that will sustain humanity in terms of human relationships, moral conduct and responsibility in matters affecting the human environment for whatever might be the Divine Authority's intent, is absolute.

Humanity, potentially, has a lot of living to do. It is our grandchildren who, only sixty years from now, must guide and manage — or at least respond to — humanity's circumstances and conduct at the peak.

three traditions which claim divine revelation, rather than rational reasoning, as the basis of their faith each take Adam as a starting point, make mention of Noah, then take up their story with Abraham. The implication is that Abraham took a leap out of a religious vacuum and that Judaism then developed under divine guidance, more or less in isolation of religious activity. Shaman and totems had given way to priestly polytheistic systems with semi-divine kings to the north, east and south (some claiming full divinity), with an overlay of Indo-Aryan Vedic sacramental philosophy of

²⁴⁰ The term 'systematic religion' as used in this paper is not restricted to religion subsequent to the introduction of written texts or the development, imposition and systematic study of authoritative doctrinal and dogmatic statements. Neither is it restricted to systems that involve ritual or priestly figures, although available evidence indicates that from the earliest era of identified systematic religions, c. 8,000-7,000 BCE, persons claiming or recognized as having healing or divining capacities (sharman) generally assumed communal religious leadership to some extent. The term is used to refer to any system of enquiry or belief organized on a communal basis and seeking to understand the meaning of human existence and to establish or regulate laws and ethics for communal living, or to identify and honour a power or authority that initiates or sustains life and is greater than the group or its members and which exercises influence in their lives and their affairs.



life in the eastern region, (Ling 1968 p. 3; Flood 1996), but there were also a series of codes of conduct.²⁴¹

3. The Concept of Divine Covenant: Stage 1 – Evolution of an Idea

At an early stage in that process of exposure, Abraham perceived and responded to a divine command to leave his ancestral home, to migrate to a land that he would be shown, settle, and found a new nation. Somewhat later, at Moreh, he experienced a vision. Neither was a covenant involving three essential attributes: a divine promise, an obligation linked to it, and a penal clause, either explicit or implied, in the event that the obligation was not honoured. There was a command associated with a promise, but no penal clause and only the implication that the promise might not be fulfilled if the command was not acted upon.

The covenant followed only after Abraham obeyed the first command and survived a range of testing experiences. When it was imposed in a vision after he had finally settled at Hebron he was traumatized, but he did not spontaneously understand that his life's work was to be the basis of a process that should enable humanity to live in harmony and stability for an indefinite period after it reaches its plateau. An understanding of covenant began to evolve when the basic covenant, having been revealed, was invoked and reinforced in many stages involving interaction between people of a number of faiths.

Each of those faiths has received insights and inspirations relating to one or another aspect of covenant at some time. The concept of covenant — and in particular the notion that all humanity is interdependent and has responsibilities to share and obligations to honour — is not the sole province of the Abrahamic faiths. The key phases that have influenced the understanding of the concept to date are summarized in a series of clusters arranged according to the era in which relevant ideas were first expressed. Each phase is placed in historical context by an ID number in a panel below the dateline on chart 1, and the interaction between the faiths can be traced along diverging and intersecting time lines in chart 2.

Abraham was traumatized when Yahweh told him his descendants would be exiled, enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years; that they would return with many possessions and that judgment would *also* be passed on the nation that enslaved them because its wickedness had not ended. Yahweh then made the specific commitment that: “To your descendants I give this land, from the wadi of Egypt to the Great River, the river Euphrates.”

²⁴¹ Over several thousand years Ur was swept by waves of Semitic Accadians and Amorites; Aryan Hurrians from Iran invaded the region during the 18th century BCE; and for about seven hundred years an Asian Sumerian people had provided the basis of the population. Abraham's ancestry is therefore speculation, (Armstrong 1993 p. 11), but the religious environment was very complex, and at Ebla, a centre of scholarship, religion and commerce between Haran and Canaan, at least twelve gods were worshipped, and creation was seen as the act of a deity. (Matthiae 1981, Gordon 1987, Pettinato 1981) Contact with a wide range of belief systems was clearly a vital aspect of Abraham's formative experience as he migrated from place to place successively. Exposure to belief in divine intervention and punishment, certainly: but a sense of covenant, no. [Armstrong 1993 p. 11, suggests that the migration occurred between the twentieth and nineteenth centuries rather than the eighteenth, and that Abraham may have been a wandering chieftain.]

Chart 1

The Human Population Explosion

Systematic Religion: Evolution, Covenant & Crisis

Domination: Use & Abuse of Resource

Divine Covenant
 Successive stages in the evolving understanding of the nature and consequences of Divine Covenant are discussed as clusters of ideas in section 3 of this paper. The clusters are placed in the era in which the ideas were first expressed or committed to writing for the Holy Books. This sequence is *not* the same as the era in which the events referred to occurred or are said to have occurred. The clusters and the era in which the ideas were expressed are identified by numbers in the panel beneath the date line.

- 1) Adoption of totems
- 2) Shamanism
- 3) Adoption of deities, sacrificial practices under priestly direction
- 4) organized settlement, kingdoms.
- 5) Vedas

Parallel developments: Kingdoms of Israel & Judah Hebrew prophesy
 Asian & Greek philosophy
 Messianic expectations
 Buddha, Confucius
 Zoroaster

Jerusalem Destroyed
 again. Jewish dispersion

Jerusalem Destroyed:
 Jews exiled

Jesus of Nazareth

300-year Crusades
 Maimonides

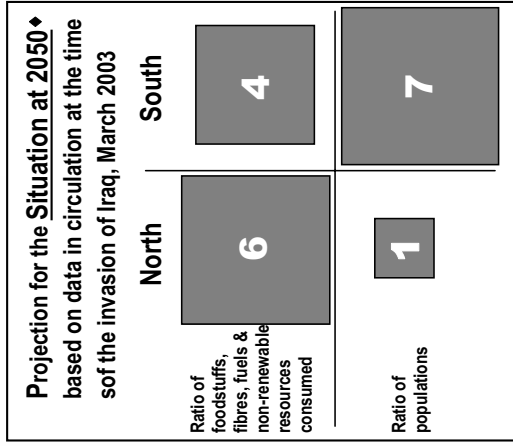
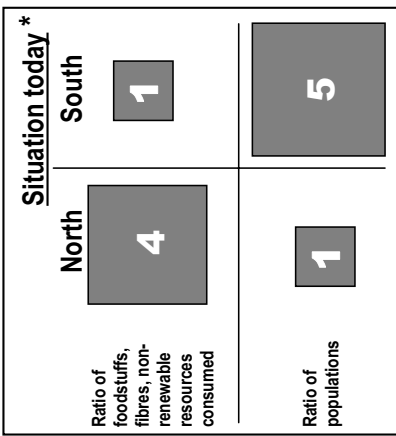
The Prophet Muhammad
 Islam

Nicaea

Reformation
 European Colonial Era
 Fall of Constantinople

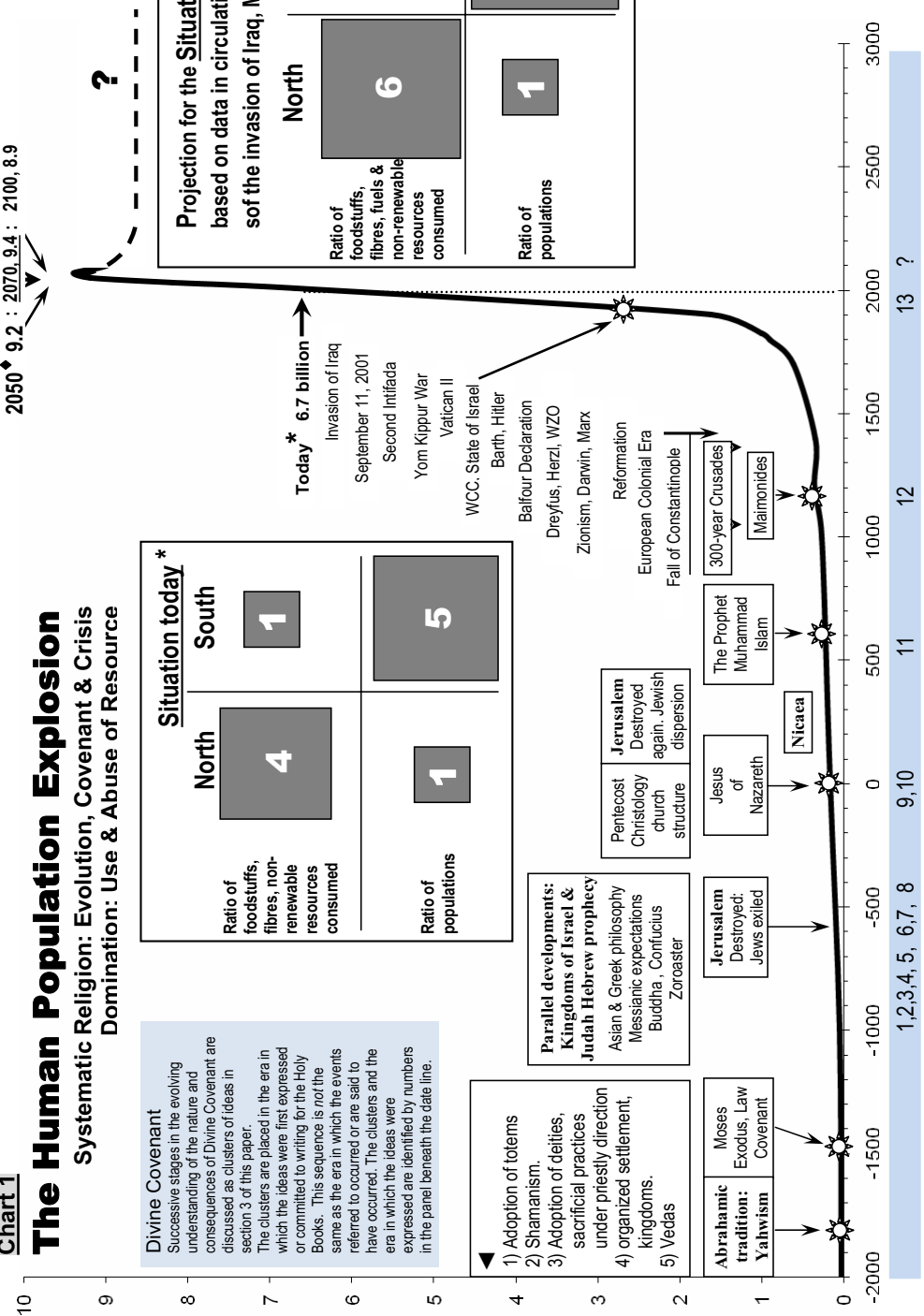
WCC, State of Israel
 Barth, Hitler
 Balfour Declaration
 Dreyfus, Herzl, WZO
 Zionism, Darwin, Marx

Invasion of Iraq
 September 11, 2001
 Second Intifada
 Yom Kippur War
 Vatican II



Peak
 2050 ♦ 9.2 : 2070, 9.4 : 2100, 8.9

Today * 6.7 billion



World Population in Billions

Time Scale: 2000 BCE – 3000 CE

The North: Countries with European Christian or Jewish heritage which constitute the Western World. **The South:** All other countries, essentially Asia, Africa & Latin America; previously called the economic Third World. **Population data:** (1) McEvedy, Colin & Richard Jones 1978. Atlas of World Population History. Harmondsworth. Penguin (2) UN DESA. 2007 World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision. Data, projections, trend lines. **Resource usage and projections** have been compiled from published trade data and industry projections for production and demand for basic foodstuffs, fibres and non-renewable resources. Ian Fry MCD/NL Oct 2007

Evolution of Systematic Religion and the Concept of Covenant

Chart 2

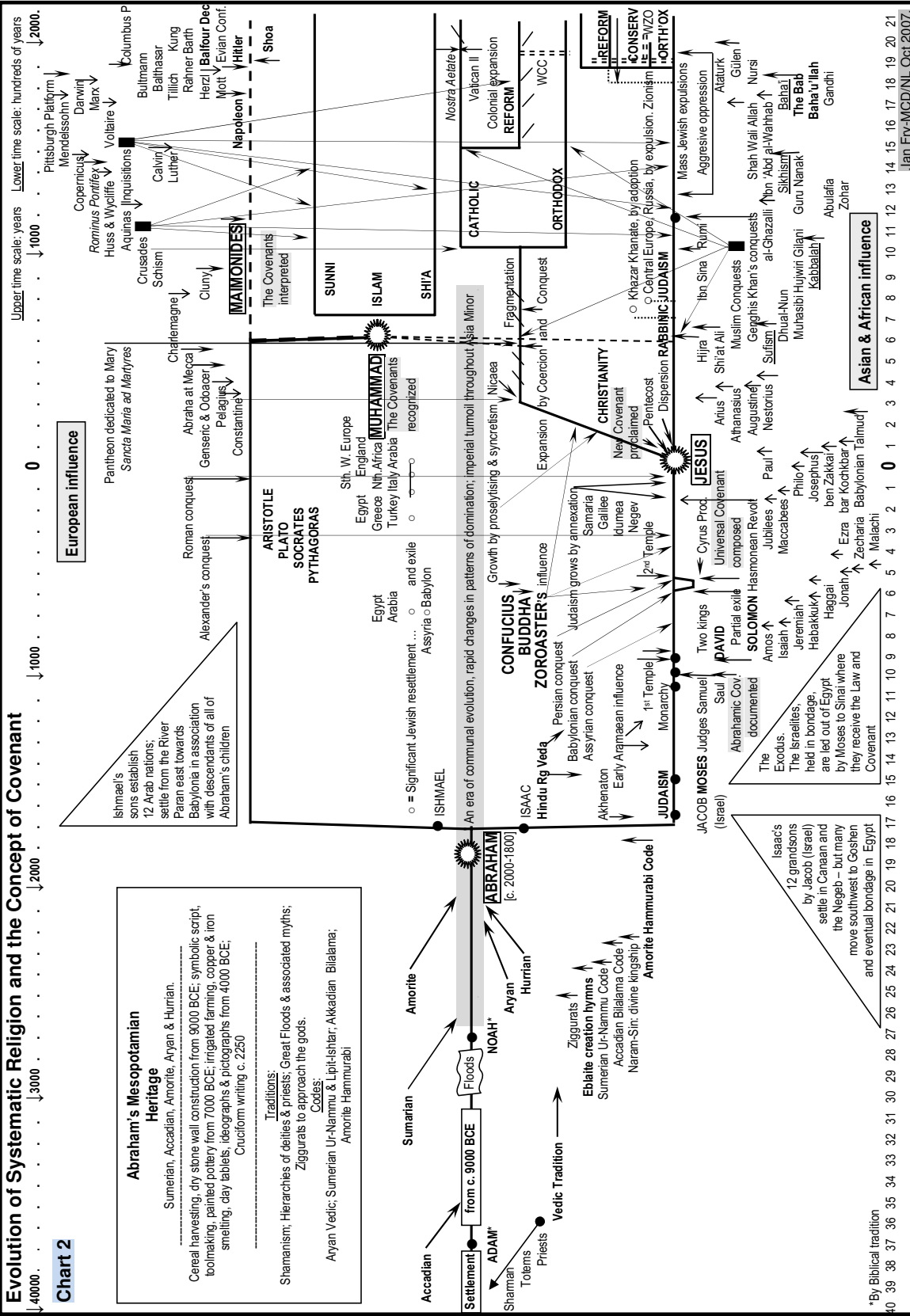
Abraham's Mesopotamian Heritage

Sumerian, Accadian, Amorite & Hurrian.

Cereal harvesting, dry stone wall construction from 9000 BCE; symbolic script, toolmaking, painted pottery from 7000 BCE; irrigated farming, copper & iron smelting, clay tablets, ideographs & pictographs from 4000 BCE; Cuneiform writing c. 2250

Traditions:
Shamanism; Hierarchies of deities & priests; Great Floods & associated myths; Ziggurats to approach the gods.

Codes:
Ayan Vedic; Sumerian Ur-Nammu & Lipit-Ishtar; Akkadian Bilalama; Amorite Hammurabi



*By Biblical tradition



Abraham's problem was that ten tribes occupied the territory straddling the Jordan, including the Syrian Desert — the stronghold of the Amorites — whose wickedness, according to the statement attributed to Yahweh, had not ended. Trouble was to be expected if Abraham tried to settle those areas. Furthermore, he had not been given specific rules, guidelines or codes of conduct on which he and his descendants would be judged, nor a schedule of punishments, nor any pattern of worship practices or liturgies. The Abrahamic Covenant was based on human conscience, intelligence and capacity to determine right from wrong. That was to be adequate to ensure that the party under covenant acted appropriately.

It was clearly implied that judgment would be exercised and punishments imposed on the same basis to Abraham's household and successors and on those occupying the Promised Land at that time. The word "also" in the expression: "I will pass judgment *also* on the nation that enslaves them," would have been superfluous if equality of judgment and punishment was not intended. Exile and enslavement were to be imposed as punishment for breaches of the Covenant which, again by implication, included abuse and oppression of the neighbours of Abraham's descendants.

The Hebrews were not being treated in isolation. Judgment of their actions would be based on their adherence or non-adherence to the Covenant, while Yahweh would continue to exercise the same authority and judge other communities on the same basis: their wickedness — meaning abuse or oppression of their neighbours — but *not on the basis of their worship*.²⁴² The exclusive application of the worship provisions of God's relationship with humanity applied *at that stage* specifically to Abraham's successors. Nothing suggested that other forms of worship or the recognition of other gods should be suppressed. Abraham's household and descendants were simply obliged to honour Yahweh and no god *other than* Yahweh.

Similarly, the covenant did not qualify or contradict in any way the direct relationship between Yahweh and all humanity. Yahweh's love, mercy and justice was universal.

But Yahweh's commitment to Abraham was the trigger for a chain of traumatic events of far-reaching consequences. It prompted Abraham's wife to propose that he should father a child through her slave girl so that Yahweh's promise could be fulfilled; coercion of the slave girl to become a surrogate mother; a consequent family feud and expulsion of the slave-girl; Yahweh's intervention, the return of the slave-girl, and the birth of Abraham's first son, Ishmael.

The subsequent birth of a second son, to Sarah, exacerbated the jealousy and precipitated Abraham's decision, taken reluctantly, to banish Ishmael and his mother after receiving God's assurance that although the family was divided and the responsibility to pursue the Covenant would pass to one son, both sons would lead great nations.

From that point the Hebrew text follows only Isaac and his descendants. Ishmael is written out of Biblical history. He is referred to only when other family members cross his path. However there is sufficient information available²⁴³ to establish that the branch of Abraham's family that Sarah and Isaac rejected, settled to the south and the east, from the eastern edge of Egypt through Central Arabia towards Babylon, and became a significant influence in the development of the Arab nation.

²⁴² A selection of relevant references: Genesis 12:17-20; 15:14; 18:20-21; 19:13-14, 24-25.

²⁴³ Genesis 25:5-6,18 (J), and the Book of Jubilees which forms part of the Jewish Pseudepigrapha.



All of Abraham's descendants were subject to the foundational Covenant with its components of divine promise, obligations and penalty clause.²⁴⁴ Key points are summarised, thus:

Responsibility for honouring the covenant passed through two generations of Abraham's descendants with little to distinguish them and lengthy periods of apostasy before family affairs again triggered dramatic developments. A group of Abraham's great-grandsons on Isaac's side sold one, a sibling, Joseph, into slavery through a group of great-grandsons on Ishmael's side; Joseph saved his criminal brothers from famine by arranging their settlement in Egypt. A later descendant on Isaac's line, Moses, married into the apostate line of another of Abraham's children, Midian (one of six born to a third woman), then, later, received help from his father-in-law, (a Midianite priest), to organize the people of Israel after their escape from oppression in Egypt. Israel received a comprehensive code of laws and practices from Yahweh through Moses but immediately fell into apostasy also.

²⁴⁴ The region which Abraham apparently allocated to Ishmael and Ketura's sons included the district of Paran, where Ishmael's half-brother Midian settled, and also extended into central Arabia. Isaac's descendents passed through Paran on their way to and from Egypt. Moses married a daughter of a Midianite priest, Jethro, and received help from him in establishing a legal system for the Israelites after the Exodus. Within the region were areas that were already settled by the families of Lot's sons/grandsons who had been conceived in drunken incest against Lot's will, the Ammonites and the Moabites. Lot's household had ceased to be a part of Abraham's wider household after he and Abraham parted company following their return from Egypt. They were not included in the covenantal circumcision event, they were subsequently barred from the assembly of Yahweh for misconduct and reverting to pagan practices, and their core community was slaughtered by the Israelites under Moses.



Yahweh sternly rebuked Israel, but ratified and then renewed the Covenant through the leadership of Moses, but *not* by succession through his line.

The core of the Midianites, having rejected the most basic tenet of the Abrahamic Covenant and adopted idolatry, led the Israelites to again do likewise and to fall into immorality.

Moses was immediately instructed to extract full vengeance for the sons of Israel and the ensuing slaughter was carried out in Yahweh's name.

The events foreshadowed by Yahweh at Hebron had come to pass. The penal clause of the Abrahamic Covenant had been invoked successively, through Israel's bondage as a consequence of Jacob's failure to adhere to it, and when the Midianites felt the full force of Yahweh's judgment under covenant. Equality of divine judgement had been demonstrated through the fate of the Egyptians, and the Israelites had been enabled to return to the Promised Land.

The Israelites then fought battle after vicious battle to occupy portions of the Promised Land but, in due course, out of frustration for having to do so, they decided that a loose community structure with dependence on periodic divine guidance through judges and without direct leadership controls did not provide security. They wanted a king. They got one, and then began documenting their history.

The immediate stimulus was the establishment of the monarchy: a crucial event in the evolution of its nationhood and self-understanding. It was expected to ease conflict with the peoples whose territories they were yet to occupy with a guarantee of protection under a divine covenant, and to usher in an era of privilege under Yahweh's protection.

The events from Horeb through the Exodus to Sinai and to the establishment of the monarchy were therefore documented first. Once the process was underway, the amount of detail recorded increased. Then the need to record the nation's pre-history became more apparent but, with only oral history to rely on they had to leave huge gaps and reliability was uncertain. They had largely lost touch with their pre-Egypt heritage and information for the period of several hundred years prior to Sinai was very sparse.

On this basis the sequence of clusters begins with the call to Moses, the Exodus, the delivery of the Mosaic Covenant at Sinai, and Yahweh's prompt threat to destroy the apostates and to narrow the base of the covenant community to a remnant led by Moses.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁵ Some authorities maintain that the J and E strands were all written more or less concurrently, in the tenth century rather than in the tenth and eighth respectively, and that they should be classified by place of composition, either Judah as an undivided kingdom or Israel. For this reason, and the logical sequence of their content, some passages from the E strand are included with passages from the J strand in the first cluster.



4. The Concept of Divine Covenant: Stage 1 – Evolution of an Idea

Cluster 1: 10th - 8th cent. BCE ²⁴⁶

The first cluster, written in the tenth century, relates to the period immediately after the Kingdom of Israel had been established. It records that Israel's leaders recognized that, as a community, they had been rescued from oppression by divine intervention under a special relationship imposed by Yahweh, that they accepted specific obligations under the Mosaic Covenant of Sinai; undertook to bow to no other god than Yahweh, and acknowledged that serious consequences might result from apostasy and failure to honour obligations under covenant.

Cluster 2: 10th cent. ²⁴⁷

The writers acknowledged Yahweh's absolute authority in commands imposed on Abraham in a divine covenant during an earlier period; that his successors were to bow to no other God and to accept ongoing responsibility to maintain the specific Abrahamic Covenant; and that Abraham's successors divided into two streams, through Isaac and Ishmael.

Cluster 3: 10th cent. and later ²⁴⁸ Straining to recall the origins and pre-history of their community, they acknowledged the divisions within Abraham's family, the succession through Isaac and then Jacob, Jacob's failure, and the community's bondage and rescue. They tried to glimpse their pre-history, and recognized creation as an act of God.

Cluster 4: 8th cent. ²⁴⁹

By the eighth century the competing kingdoms of Judah and Israel faced increased external influence from pagan and polytheistic kingdoms including the Assyrian Empire. Israel's King Ahab introduced the worship of Baal; Judah became a vassal kingdom, a hotbed of idolatry, and apostasy was widespread.

The primary stage of Israel's prophetic era began at this point with the inspired work of Hosea, Amos, Isaiah and others who recognized that Yahweh's authority is universal; judgment and corrective punishment is imposed on both individuals and communities or nations; and the agency through which punishment is administered may be no less corrupt or unworthy than the party being punished.

Cluster 5: 7th, early 6th cent ²⁵⁰

The dramatic prophetic period continued. Elijah and Jeremiah each understood that Yahweh's relationships are both personal and communal; that Israel would be subjugated for its apostasy, but that a remnant would survive so that it would rise again to pursue its continuing role in Yahweh's plan. Jeremiah also anticipated that a messianic figure, 'a righteous branch springing from David', would secure Jerusalem in peace – provided the Covenant was honoured.

²⁴⁶ Exodus 3:6 E, 7-8 J, 16-20 J; 32:9-11, 14 J; Numbers 14:19-25 J

²⁴⁷ Genesis 12:1-7 J; 13:14-16 J; 15:1-4 J & E?; 15:13-16 E?; 18 J; 16:9-10 source ?, 16:11-12 J

²⁴⁸ Genesis 26:3-6 J; 26:24-25 J; 28:13-17 J; 32:27-29 J; 2:5-4:26 J; J portions of chapters 6,7,8 & 9; 8:21 J

²⁴⁹ Genesis 21:12-13 E; 22:2 E; 22:16-18 Source ?; 28:20-22 E; 46:3-5 E; Hosea 2:7,9-10,13-23; 14:1-8; Amos 3:1-2; 8:4-7,14; Isaiah 6:1-3; 1:2-4, 9, 24-28; 6:13; 11:1-6, 9-11

²⁵⁰ 1 Kings 18:17-18 D; Jeremiah 23:4-6; 30:4-11; 31:31; 33:14-26; 2 Samuel 7:11b,16 source ?; 2 7:12-15 D



Editors backdated this understanding to relate it to the oracle of Nathan, David's reign and Solomon's succession.

Cluster 5: 6th cent. ²⁵¹

Rampant idolatry in Assyria triggered the ministry of the prophet Zoroaster, but the circulation of the RgVeda, completed ca.900, was also a factor. It was basically socially constructive but Zoroaster denounced its polytheism and some aspects of its teachings. [Zaehner 1977] Zoroaster's stringent monotheism influenced both Cyrus of Persia and Second Isaiah in exile. They both concluded that Israel's God and Persia's God were one. But Second Isaiah also realized that God has a covenant with all humanity and that Israel is to exemplify the nature of that relationship. Editors backdated that realization also, inserting it in Genesis and Exodus as if it had been a fundamental belief from the earliest days of Abraham and his predecessors.

Cluster 7: Post exile 6th/5th cent. ²⁵²

Jonah, also inspired by the experience of the Exile, realized that God's love and compassion is for all who repent, not only those who were obligated under the Abrahamic or Mosaic Covenants.

Editors acted again, inserting an array of critical passages into Genesis and Exodus which had been compiled from three to four centuries earlier. The insertions included the expanded creation story; the Universal Covenant through Noah; a greatly expanded statement of the Abrahamic Covenant, including that circumcision was to be a sign of the Covenant; a redefinition of the land promised in perpetuity to Israel, reducing it to the land of Canaan and, in so doing, tacitly acknowledging that Ishmael's descendants had been blessed and were occupying the balance of the territory under covenant, while Israel's covenant was to relate to Isaac.

But they also inserted passages relating to circumstances after Abraham's death. They noted that: after Jacob/Israel had destroyed the idols, Yahweh confirmed that benefits to flow to his descendants were because of *Abraham's* obedience; Yahweh's name was not disclosed until Moses received additional commands in Egypt; future protection had been made conditional on absolute obedience to Yahweh prior to Sinai; Israel's role as a kingdom of priests with stronger conditionality of covenant was imposed at Sinai, and that there would be continuity of punishment for breaches of the Covenant, They also inserted the 18th century Amorite Hammurabi Code into Book of Covenant without acknowledging in any way that it was only known to the Israelites because of the Exile.

Those additions represent the major flowering of Israel's understanding of Divine Covenant and it happened because of its interaction with diverse peoples who were also struggling to understand their relationship with God. However the editors should not be criticised for doing so. They were concerned to lift the self-understanding and commitment of Israel. They were not to anticipate the confusion that their action would later cause.

Cluster 8: Post Exile to 2nd cent. BCE ²⁵³

²⁵¹ Second Isaiah 42:5-8; 43:8-12; 44:24, 28; 45:13

²⁵² Jonah 3:4-10; 4:1;10-11; Genesis 1:1-2:4 P; 8:15-17 P; 9:1-17 P; 17:4-8 P; 17:19-21 P; 28:3-4 P; 35:11-13 P; Exodus 6:4-9 P; 15:26 D; 19:3-6 D; 19:5-6 D; 20:5-6 source ?; 20:23 to 23:33 D ?; chapters 25-31; 35-40 P

²⁵³ Malachi 1:11-14; 2:17-3: 5; Jubilees 6:1-38



Then there was a dramatic change of direction. Malachi asserted that the failure of Israel's priestly system had brought the era of prophecy to an end, pending the arrival of a Messenger to restore the relationship between Israel and God. And in a stunning work that was relegated to the Jewish Pseudepigrapha, the writer of Jubilees asserted that the Universal Covenant with all humanity, only recently inserted with the story of Noah, was the basic covenant. The Mosaic covenant, he insisted, was a continuation or renewal of the Universal Covenant. [Van Ruiten 2003 p.190; Barnstone 2005, p.223].

Cluster 9: 1st cent.BCE ²⁵⁴

Those new understandings were extended by other writers whose works are also excluded from the canon.

The Qumran Community believed that Israel was condemned by misconduct during the Hasmonean expansion [Barnstone 2005, p.223]; that it would be the faithful remnant that provided a vehicle for the renewal of the Covenant of Sinai; and that the rigid discipline in conduct and acceptance of communal and personal covenants that it imposed on those who wished to join it was a requirement for renewal. [Evans 2003 p.59]

Philo regarded covenant as a matter of God's gift of grace, law and justice being reflected without restriction in those who might have responsibility for human affairs. It was not a matter of a contract imposed or negotiated between God and a person or community, and it was not essential to express or conceptualize religious belief or personal obligations. [Grabbe 2003 p. 257,266].

Cluster 10: 1st - 4th cent. CE ²⁵⁵

According to the authors of the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus taught that the Mosaic Covenant obliged Israel to contribute to the life of humanity, but that the substance of law — good relations with neighbours — determined every person's relationship with God, and that he believed himself to be the fulfilment of Malachi's expectations.

However Jesus' disciples and later adherents gradually departed from that teaching.

Paul, writing ca.55-59 CE before any of the Gospels were in circulation, implied that Israelites who rejected Jesus forfeited a covenantal relationship with God to those "of the promise" and that descendants of Abraham who were not through Isaac had never been part of the covenant. The writer of Hebrews, ca.60-96, taught that the Christian "presence" is superior; the Mosaic Covenant was abrogated and Christ had "obtained" a more excellent one; that the 'old' covenant was at fault, not the people subject to it; Jesus' promises are "better", and Christ is a mediator between humanity and God. Ephesians, ca. 90-95, rejected the later prophets' teaching about God's personal covenantal relationship with all humanity, and stated that gentiles were "without God" until Jesus provided "access in one Spirit to the Father." The writer of John's Gospel, ca.90-110, insisted on a one-track salvation: Jesus was the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by him.

²⁵⁴ Qumran Manual of Discipline, Section 1; Damascus Document; Philo, Mut. 51, 52; Somm. 2

²⁵⁵ Matthew 5:13-16; 5:17-20; 6:7-15; 11:2-6; 25:31-34; 26:63-64; Luke 13:34-35 ; 9:34-36; 22:14-20; Mark 16:14-16; Acts 3:25-26; Romans 9:3-8; Hebrews 8:5-9, 13; 9:11-14, 13:20; Ephesians 2:11-22; John, various chapters.



Then, as the church took a grip on the future of imperial affairs, it adopted the Athanasian Creed, ca.381-428, and rejected all other notions of covenant. Whosoever will be saved must hold the Catholic Faith whole and undefiled or, without doubt, he shall perish everlastingly. That was not a matter of enhancing faith by clarifying teaching; it was a case of rejecting a basis for faith and abrogating the teaching of Jesus.

Cluster 11: 6th cent.²⁵⁶

The consequences of that creedal statement, and the conduct that followed, triggered the ministry of the Prophet Muhammad and the dictation of the Qur'an.

The framework of the Qur'an is that the scriptures of all three communities comprise 'The Book', and, concerning covenant, its essential elements correspond with the teaching of the Hebrew prophets and Jesus of Nazareth.

They can be encapsulated thus: the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Christian and Universal Covenants are all valid, but no covenant relates to David.

The paramount Qur'anic consideration in covenant is submission to the will of God in one's conduct and in honouring all moral obligations; recognition that divine judgment is the prerogative of God alone; anticipation of judgment for transgressions on that basis and the need to monitor one's own conduct and not to assume automatic salvation after acknowledging one's sins. Repentance is a matter of the heart, not the mouth, and one must not look for benefits through personal or material intervention or intercession.

Paradise is for all who live according to God's will, not only 'People of the Book', and Sinai did not abrogate the Abrahamic Covenant which continues to bind all descendants through Ishmael to Muhammad as the 'Seal of the Prophets'. Sinai was an extension of the Abrahamic Covenant that binds only those descended through Isaac. Both Jews and Christians have breeched covenants that they acknowledge and are subject to judgment accordingly. Believers who accept as valid any of the divine covenants are bound by the same covenantal concepts of obedience to the Law, and there is no need for separate confirming covenants.

The universal covenant embraces all humanity with obligations that relate to all living creatures: not only humanity.

Quite specifically, the Qur'an maintains that Jews are still part of the Divine Plans and rigidly subject to covenant as the people chosen for a particular role. The prophecy of "The Night Journey" anticipated that if they again transgressed against their neighbours they would again suffer Divine retribution. It was not a prophecy that they would transgress, because they, like everyone else, have the facility of absolute free will. But it was a very definite statement that in the event of a further communal transgression they would be subject to exemplary consequences.

²⁵⁶ The Qur'an: Sura 2:62, 83-96; 3:64-80, 98-109, 113-120, 144-148, 183-188, 199; 4:46-48, 152-159; 5:1-5, 7-43; 7:188; 17:1-10; 18:110; 20:116-128; 21:78-81; 27:91-93; 29:14-22; 33:7-20, 38-40; 37:100-138; 48:28-29; 52:1-28.



Cluster 12: 12th cent.²⁵⁷

The preeminent 12th century Spanish Jewish scholar, Moses Maimonides, accepted the validity of Muhammad's ministry but rejected Qur'anic belief that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. In spite of scathing criticism of the great "stumbling block" of Christian theology he saw a role for each of Judaism, Islam and Christianity in bringing humanity to understand its relationship with God.

Disagreeing with the Qur'an, and thus playing into the hand of the Church, Maimonides wrote that David's succession was under covenant and that a Messianic King would arise from his line. He foreshadowed the return of the dispersed of Israel to the Promised Land under the Covenant of Sinai and predicted that their return would be associated with a war between powers of great evil: Gog and Magog. His ultimate prediction, corresponding with Malachi's belief that prophetic capacity would, in due course, return to Israel, was that the return would be a prelude to an era free of famine and war; that Israel would dwell securely with its prophetic capacity restored; that "the occupation of the entire world will be solely to know God," and that "the world will be filled with the knowledge of God as the sea fills the ocean bed." But the Church disagreed. The Messianic Era was here and now, it said, under its delegated management.

Cluster 13: an opportunity lost, and the 19th-20th cent.

Two hundred and fifty years later, Muslim forces occupied Constantinople and the Church's situation changed significantly. It did not wish people who held power under its patronage to trade with, or reach political accommodation with, the powers of Islam. It used various mechanisms, including its versions of covenants to coerce the principalities and powers into a massive crusade to regain ground and suppress Islam. It did not succeed. It further undermined relations between the communities of faith, inhibited any moves towards reconciliation, triggered a competitive push for territories and initiated the European Colonial Era. This was to be managed on the basis of the Athanasian Creed and contrary to every other understanding of covenant.

The pivotal document was the bull *Romanus Pontifex*, issued in favour of Portugal by Pope Nicholas V in January, 1455, little more than a year after the Ottoman occupation of Constantinople in May, 1453. Portugal was to enjoy absolute power over people and lands that might be discovered in the New World.²⁵⁸

But the first of a series of critical documents, the bull *Dum Diversas* had already authorized, promoted and legitimized slavery in any areas where Islam was present. It was issued a year prior to the occupation of Constantinople, in May 1452.

"We ... [grant to King Alfonso the faculty]... to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms,

²⁵⁷ The Mishneh Torah, volume 14, The Laws of Kings and Their Wars, chapters 11, 12.

²⁵⁸ *Romanus Pontifex* reflects a particular interpretation of the New Covenant: that the temporal head of the Church exercised authority delegated by God; and that the teachings of the Prophets and Jesus which were guidelines for relationships between people and personal conduct towards one's neighbours could be ignored without regard for Divine Judgment. It grossly exceeded the parameters of the Athanasian Creed. While the creed demanded absolute acceptance of the Catholic Faith it did not presume to hand the responsibility for judgment and punishment to the Church. It anticipated the return of Jesus, that he would judge the living and the dead upon his return, and that in the meantime either judgment would be left in abeyance or saving grace would be exercised by God.



dukedom, principalities, dominions ... held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and ... to convert them to his [and his successors] use and profit..."²⁵⁹

The church hierarchy had totally rejected the concept of Universal Covenant and the guidelines for conduct towards one's neighbours. The understanding of covenantal responsibility which had been developed through interaction between people of a wide range of experiences, and which had been edited progressively into the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian New Testament, should have prompted them to reflect on what the future might hold. They ignored the teaching that judgment may be imposed and extend through future generations as a consequence of communal wrongdoing: they sought to choose which aspects of covenant they would respond to.

In 1869, against the backdrop of the European Colonial Era and turmoil in Europe, the Philadelphia Conference of Reform Rabbis adopted a platform that said the purpose of the ending of the second Jewish commonwealth had been to realize the priestly mission entrusted to Israel to lead the nations to know and to worship God, and the Messianic aim is the union of all men as children of God confessing unity of God and a call to moral sanctification: not a restored Jewish state under David's descendants. [Meyer 1988 p. 256]

But later, responding directly to the impact of Christian-Jewish relations in Europe, Theodore Herzl wrote in *The Jewish State* that the Jewish question is no more a social than a religious one; that Jews shall not be left in peace and that the only solution was to make it a political world-question to be settled by civilized nations. [Herzl 1896 p. 2]

Again, the Church did not agree. *Civilita Cattolica* published a statement that to reconstitute Israel is against the prediction of Christ Himself and Jews must remain dispersed to render witness to Christ by their existence. [Minerbi 1990 p. 96]

But in line with Britain's aspirations not to be defeated in The Great War, Arthur James Balfour wrote in 1917 that: "His Majesty's Government (favours) the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object." [Isaacs 1995 p. 202]

Then two Christian leaders who had both been affected by that war responded in quite different ways. Karl Barth wrote first, (*Romans*, 1922) that Israel and the Jews have not been cast off. They have been "veritably entrusted with the oracles of God ... the Risen Lord is no founder of a new religion ... (and God) overcometh the unrighteousness of the existing order..." [Barth 1968 p. 396]

Then, as already noted, Adolf Hitler followed with his infamous statement in *Mein Kampf*: "I am acting in accord with the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord ..." [Watt 1969 p.60]

5. The reality of Shared Covenant: a requirement for dialogue and reassessment

During the past five generations the conjunction of prophecy generated within two of the three primary Abrahamic faiths has involved the conduct of all three, and, with the declaration of the State

²⁵⁹ Various translations and histories of the document are available. Some indicate that it was issued to both Spain and Portugal. This extract: www.romancatholicism.org accessed August 20, 2007.



of Israel and its consequences, every aspect of Divine Covenant that has been illustrated progressively though four thousand years of Biblical and Qur'anic history and human interaction is being illustrated again.

This interaction confirms the reality of divine covenant. In doing so it also confirms that each of the Abrahamic faiths owe their origin to inspiration and revelation, and that they are each legitimate instruments of God's will with a continuing role tightly obligated within covenant.

Several circumstances have therefore been demonstrated.

The Divine Covenants under which each of the Abrahamic Faiths came into being are firmly in place, but in circumstances that none of them welcome or, generally, appreciate.

The people Israel are the primary instrument through which humanity will be enabled to understand and respond to its relationship with God; the prophetic understanding that a remnant would remain to re-establish its communal function after any or each successive breach of covenant and punishment has been confirmed; and in current circumstances the role of the reinvigorated remnant is to be a catalyst to precipitate change to the benefit of humanity at large and consistent with Divine Will. Israel is a very reluctant catalyst. Its people find it very difficult to acknowledge that they are the focal point in conflict from which the dominant and privileged Christian Western World – which they see as their protector and with which they are intimately enmeshed – will emerge with its position of relative privilege and authority reversed.

The Christian Church's role is to be a vehicle to proclaim the Good News of the love of God for all humanity on the basis of the teaching of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, through whom the Gospel was delivered as an extension of the Hebrew experience and as a pattern for relationships and conduct to enable humanity to live in harmony and stability. Through the misinterpretation of its role, the misconduct of its hierarchy and gross exploitation by commercial and political powers acting on its self-understanding, it has basically failed in its mission, and in the eyes of the world-at-large it faces an uphill struggle to establish its credibility and fulfil its role.

The role of the Prophet Muhammad and the establishment of Islam as the third Abrahamic faith, generated through the line of Abraham's first born son, Ishmael, was to confirm those who had gone before, to correct errors of understanding, and to lead and stimulate reform in both religious belief and personal and communal or corporate conduct. The pursuance of reform in obedience to Divine command remains the basis of its Divine Covenant which it must pursue while restraining those elements within its ranks who – responding to the need to offset the exploitation and degradation of a significant proportion of the world's people – have taken precipitate action to accelerate the pace of change.

The conduct that brought about confirmation of these roles relates directly to the prophecy revealed in the critical Qur'anic passage, The Night Journey, and to Maimonides' prediction of the circumstances of the return of the people Israel to The Promised Land.

For most of its history from the seventh century CE the Jewish community was in no position to transgress – as a community – against its neighbours. It was scattered, fragmented and constantly oppressed by the Church and its associated powers – the amorphous Christian gel. That situation changed, quite quickly, with the preparation of Herzl's plan for a homeland for Jews in Palestine and the establishment of the World Zionist Organization to implement it. Measures taken to implement the plan constituted the transgression. [Aarons & Loftus 1994; Lilienthal 1953, 1978; Tessler 1994; Fry



2000(2)] Adolf Hitler then fulfilled the role of the Scourge foreshadowed by the Qur'anic passage. A remnant remained to return to the Promised Land, to restore Israel as a cohesive community and to provide a focal point for the efforts and aspirations of those remaining scattered in the Diaspora, and to pursue Israel's prophetic role under Covenant.

But, while the transgression was entirely a matter of absolute freewill, it was prompted by, and was a consequence of, the abuse of authority and breach of Covenant by the Christian community, its leaders and powers associated with it during the long and painful experience of its institutional growth and the European Colonial Era. Hitler and his Alliance constituted one of the 'persons' of Maimonides' Gog and Magog. The remaining powers of the Christian Western World — the Allies — constituted the other.

In fact current world crises need not have erupted around the establishment of the State of Israel if a different approach had been taken to resettlement. It was predicated on the assuagement of the guilt complexes of the Western Christian powers and the churches for their role in bringing about the Shoah, and the assumed desirability of repatriating all people who considered themselves as Jewish to the region in which the religion of their forebears originated. It was then precipitated and brought into effect by the corruption and blackmail exercised by those pushing for a decision by the United Nations to partition the Mandated Territory of Palestine. [Aarons & Loftus 1994 pp. 168-171; Fry 2000 (2) pp. 1481-83, 1955-56] These situations and actions compounded breaches of covenant by both the Jewish and Christian communities.

If a reassessment of the theology of covenant which determines communal self-understanding and conduct had been undertaken prior to, or immediately after World War Two, and if the economic and political powers had responded appropriately, events could have unfolded in a radically different way.

A paradigm shift is now necessary to avoid further rapid deterioration and consequences which may go far beyond inhibiting the development of harmony and stability in humanity's affairs on the plateau.

The Muslim community of Dār al-islām need not have become involved in a crisis which was essentially a matter of Christian-Jewish relations. Its relations with the Jewish community had been quite sound. However it did become involved because its people shared the territory being partitioned to establish the State of Israel; they were among those most deeply affected by the European Colonial Era; and they see their moral, social and cultural norms being undermined by Western (thus Christian) influence. Furthermore, as a result of a key phase of the conflicts centred on Palestine and the City of Jerusalem, the Muslim World Community now enjoys financial, political and cultural influence as great as at any time in its history, even allowing for the peak of power enjoyed by the Ottoman Empire. [Fry 2000(2) 1785-1820]

The key phase was the partial oil embargo that was imposed against the USA and Holland in retaliation for the resupply of arms to Israel by the United States which enabled Israel to continue the Ramadan or Yom Kippur War and end direct hostilities without having to negotiate a settlement of the concerns of the Palestinian people. The embargo enabled the source countries to dramatically



raise the price for their crude oil.²⁶⁰ With a massive new flow of ‘petro-dollars’ the source countries, many of which were Muslim, were able to fund aid and development programs in underprivileged countries for which those countries had been begging, as well as their own development. Hospitals, schools, mosques, universities and joint investments flowed freely. The prestige and influence of the benefactors rose accordingly. So did interest in Islam.

6. The Way Ahead, and a Wider Role for the Gülen Movement?

Each community under covenant has a potentially critical role in securing humanity’s future. If they act in concert, the course towards harmony and stability can be relatively smooth. If they do not: ruggedness and trauma can be anticipated, but the outcome in either case must be the same. A dramatic shift in influence and privilege from the Western world to the balance of the world; realignment of priorities in resource allocation; a dramatic lift in the circumstances of countries that are currently in a state of degradation and depression, and an equally dramatic shift in patterns of personal, communal and corporate conduct in the Western world will inevitably take effect under the Universal Covenant.

A particular obligation of each of the Abrahamic faiths is to enable humanity to better understand its relationship with the Divine. If the resolution of the current world crisis is seen to be to the benefit of humanity-at-large, then it follows that *if* that resolution is seen to be at the initiative of the Abrahamic faiths, or as a consequence of interaction between them, it may lead to global recognition of a relationship between humanity and the Divine. However, there is little doubt that if current leadership fails to act on this opportunity it may, in the immediate future, be responsible for leaving people of other faiths, or none at all, with the belief that this God business is all a figment of Abrahamic imagination. The outcome depends on the people involved. None are bound like robots or puppets. They all enjoy authority and the opportunity to act totally on free will. The only thing that binds them is their obligation under divine covenant.

There appear to be four alternative pathways to stability and harmony – or five if the leadership groups of all three faiths act in concert.

Israel and its supporters, for whom the security of Israel is paramount, take two concurrent steps: 1) to negotiate an end to the Palestinian crisis directly with the Palestinian people, and 2) to initiate the redirection of global governance and resources by using their influence directly on the political economies of the West and by collaborating with the Non-Western powers. This would remove the Palestinian Question from the international conflict equation, dramatically change Israel’s relations with those people who see it as a tool perpetuating Western domination and oppression, and make the US military umbrella totally redundant. There could be no clearer demonstration of Israel’s existence under covenant.

²⁶⁰ The countries from which the Western world was, at that time, sourcing the bulk of its petroleum requirements had been struggling to obtain anything like a realistic return for their commodities. The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) had been established but its members efforts to achieve a fair share of revenue or effective participation in production were constantly thwarted by oppressive collusion by the cartel of oil ‘majors’ and their governments. That situation changed dramatically when a group of Arab countries – allies of Palestine but not all members of OPEC or directly involved in the war – imposed the partial embargo and raised prices. The West screamed “cartel”, but it was crying “wolf”.



The Christian Churches initiate a reassessment of fundamental theology in collaboration with leaders and authorities of its partner Abrahamic faiths who then, together, use their influence on the political and economic powers of the West to ensure the redirection of global governance, authority and resources. Muslim scholars and leaders take the same path: initiate a reassessment of fundamental theology in collaboration with leaders and authorities of its partner Abrahamic faiths who then, together, use their influence on the political and economic powers of the West to ensure the same redirection of global governance, authority and resources.

A breakdown in international relations results from the crises in the Middle East; the redistribution of resources and authority follows, accompanied by the redrawing of international systems of governance, authority, financial management and capital investment. But the process is different. It involves collaboration between all interested parties in the Non-Western world, excludes the Western world, and results from the non-Western powers coalescing (as they are tending to already) around complications flowing from the Israel-Palestine imbroglio.

The first option requires a dramatic change in dominant attitudes in both the United States and Israel, and there is no evidence that change is imminent. People of influence in Israel's affairs do not believe that the Christian Churches will ever change their fundamental theology and self-understanding, or influence the conduct of their adherents sufficiently to ensure security for Israel and safety for Jews in the Diaspora.

The second is hardly achievable because of the Vatican's absolute resistance to a process of theological reassessment or renewal; the inability of the World Council of Churches (in spite of strong activity in interfaith dialogue) to act as a vehicle for rapid change because of the arrangements under which it is constituted and operates, and the determination among the Western Powers to maintain their position of privilege with near-complete disregard for any guidance from the churches.

Given the strained relations between Western governments and the Muslim world at large; the fact that the Islamic Conference is concerned only with relations between states; and because Islam does not have a centralized body of authority that can readily take initiatives in matters of religion except, perhaps, the Saudi Arabia-based World Muslim League (Rabita), this leaves the fourth option – a total breakdown in international relations – as the most likely.

However it is clearly preferable that such dynamic change, with consequences that can not readily be identified and quantified in advance of the event, should take place with the steadying influence of one, if not all, of the communities of faith which are bound under divine covenant. In this regard the Gülen Movement is in a potentially critical position.²⁶¹ Although there are Muslim organizations in

²⁶¹ People of religions that do not have a perception of a divine being, or divine intervention, may well understand a simple schematic scenario with the Abrahamic faiths identified by their initials, J, C and M, and with their responses to divine covenant, and the consequences of failure to honour their respective obligations, summarized thus –



many countries that have been established to secure or negotiate in support of their communities, and to offset Islamophobia through dialogue with other faiths, there are none with the philosophical approach, experience, competence and influence of the umbrella Gülen Movement. The initiatives that Fethullah Gülen and his colleagues have already taken suggest that they may be able to initiate an appropriate process for reassessment, bringing together scholars and leaders of each faith to work together on a continuing program.

The scheme of cooperation ought not be limited to like-minded organizations within, or involving, only Islam, Christianity and Judaism, whether with, or without, the formal involvement of the institutions of those partner faiths. It ought welcome participation from scholars other than those of the revealed religions. There are certainly many potential partners for the process. To list them in this paper is not appropriate, but an outline of the rise of organizations set up to facilitate interfaith dialogue or to serve minority faith communities is appropriate.

Chart 3 indicates when and in what relative numbers such organizations have been established. The earliest ones were single faith support groups or, as in the case of the Muslim-Christian Association in 1918, reactions against the Balfour Declaration and the activities of the Zionist communities. No organizations that were established prior to World War Two for the purposes of dialogue, cooperation or the protection of minorities involved direct membership of institutions of the Abrahamic faiths. They were founded by concerned individuals who, in most cases, had strong institutional links, but membership was individual.

In the years following World War Two the emphasis was heavily on Christian-Jewish reconciliation, except in the United States where there was a proliferation of single interest and multiple interest religious and civil rights groups. Since the establishment of the State of Israel and the rise of interfaith tension and conflict there has been a corresponding rise in initiatives following each related war. The Iranian crisis, the decision of the United States to provide Israel with direct military aid, and Israel's confrontation with Syria in 1963 prompted a sharp rise in the organization of Muslim groups in the US, then a dramatic overall increase in activity followed the Six Day, Ramadan and first Gulf Wars. (The phenomenon of the establishment of a rash of single interest and multiple interest religious and civil rights groups in the United States occurred again following the Ramadan War, but with a disproportionate emphasis on the defence of particular Christian-group interests.)

During the 1960's and 1970's some Christian churches and institutions took a direct interest in interfaith organizations and activities, and Christian theological training institutions began to add the study of non-Christian religions to their curriculum, but they also closed ranks and placed greater emphasis on teaching the concepts which their partner faiths disagreed about. Of special significance

The inadequate response to its task by J led to C being brought into being. The misconduct of C led to M being called. C's continuing misconduct induced the transgression of J which triggered the application of prophecy from M (the Night Journey). C then provided all three parties involved in the prophecies: two powers of evil for the prophecy from J (Gog and Magog), and the Scourge, Hitler, for M (the Night Journey). Through conflict with M, J is now the catalyst in precipitating conflict between C and M in circumstances that bring covenantal retribution upon C and benefit for the whole of humanity long term. However the scenario is not yet played out. The geographic and physical circumstances of both J and M are such that it is virtually certain that if they do not act to help resolve the situation, the consequences of a continuation of current policies will be catastrophe for both of them as well as bringing degradation upon C. The features which are central to their beliefs and self-understanding – the State of Israel and Jerusalem, and the heartland of Dār al-islām, Mecca – lie at critical points in the Middle East zone of conflict.



were the establishment of the Vatican's Secretariat for Non-Christians, and the World Council of Churches' Unit for Dialogue with Living Faiths and Ideologies.

The consequences of the Ramadan War, the oil embargo, the Gulf War and the associated implosion of the Soviet Union then encouraged universities to become more directly involved, organizing conferences and research programs. The biggest increase in Muslim organizational activity in the USA, and the broadening of educational curricula followed the Kosovo Crisis. That pattern continued through the 1990's, and several universities established centres for interfaith studies and dialogue, or inter-civilization studies: the University of Malaya possibly being the first.

However, since September 11, 2001, the dark mood of foreboding and the realization that the world does indeed face a crisis linked to both religious self-understanding and its abuse, has boosted the level of interfaith activity in all fields. The resource-use blocks in chart 1 indicate the critical nature of the point we are at in human history. The dominant assumptions in the Western world concerning its relationship with the Non-Western world are illustrated by the projections for future resource consumption which are based on data current at the time of the 'shock and awe' invasion of Iraq. They indicate that the assumed relationship is totally unsustainable on two grounds. First: the impact on the environment if the projected consumption levels in the West were to be 'achieved', regardless of any efforts by the Non-Western world to achieve comparable consumption levels. Second: the inevitability of retaliatory conflict when human relationships are abused by such disproportionate resource consumption. No amount of interfaith dialogue could possibly placate the mass of people if that pattern were to become the reality.

Also, since September 11, 2001, additional universities have established centres for dialogue studies (including LaTrobe and the Australian Catholic University). Privately constituted and funded centres (such as the Weeramantry International Centre for Peace Education and Research, Colombo) and the World Futures Council have also been established, and the flow of new initiatives is being maintained at a frenetic pace. [For a selected chronology of the establishment of significant organizations and institutions illustrating the pattern of developments see endnote²⁶².]

²⁶² The institutions and organizations named here have been selected and listed to illustrate the changing emphasis in international concern and initiatives relating to the interfaith relations and the crisis in the Middle East.



The significance of the contribution that Fethullah Gülen and his colleagues in the Movement have already made is best appreciated by relating it to the circumstances in which he became involved.

By the time Gülen abandoned elementary education and began reading religion with his father and Hacı Sitki Effendi, efforts had been stirred in Turkey to reverse some of the Kemalist Reforms and to bring its domestic codes into line with the liberties and rights subscribed to by adopting the Charter of the United Nations in which the country was entitled to a seat – having broken its neutrality in the closing stages of the war against Germany to benefit from post war association with the victorious Western powers.²⁶³ As a result, some degree of religious freedom had already been restored, religious instruction was allowed upon request at state schools, a faculty of divinity had been established at the Ankara University, and the Sufi Brotherhoods were being revived.

It was then that Gülen became interested in the works of Said Nursi who was said to be the inventor of Interfaith dialogue because of his correspondence with the Pope and the Orthodox Patriarch in an effort to bring Muslims and Christians together in opposition to Communism. By the time his mentor died in 1960 and Gülen began giving lectures himself, the Middle East had reached another Arab-Israeli war involving the Great Powers – the Suez Crisis. He travelled twice for the Haj, in 1968 and again in January 1973. His experience of Saudi Arabia and the Eastern Mediterranean on the second pilgrimage would have still been prominent in his memory when the Ramadan War broke out nine months later, but at that time his principal concern appears to have been religious recovery and domestic reform at home, and his preaching focus remained firm: love, right behaviour before God, the requirements of the Qur'an, tolerance, human rights, justice, community cohesion, democratic participation, and the need for the religion of Islam to be given its rightful place as an influence in the life and education of the community.

However, after the Ramadan War his foreign contacts and interest in foreign affairs appear to have increased steadily, and when he returned from Mecca and Medina to Turkey by the land route following his third Haj in August 1986 he was clearly immersed in the international crisis. The

1843, B'nai B'rith; 1893, Parliament of the World's Religions; 1897, World Zionist Organization; 1900, International Association for Religious Freedom; 1901, Jewish National Fund; 1906, American Jewish Committee; All India Muslim League; 1913, Anti-Defamation League; 1918, Muslim-Christian Association; 1928, Muslim Brotherhood; 1936, World Congress of Faiths; 1944, National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (USA); Jewish Council for Public Affairs (USA); 1945, Arab League; 1947, International Council of Christians and Jews; 1950, American Israel Public Affairs Committee; 1956, Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations; 1961, Christian Legal Society (USA); 1963, Muslim World League (Rabita); Muslim Students Association (USA & Canada); Islamic Society of North America; 1964, Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians; 1968, Jewish Defence League; 1969, Organization of the Islamic Conference; 1970, World Conference of Religions for Peace; 1971, Dialogue Unit of the WCC; 1973, North American Islamic Trust; 1974, Conference of Jews Christians and Muslims; 1976, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs; 1984, Islamic Relief (UK); 1985, Muslim Youth of North America; 1989, Holy Land Foundation; 1990, American Muslim Council; 1992, Muslim American Society; International Movement for a Just World; 1993, International Interfaith Centre; Association of Muslim Lawyers; 1994, Journalists and Writers Foundation; Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR); 1995, Minorities of Europe; 1996, Children of Abraham Institute; Society for Scriptural Reasoning; Three faiths Forum; 1997, Muslim Council of Britain; Islamic Human Rights Commission; 1998, Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief; Forum 18; World Faiths Development Dialogue; 1999, Rumi Forum; 2000, United Religions Initiative; 2002, Interreligious Engagement Project; World Council of Religious Leaders; 2003, Jewish-Christian-Muslim Association of Australia; Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Muslims and Jews; 2004, World Futures Council; 2006, Mosque and Imams National Advisory Board (UK); 2007, Family Action Organization (USA).

²⁶³ Turkey's neutrality had been assured by concurrent treaties of mutual assistance with both Britain and France, a nonaggression treaty with Germany, and its capacity to maintain passage through the Black Sea to the Soviet Union.



Iranian Revolution was history; Israel's destruction of the PLO and Beirut were fresh memories; Jordan was about to assume responsibility for the West Bank; and Osama bin Laden, with aid from the USA, was helping the Afghans humiliate the Soviet Union which was preparing to withdraw.

Gülen's preaching was taking on a new emphasis.

He was aware that the Catholic Church's attitude had changed, that it was looking further afield and encouraging Christians to have dialogue with people of other faiths. He noted that the church "is turning towards other religions that preserve the concept and meaning of God as One, Transcendental, Creator, Ruler of Fate and Wise." He was soon prepared to say that "Interfaith dialogue seeks to realise religion's basic oneness and unity, and the universality of belief. Religion embraces all beliefs and races in brotherhood, and exalts love, respect, tolerance, forgiveness, mercy, human rights, peace, brotherhood, and freedom via its Prophets." [02.05.2002]

He was well aware of opposition from certain quarters, notably the Kharijites, Karmatis and Anarchists, but he put his commitment into practice in seeking meetings with the Greek Patriarch Bartholomeos in April 1996, Pope John Paul II in February 1998, and Chief Rabbi David Aseo as recently as July 2006.

Gülen's writings on the relationship between civilization and modernization establish that has an acute awareness of the processes of evolution in all human development, material progress, the flow of history and philosophical and religious thought, and, in particular, the relationship between the three Abrahamic traditions.²⁶⁴

That awareness was the basis on which he could say, after the traumatic events of September 11 and the subsequent 'shock and awe' invasion of Iraq:

The goal of dialogue among world religions is not simply to destroy scientific materialism and the destructive materialistic worldview; rather, the very nature of religion demands this dialogue. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and even Hinduism and other world religions accept the same source for themselves, and, including Buddhism, pursue the same goal. As a Muslim, I accept all Prophets and Books sent to different peoples throughout history, and regard belief in them as an essential principle of being Muslim. A Muslim is a true follower of Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and all other Prophets. Not believing in one Prophet or Book means that one is not a Muslim. Thus we acknowledge the oneness and basic unity of religion, which is a symphony of God's blessings and mercy, and the universality of belief in religion. So, religion is a system of belief embracing all races and all beliefs, a road bringing everyone together in brotherhood. [11.06.2003]

Tragically, the reaction of the United States Government and certain of its allies was damning of Islam and its people in a bid to politically and socially isolate them and reduce their influence in

²⁶⁴ "We have a Prophetic Tradition almost unanimously recorded in the Hadith literature that Jesus will return when the end of the world is near. We do not know whether he will actually reappear physically, but what we understand is that near the end of time, values like love, peace, brotherhood, forgiveness, altruism, mercy, and spiritual purification will have precedence, as they did during Jesus' ministry. In addition, because Jesus was sent to the Jews and because all Hebrew Prophets exalted these values, it will be necessary to establish a dialogue with the Jews as well as a closer relationship and co-operation among Islam, Christianity, and Judaism." [Fethullah Gülen. 11.06.2003]



international forums. However that policy has backfired. The reverse has happened. Muslim minority communities — after a period of reluctance and trauma — returned to organizing and, with the cooperation and support of many communities of non-Muslims and institutions of other faiths, have become better coordinated and organized in their worship, education and welfare programs. Extensive dialogue and community consultation programs have been organized with churches, synagogues, universities and local government. With better exposure and ease of recognition they have achieved greater acceptance and enjoy more open participation and influence in their wider communities than had previously been possible. Certain governments and political parties have found it necessary to modify their wedging practices to avoid a community backlash.

It is unfortunate that Gülen's proposal for the establishment of a three-faiths university, symbolically to be placed in the region from which Abraham migrated, was not adopted. However the collaborative establishment of Chairs in Islamic Studies at universities, such as that at the Australian Catholic University, indicates that some authorities may be prepared to go to the next step.

However the need for the leaders of faiths to go further and to begin a process of systematic reassessment of how we came to our point of crisis, the influence that their theological teaching has had, and how to move forward is so critical that efforts to achieve collaborative educational and research programs cannot be allowed to lapse. The Gülen Movement, under its leader's inspiration, has shown that it is able to manage such an effort — if it has the will. It should be encouraged by the Four Levels of Interreligious Dialogue identified by M. Thomas Thangaraj. [Thangaraj 1999]

1. The dialogue of life....
2. The dialogue of action....
3. The dialogue of theological exchange, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values.
4. The dialogue of religious experience...

Given that the major faiths each now acknowledge the validity of their partner faiths, logic requires that they also acknowledge the validity of their holy scriptures. It follows that at the level of scholarly theological exchange it is time to shift from dialogue to reassessment. Therefore conditions requiring that the faithful should try “to learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth” while at the same time letting them “try to illuminate these treasures with the light of the Gospel, to set them free, and bring them under the dominion of God their Savior” should be discarded.²⁶⁵ However some communities are still being told to regard dialogue in that light.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians (May 10, 1984) *The attitude of the Church toward Followers of other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*.

²⁶⁶ “According to the guidelines, interfaith dialogue does not entail Christians watering down their faith. Nor should it be blind to the light of truth in other religions. ... it does great harm to interfaith dialogue for a Catholic to slip into a belief that all religions are basically the same.



The two positions are contradictory. Therefore to establish a program of collaborative reassessment of fundamental theological concepts is no mean task, but the Gülen Movement should be encouraged by the assessment that “the earliest form of dialogue between Islam and Christianity can be said to have taken place in the Qur’an, where the Christian doctrine is referred to in explicit terms.” (Alatas 2006 p.125) Many debates occurred face to face and in correspondence during the three centuries following the establishment of Islam.²⁶⁷ But more significant than the debates and polemics were later developments including cultural borrowing of Christians from Muslims, largely revolving around the Muslim universities of the past, that influenced matters in the Medieval West. The records indicate that three themes of interreligious dialogue began to emerge in the 13th century during the period of the rise of the western university: (1) the multicultural origins of modern civilization; (2) intercivilizational encounters of mutual learning; and (3) the point of view of the other. (Alatas 2006 p.126)

Logic suggests that the process of reassessment should be steered by an International Standing Body of eminent persons involved in the life of each major faith, including scholars at the highest level of universities from each faith. It will need to be well resourced, with funds available to administer a network of research programs that would involve universities and related institutions of research in a number of countries, and that would not necessarily be campus-dependent. It is envisaged that the research programs would involve groups of doctoral or post-doctoral candidates working in teams of three (probably one Muslim, one Christian and one Jew) under the supervision of teams constituted the same way. There would be no need for them to be domiciled at the same institution. The world is driven by instant communications. The results of their work would be published and made readily available for consideration by the teaching institutions and peak leadership bodies of each faith, and for general publication.

The program would probably require two parallel bodies: one to administer the program and ensure a flow of funds, and another to determine all academic matters. These would include priorities for research; oversight of the selection and appointment of panels of research scholars, supervisors and examiners; and policies for the awarding of degrees and publication policies to be adopted in the event that the scholars in a research team were not unanimous in their conclusions (requiring the admission of a minority submission on certain matters).

It can be anticipated that the resulting publications, books, papers or occasional pieces would be used extensively in dialogue programs and by educational institutions. However, if any changes were envisaged to the teaching, doctrines, creeds, liturgy, systems of discipline, structure and authority

“Catholics should not fudge “the basic Catholic belief that the Church (the Body of Christ) is necessary for salvation” ... “Jesus is for all times ‘the way, the truth and the life.’ (Jn 14:6) Jesus alive in His Church is necessary for the salvation of every human being.” At the same time ... “[The] universal salvific will of God propels us to seek out the evidence of God’s presence in all men and women of good will and offer every encouragement and mutual search for fullness of all Truth.” “... three challenges [can be identified] in further development in the “graced journey” of interfaith dialogue. Many Catholics fail to see why we should engage in interfaith dialogue. The ongoing development of interfaith relations “is an important way to peace in families, neighbourhoods and communities – local, national and international.” [Kairos Catholic Journal Vol. 18, Issue 17. www.southern-cross.org.au accessed 3/10/2007]

²⁶⁷ Alatas shows that within the first three centuries of Islam several works refuting Christian doctrine had appeared, and an index of books written in Arabic lists the works of several authors who dealt with Christian theological doctrines. Alatas notes that the discussion on Christianity was not always one-sided. There were often exchanges between Muslim and Christian scholars; among the first Christians to “enter into polemics” with Muslims was St. John of Damascus, and there was debate between Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I and Caliph al-Mahdi.



systems or organizational relationships of any institution of faith, these would be matters for consideration and decision solely by that institution.

The initiative of reassessment of matters around which the Abrahamic faiths have divided is long overdue. It is a matter of great urgency if the opportunity for a Messianic Era of peace stability and harmony as envisaged by each of the Abrahamic faiths is not to be missed and if, as Maimonides anticipated “the world will be filled with the knowledge of God as the sea fills the ocean bed” following the return of people Israel to their ancestral homeland. But it can only be achieved if scholars and institutional leaders from each faith are involved in intimate collaboration.

A logical starting point may be the convening of a meeting of thirty or forty eminent persons for an in-depth working session of a few days to consider alternative approaches to establishing an international standing body, what resources will be required, how to obtain them, and what administrative and coordinating procedures and facilities must be put in place. This is a challenge, an opportunity and an obligation under covenant that I trust the Gülen Movement is prepared to accept.