

The Quran and Its Biblical Reflexes: Investigations into the Genesis of a Religion

A discussion with Mark Durie and Jonathan Cole

by [Mark Durie](#) (August 2022)



Battle between Christians and Muslims at El Sotillo, Francisco de Zurbarán, 1637–39

The following is an edited version of a '[Political Animals](#)' Podcast with Jonathan Cole

Cole: Welcome to the Political Animals. I am your host, Jonathan Cole. I am an academic writer and translator, specializing in Political Theology, the intersection between religion and politics.

Joining me in this episode is Dr. Mark Durie, for a conversation about the theological relationship between Islam and Christianity. Mark is a senior research fellow at the Jeffrey Center for the study of Islam at the Melbourne School of Theology. He has, not one, but two PhDs, in linguistics and Islamic Theology. He has held visiting academic positions in linguistics at MIT, UCLA, UC Santa Cruz, and Stanford. In 1992, while head of the Department of Linguistics and Language Studies at Melbourne University, he became the youngest person elected to the Australian Academy of Humanities.

Mark speaks on human rights and relations between monotheistic faiths, Christian missions, and religious freedom. He is the author of many books on Islam and other topics, and he is the author of a recent book, a tremendous book, which I have had the pleasure of reading cover to cover, called [*The Quran and its Biblical Reflexes: Investigations into the Genesis of a Religion*](#).

Mark, you and I have both spent a significant part of our professional lives working on Islam. Could you tell us a

little bit about how you developed this interest?

Durie: It began through linguistic field work. I was doing a PhD on the language of Aceh, in Indonesia, which involved living in a village among the Acehnese people. Within Indonesia, the Acehnese are the most strict and radical Islamic ethnic group, so much so that the government has given the region of Aceh a special status. They have sharia provisions that do not apply elsewhere in Indonesia. They call Aceh the 'verandah of Mecca.'

I was living amongst Muslim people and learned a lot about Islam on a face-to-face basis: what people believe and their experiences, such as going on pilgrimage. I learned a lot about Islam living in that context, but I did not study it. I felt that once I got engaged with Islam on a formal basis, it would change my life, and I was not ready for that. So, I just engaged with whatever people shared with me. I was a Christian and, in many ways, I found it enjoyable to talk about faith with others.

The Acehnese had a long history of jihad, of violent religious engagement with enemies, both pre-colonial and post-colonial. There was a 40-year-long insurgency that they fought against the Dutch for which they are famous in Indonesia. I had studied that, and years later, when 9/11 happened, I knew immediately who had done it. I understood the ideology that could produce those shocking and amazing events. I realized that I knew something about Islam. I knew the verses that were found in the backpacks of the 9/11 attackers. I also realized I needed to know a lot more. So, I began to teach and research and equip people to understand and engage with Islam. That is how I got into this. For most of the last 20 years, I have been working as a pastor and at the same time studying Islam, teaching about it, traveling and writing.

Cole: That's fascinating, because 9/11 was a crucial moment for me too. The attacks happened around 10 PM at night here, and I was watching a replay of an Australian football game. I stayed up through the night watching the entire thing unfold. I was about to start a career working for the Australian federal government. At that point I realized this would be one of the seminal strategic challenges of our time. I ended up working in intelligence and became a senior terrorism analyst at the Australian Office of National Assessments. That job gave me the opportunity to travel all over the world talking about jihad from Afghanistan to CIA headquarters, from Denmark to Kenya, from Turkey to South Korea. We were looking at global Islamist terrorism, the contemporary jihadist movement, in every part of the world.

Mark and I, as non-Muslims, both came to the study of Islam through 9/11. Mark's done the more serious work, but I have done enough work to understand the significance of Mark's work. What I would like to do is read the first paragraph from your book, because it is a beautiful summary of its argument. This is how the book begins:

This book addresses the question of whether there is a unifying continuity, what might be called a "family resemblance," between the Bible and the Qur'an. Similarities between these two scriptures are plain enough, but how deep do they go? Is what the Quran has in common with the Bible enough to make it a continuous development from the Bible, in some coherent sense, or does the Quran represent a break from the Bible, a separate, creative development with similarities which do not run deep? This is the question explored by this book, and the answer proposed will be that the Quran is a creative theological innovation, which repurposes Biblical lexical and textual materials to serve its own distinctive theological agenda.

It will be useful to explain to listeners why this question of continuity arises in the first place, particularly for someone who may not be familiar with the Quran or even what Muslims believe.

Durie: It has become commonplace in our culture to refer to the idea of Abrahamic Faiths. This idea has become embedded in thought: that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share a common heritage; they go back to a common source, hence the name Abrahamic; they share a lot of ideas about human beings and about life; and they are a natural grouping of religions, in contrast, say, to Hinduism. But what is the nature of that relationship?

It is an important political issue because one of the debates that is going on in Europe is whether Islam is in some sense indigenous to Europe. If Islam and Christianity and Judaism are part of a closely related family of faiths, on a shared family tree then the intrusion of Islam as a major religion within Europe is not culturally a threat because it is not as if Islam was an alien faith. It is considered a sister faith to Christianity. So, it does not bring a completely different worldview, but it should fit in Europe.

These are high level discussions that are taking place about this. In general, post-9/11, there has been a huge emphasis on embracing the other, on building bridges between faiths, and on trying to form a common sense of identity and purpose, so there is a lot of will behind the idea that Islam and Christianity are somehow closely related. Thus, Islam should not be seen as an alien intrusion into Europe. It is an important question of social policy.

At another level, the reality is that the Quran has a vast number of references to Biblical materials. What to make of that is an interesting question? Both Christians and Jews have

wrestled with that since the 7th century since Islam began. Why are there so many references to the Bible in the Quran, and what does that mean for the relationship between Islam and Christianity or Islam and Judaism? The default assumption, which has been in place for more than a thousand years, is that in some sense, Islam developed out of Christianity and Judaism, so it represents, a deviation from Biblical faiths: a branching out, but not a completely different system.

My book was claiming that this is a mistake: Islam is not a derivative of Judaism or Christianity, despite the presence of many hundreds of Biblical references in the Quran.

This claim creates an intellectual puzzle: How can you say that the Quran is not a development from Judaism or Christianity when there is so much of those two faiths embedded within it? How can one make sense of that? One of the problems is that people just cannot imagine an answer to that question, and so they fall back on the continuity assumption, which brings with it complex implications.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, argued that the UK legal system should embrace Sharia law. One of the things he said was "it's not as if it's an alien system." There is so much that stands behind that single phrase in his views about the relationships between the faiths. This is extremely important: if you are going to assign Muslim women to have their marriages regulated by Sharia law on the basis that you think Christianity and Islam are kindred faiths, which is hugely important. The relationship of Islam to Christianity is not a trivial question: it is an important question for human rights, and for the political future of Western nations.

Cole: Which is really to say that this is not merely an academic question, fascinating though the intellectual problem

is, as you have said.

It is worth noting that many of the key figures of the Bible also feature in the Quran. Islam itself makes the claim that it stands within the same tradition, but it does not present itself as a development so much as a correction. The Islamic view of Christianity and Judaism is that all the Hebrew prophets taught and lived as Muslims, and the Jewish and Christian scriptures, which received the Muslim revelation, are distorted and perverted. Muhammad, being the seal of prophets, the final prophet, has restored the true teaching of Jesus and Moses and true submission to Allah. The average Christian or Jewish believer really has no idea how to respond to these surprising and confronting claims.

Now, Mark, before we get into your explanation, which is highly original and provocative, can you give us a brief survey of the prevailing explanations that have been offered either historically or by Muslims and Christians or by secular scholars, to explain why there is so much Biblical material in the Quran and why Islam claims to be the true Judaism and the true Christianity?

Durie: Jonathan you are right that Islam claims to be the true Judaism and the true Christianity. The Quran even says that Abraham was not a Jew or a Christian but a Muslim, and Jesus' disciples say, "We are Muslims." What Islam does through the Quran is to claim that the heritage of Biblical faiths is Islamic and belongs to Islam. As I sometimes put it, if Solomon ever built a temple in Jerusalem, it was a mosque. To understand that is to understand a lot about the battles between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

This apologetic challenge, the claim of Islam, that it is the true Christianity, and the true Judaism came as a big shock to Jews and Christians across the Middle East, in the context of

very rapid conquest and political and military dominance. The response to that, of both Jews and Christians, from quite early on, was to say that Muhammad had been influenced or taught by Christians or by Jews. Jews have said that there were some rabbis who found that Muhammad was threatening their people, so they pretended to convert to Islam, and then they gave Muhammad the Quran, and trained him in Biblical beliefs.

There is a Christian version of that which says that a monk called Bahira, or Sergius in the Syriac sources, taught Muhammad as his disciple. Muhammad then became heretical and moved away from true Christian faith.

This has been a standard view amongst Christians since the time of Muhammad. John of Damascus had this view. Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Nicholas of Cusa, who was a great Catholic intellectual in the late Middle Ages: they all had the view of Islam as a kind of heresy.

Now to call something a heresy is a claim of continuity with a degree of discontinuity. A heresy is something that develops out of the root, but loses its way, or goes beyond the pale. This claim that Islam was a heresy and Muhammad lost his way or moved away from the true faith has been the dominant view among Christians and Jews.

It is really striking that both Christians and Jews said that one of their number trained Muhammad, I read somewhere that Zoroastrians had the same view, that a Zoroastrian trained Muhammad.

Cole: Everyone is trying to claim everyone in every direction!

Durie: That is right! "Jesus is a Muslim!" "No, Muhammad is a Christian!" It seems like a mirror image: "You can't claim our

history, we're going to claim yours." It has been such a dominant view.

An Anglican bishop, Kenneth Cragg, writing in the middle of the 20th century, argued that Muhammad was well-intentioned, but had encountered a poor Christianity, so he was turned off it. Cragg said that Christians have a responsibility to restore Islam to its true origin, to "retrieve" it: he had this doctrine of retrieval. Where a cathedral in Constantinople has been turned into an Istanbul Mosque, it is as if you could just scrape all the paint off and restore it back to a church.

This has been the mainstream view of Christian scholars in dealing with Islam, that it is a continuous development, which has lost its way, and it can somehow be brought back. I find that deeply problematic.

Cole: That is fascinating. If we just move away from Christians and Jews, what are some of the theories that scholars have advanced to explain how so much Biblical content ended up in the Quran?

Durie: Just before delving into that, I would mention what I call the "riddle of relatedness." There is a lot of material in the Quran, which is Biblical, but there's also remarkable ignorance. The Quran seems to clearly portray Mary [the mother of Jesus] as the same person as Miriam of the Old Testament, who was the sister of Moses and Aaron. How could someone who had been a Christian or disciple as a Jew not know that Jesus was not the nephew of Moses? How could you not know that?

There are other puzzles as well. Most of the Biblical material in the Koran is Old Testament, but the theology of Islam is much more Christian. The teachings about Satan are more like

the New Testament, as well as teachings about the afterlife, heaven and hell, judgment, and intercession for the dead. These puzzles are problematic.

In the 19th century, a Jewish scholar, Abraham Geiger, wrote a study of what Muhammad had borrowed from Judaism. It has been a common view that Muhammad was deeply familiar with Christianity and Judaism, and he borrowed from them, using these sources to inform his religion.

In recent times, there has been an emphasis on the Quranic community and how it could have functioned. A widespread view is that Christianity influenced the Quran. For example, it is claimed that the chapters of the Koran were influenced by Christian liturgies. Another view is that there were Syriac texts that were read as if they were Arabic, and that is where the Quran has come from. There has been a lot of emphasis on the milieu of late antiquity and that a mixing of ideas and influences came to shape the Quran.

Cole: There is a consensus that there were Jewish tribes living in the Arabian Peninsula at that time, and some Christians, with trade and cultural connections between Arab Christians in the area?

Durie: Yes, it is very clear that there were Jewish groups in Arabia, and that there were also tribes of Arabs who had converted to Christianity. There was a strong Christian presence. We have Jewish and Christian rock inscriptions in the region that are in Arabic, and which predate the Islam's appearance. Puzzles abound: the relationship of Islam to idolatry is also unclear.

One of the big problems is that the story the Quran seems to tell is different from the story that Islamic tradition tells.

Islamic tradition includes the biography of Muhammad and traditions of Muhammad that were formalized two or three hundred years after Muhammad. The deeper scholars investigate the relationship between the Koran and the Islamic explanation for the Quran, which is the heart of Islamic faith, the more they are finding discrepancies between those two. The deeper you go into this puzzle, the more puzzling it becomes. Some people have said in the last 20 years that scholarship on the Quran is in a chaotic and unclear point, because there are so many conflicting things to explain.

Some have said that Jewish Christianity influenced Muhammad—by Jews who were followers of Jesus—which is said to explain the hybrid mixture of Christian and Jewish perspectives in Islam. I do not find that compelling, but it is an example of how scholars have wrestled with the problems of the origins of the Quran

Cole: There is layer upon layer of perplexing things that are very difficult to account for. This seems quite distinct from what you get in the study of Judaism and Christianity.

Durie: That is right. There are no comparable mysteries about the origins of Judaism and Christianity. Christianity rose out of Second Temple Judaism. It is one of the daughters of Judaism. This is clear from its liturgies and structures. Scholars have argued that it even took a couple of hundred years for Judaism and Christianity to separate. One book was called *The Ways that Never Parted*. Even two or three hundred years after Jesus, Christians were attending synagogue sermons to supplement their faith. We know a lot about that separation and how it developed and the sources. The New Testament is absolutely steeped in Old Testament ideas and theology in a way that can be traced and understood. It is not mysterious.

But with Islam, the more you poke it, the more unclear it becomes.

Cole: And indeed, in the New Testament itself, within the first generation of followers of Jesus difficult social and pastoral questions arise about the extent to which you must be Jewish to be a follower of Christ. This points to the intimate relationship with Judaism. This contrasts with the Quran, which traditionally explains any difference with the idea that the Jewish and Christian scriptures are corrupted, but it is unaware of the intellectual problem we are discussing here.

Durie: Yes, that is true. Muslim scholars would acknowledge there are inconsistencies between the Bible and the Quran, but their answer is, "The Bible is corrupted. If you want to know what Jesus said, read the Quran." Or "If you want to know the religion of Moses and you want to follow that, read the Quran." As the Quran says, a true Jew or a true Christian will become a Muslim if they are sincere. That view is deeply held. A leader of Al-Azhar University said, "There are two types of Jews and the good ones become Muslims." That perspective is very, very deeply ingrained in the Islamic world view. That is another answer to this puzzle, that what the Quran says is what the Bible originally said, and that is the end of it.

Cole: Your answer to this nexus of problems is that "The Quran is a creative theological innovation, which re-purposes Biblical lexical and textual materials to serve its own distinctive theological agenda."

The methodology for getting here is really, interesting because you draw on your expertise as a linguist. You draw out

what I find helpful conceptual distinctions. One which you take from linguistics is a distinction between inheritance and borrowing in language contact. You are making an analogy with theological contact. Could you explain the difference in linguistics between inheritance and borrowing, and it is relevant as you see it, to try to unravel this riddle between Islam and Christianity.

Durie: The great linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure pointed out that language is characterized by structure. There are structural relationships between words. You see it in morphology and in syntax. The study of that structure is a core part of linguistics. When languages change over time, the structure changes gradually. You can get small additions, but structural coherence is maintained over time. For example, you can trace the morphology of the rules of formation of words in Italian back in a continuous development to Latin. Is English related to German? Well, it is. How do you know? Because you can trace the structure of English and German grammar, word systems and morphology back to a shared origin, which is called proto-Germanic.

When you have inheritance in languages, there's structural continuity: the system is what evolves. But when you have borrowing, an element is taken out of one system and inserted into another. It loses a lot when it is broken out of its original context: its meaning, its forms are re-interpreted.

For example, the word 'alcohol': the *al* was originally the definite article in Arabic, but in English, it is just part of the word. So, what was a marker of a structural piece in Arabic Grammar now has a completely different function in English. Borrowing characteristically is destructive of structural relationships.

The questions that I then began to ask about the Quran, were,

“If the Quran has developed from the Bible, what is the system or the structure that would be retained in that inheritance relationship? Or if it has been borrowed, what has been destroyed?”

My suggestion was that the analog of linguistic structure—morphology, syntax, and semantics—is theology: an interconnected set of ideas that link together and make coherent the text of the Quran. So, I asked, “Has Biblical theology evolved into Quranic theology, or is Quranic theology a new creation that opportunistically repurposes Biblical elements, without showing signs of development over time from Biblical theology? If Muhammad had been a disciple of Christianity or Judaism, he should have been formed in a Biblical or Jewish theology that would have somehow showed up in what he created with Islam.

In making that comparison, I used a few metaphors to help. One was linguistic, but before I talk about the linguistic metaphor, let me introduce another metaphor from building. There are two ways in which you can take a church or a synagogue and turn it into a mosque. One is, you can paint over it, or add an extension. That is a development of continuity: the basic structure or system of the building is retained.

The other way is to just demolish the building and reuse the building materials to form a completely different building. If you did that, someone could come along and say, “Oh yes, I recognize that! That is from the church.” Or “There is something. That is from the synagogue!” But the structural relationships of those parts in the new building bear no connection to their original placement. So, the lintel over the door might have been a post before. In fact, there are mosques in which the pillars are all varied sizes because they have been taken from a variety of different churches. My question then was, “Is Islam an extension of a church or synagogue, or is it rather a whole new thing, built out of

materials that have been taken and repurposed.”

I also used a linguistic analogy. The conceptual problem is that there's just so much Biblical material in the Quran. The most frequently mentioned person in the Quran, 136 times, is Moses and the next is Abraham. Muhammad is mentioned my name just four times. What is all this material? I used the analogy of what are called creole languages. So let me give an example: Haitian Creole. It is a French-based creole in the sense that its vocabulary comes from French. It arose in the slave plantations of Haiti, where Africans from different tribes in West Africa were put together and they began to speak a form of the language of their masters, French, which became Haitian Creole. But what's interesting about Haitian Creole and other creoles like Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea, is that their grammar, their sound system, their morphology, and their structure is like the languages of the workers in the plantations. The grammar of Haitian Creole is like West African languages. You could translate Haitian Creole form for form into some of those West African languages, but the lexicon has been taken from French. There has been this vast borrowing from French to create Haitian Creole, but its grammar, its world view, its heartbeat is purely West African.

The terms that are used are *substrate*, for the West African languages and *superstrate*, for French. There is a marriage between these two together.

The deceptive thing about this is that when a French speaker encounters Haitian Creole, they tend to think of it as a degraded form of French, an odd French, just as Tok Pisin feels to English speakers like “pidgin English,” a form of English. That is what Christians and Jews have seen when they have encountered Islam. They would think, “This is Christianity or Judaism, but distorted.” But, from a linguistic point of view Haitian creole is not considered to be a variety of French. It is not one of the Romance languages descended from Latin. It is a whole new creation. The language

of the masters and the language of the plantation workers have come into contact, and this has produced in the children of those plantation workers a whole new language.

This has happened repeatedly in various places around the world.

So, I thought Islam is a religion which has repurposed elements from Judaism and Christianity, but its actual theology is different: it has not inherited the system, the theology of Judaism and Christianity. So, then I thought, let us identify several key doctrines or teachings of the Bible and ask what happened to those in the Quran. And let us look at elements in the Quran which are connected to the Bible, and ask, do these have any Biblical theology left or has it been completely reconstructed?

Early in the book, I used a quote from Wittgenstein. He was speaking about logical formulae, when he said that you think you are tracing the shape of reality repeatedly, but all you are doing is tracing the shape of the window frame through which you are looking. My intuition was that Western scholars, based in Christian and Jewish tradition, have looked at Islam and traced the shape of Christianity of Judaism over it repeatedly, but without seeing it properly. So that is what I set out to explore in the book.

Cole: That's a fascinating exercise. It is an amazing application of linguistics to religious studies. If we were looking at inheritance, then you would expect to see structural continuity and affinity, but if it is borrowing, you would expect to see structural discontinuity. What leads Christians and Jewish scholars to see family relationships is that they see lots of Jewish and Christian vocabulary and they say, "Well, these must be related religions."

Durie: There is a shared vocabulary, but the words all mean different things, because they are set into a different system.

Cole: Just out of interest, I imagine there would be a degree of that with creoles. There must be a lot of 'false friends' for French speakers when they come to Haitian Creole?

Mark: That is right. There would be lots of words that mean differently from one might think they mean, which have been absorbed into a distinct set of relationships in the language. So, the French speaker's interpretation of the meaning of these words could make that same error: it could be tracing the frame of something else—of French—so there could be a lot of misinterpretation.

Cole: At this point, let us consider some specific illustrations of what we are talking about. There are many in the book, and there are two which are very interesting theological doctrines that prima facie is found in both Islam and Christianity/Judaism, which suggest continuity, but you have argued that while there are superficial similarities, there are important structural or theological differences. The first one is monotheism. Could you talk about the divergences or the structural differences underpinning the monotheism of the Hebrew Scriptures?

Durie: When you look at monotheism, you need to ask, "What does monotheism do? How does it function within the system?" That is a structural question.

In the Hebrew scriptures, monotheism is a doctrine that

evolves. Early on, its key emphasis is, "You shall have no other gods before me." It does not actually deny the existence of other gods. In fact, there are numbers of references in the earlier part of the Hebrew Scriptures that refer to other gods, for example in the Psalms, but it is an exclusive covenantal allegiance that is demanded of Israel.

So "You shall have no other gods before me" means "I will be your God, and you will be in a relationship with me as your sovereign." It is only later that we find in the later prophets the idea that other gods do not exist. But the key concept of monotheism in the Hebrew scriptures, in the Bible, is exclusive allegiance to the one God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Now, the Quran has picked up the idea that there is only one God, but the function of that is very different. The oppositions, the contrasts involved are very different as well. It is used as a rejection of polytheism, but the most interesting thing about Islamic monotheism is the emphasis that the Quran makes when it puts the doctrine forward. One of the emphases is the concept of *shirk*. *Shirk* is a noun which refers to financial partnership: the idea of two people owning something in common.

The Quran strongly objects to anyone attributing 'partnership' to Allah, that Allah would have a co-owner of anything or that there is someone else that created the world alongside Allah. The Quran rejects Christianity because it says that Jesus—who is a prophet of Islam, according to the Quran—has been made into a partner with Allah, as a co-owner of the world. There are discussions of this in the Quran, for example, it says that if there were two gods, they would fight each other over the world.

I think the analogy in mind is that of a slave owner and Allah's relationship to the world is that of a master to a slave. The Quran says, imagine a slave with two masters: they

would be the most miserable person in the world. Obviously, they would have conflicting commands. If you had two gods, they would fight each other, and the world would be destroyed.

Now this sort of reasoning and even the concept of *shirk*—the rejection of co-ownership—it is just not in the Bible at all. It is not a consideration at all. It is interesting that Jesus told a parable that it is wrong for a slave to have two masters, but the focus of his parable is that one should be solely devoted to God and not to money or other things: one should have unique sole allegiance to God. But the Quran, when it uses a parable of a slave with two masters, tells it to show how miserable it would be for a slave to have two masters and how the world would be destroyed if it had two creators. It is a logical argument that it is not possible for two gods to co-exist.

It is a core part of the teaching of *tawhid* or monotheism, that Allah cannot be said to have any partners. This teaching goes **against** the Bible, because in the New Testament and in the Hebrew scriptures too, there is a lot of emphasis on partnership and relationship with God: people are described as sons of God. In the Hebrew scriptures God calls Israel “my son.”

These are relational attributes. In the Bible, it says that the people of Israel should be holy because God is holy: people should be like God. But Islam completely rejects that anything is like God.

Another Arabic concept that is introduced into the discussions about monotheism in the Quran is the client-protégé relationship. It was very big in Arab tribal society, that your safety, your identity was determined by who looked after you. Your ‘protector’ or ‘guardian’ is called your *wali*. The Quran says, “You have **no** other guardian but Allah.” What the Quran does is that it takes up the idea of one God, but to interpret that it pulls concepts out of Arab language and

culture, of guardianship—these are power relationships, of co-ownership relationships—and constructs a doctrine of the unity of God based on these concepts, neither of which is found in the Bible.

To understand the Biblical theology of monotheism, which is complex—you must recognize that it has a history, and it develops. When one compares it to the Quran's own theology, there is just almost nothing in common, apart from the idea of one God. But that idea of one God is just a little element that has been set in a completely different context. So that is why I would say that monotheism in the Quran and monotheism in the Bible are not structurally related. That is evidence of borrowing, not of inheritance.

Cole: That is really fascinating. Monotheism has a very different function from in Christianity. In contemporary jihadist thought, *tawhid*, often translated 'oneness', is a driver and core rationale of violence and the idea of *shirk* is given a very expansive interpretation: it's **so** important that you would kill a Sufi or some kind of Muslim heretic, and to have a certain (negative) view of Christians as guilty of *shirk* because of the Trinity. This speaks to a difference in the way the faith is interpreted and lived in the contemporary world.

Durie: Yes, the jihadists object to democracy, because (they say) democracy is *shirk*. It is *shirk* because people make laws in a democracy, but in the Islamic perspective, it is an attribute and prerogative of Allah to make laws, so what people are doing by making laws is attributing partnership between God and humanity. This is giving something to people that only belongs to Allah. That is *shirk*, and the Koran says that *shirk* is the only unforgivable sin. So, democracy is to be opposed.

After 9/11, one of the fatwas I discovered on a website in Melbourne was by a medieval Muslim called Ibn Kathir. He issued a fatwa against Genghis Khan for his ruling by Mongol laws were not Sharia law. Ibn Kathir said anyone can kill Genghis Khan because he is not ruling by Sharia law. At the end of the fatwa, it said that this fatwa is still open against everyone who does not rule by Sharia. You could have written in the name of John Howard, the Australian Prime Minister, at that time. I read it and thought, "This is grim: this group is fundamentally opposed to democracy. They have even put up a post on their website saying that if you are a democrat you come under penalty of death."

Theology is important: theology is the driver. The Biblical theology of the oneness of God does not lead to such a conclusion because the Biblical theology of God is very different. The relationship between politics and theology is very different in the Biblical tradition precisely because the doctrine of God is very different.

Cole: The second theological doctrine you look at is what you call the theology of prophets, which might not be so familiar with Christians and Jews. Anyone with a passing familiarity with the Old Testament will know how central prophets are to both those faiths. Could you talk us through the structural disparities or divergences?

Mark: Sure. It is interesting that many Western scholars call Muhammad "the Prophet." Jewish scholars would not call Jesus "the Messiah," but it is interesting how non-Muslims have taken a Biblical term and use it so freely to refer to Mohammed.

There are two words in Arabic, one is *nabi*, which is borrowed from Hebrew, and the other is *rasul*, which means something

like an ambassador or a messenger. *Rasul* is the main title of Muhammad: when Muslims confess faith in Islam, they say Muhammad is the *rasul* or 'messenger' of Allah. The Biblical concept of prophethood is that a prophet is someone who receives a word from God and then presents it to somebody else, and when they present it, it is as if God was speaking to that person. The message could be mundane or momentous; it could be to a nation, or it could be to a particular individual. But it was receiving a message and giving it to somebody else, as if God were speaking to that person.

On the other hand, in the Quran, the concept of the *rasul* is more elaborate. It is this scenario: a *rasul* is someone who is sent to a particular people or a city warning them of future destruction, asking them to repent and pay attention to the signs of Allah, which are being sent to cause them to be mindful of future judgment and destruction. Then the people reject the messenger, and Allah rescues the messenger and destroys the people. That is what a Quranic *rasul* is: someone with a very specific commission. The concept of 'prophecy' is not in the Quran—there is no word for 'prophecy' in Quranic Arabic. There is a terminology around how the message gets to the Messenger and how it is delivered, but the concept of what we call in linguistics a 'speech act' of prophecy does not exist in the Quran.

In the Quran there is the idea that someone gets messages from God for people, but it is completely re-packaged. The way this functions in the Quran is that Muhammad, the messenger comes to his people. He says, "You will be destroyed if you don't repent." Then the rest of the Quran just rolls on through the outworking of this story. Eventually the opponents are destroyed at the hands of the Muhammad and his followers. This story is being validated all the time in the Quran by Muhammad telling stories of past messengers. All those stories in the Quran of Moses and the other prophets, rehearse this scenario: someone is sent preaching judgment, rejected, then rescued,

and the people who were sent to are destroyed.

So that is a *rasul*. It is specific and elaborate and it supports the theology of the Quran. It is very different from the Bible. There are many, many people in the Bible who could never be a Quranic *rasul*, but who prophesy and function as Biblical prophets. It is a different concept.

The challenge is that, when Christians look at this prophet language in the Quran, they think 'prophet in the Bible,' but it is something quite different, something disconnected from any origin in the Bible.

Cole: You discuss eight lexical examples. One that is very interesting is the 'Holy Spirit.' Could you talk about the 'Holy Spirit'? What are the structural divergences here?

Durie: In the Arabic, the expression *Ruh al-Qudus*, which could be glossed 'spirit of holiness' seems to have been borrowed from Syriac. It is very clearly used in the Quran to refer to an angel, the angel Jibril (or Gabriel). How does a word for the Holy Spirit or God end up being a title for Jibril in the Koran? This centers around the story of the annunciation to Mary that she is going to bear a child. The angel Gabriel in Luke's gospel says, "You will conceive by the Holy Spirit."

The way this is interpreted in the Quran, where a similar story is told, is that the Angel Jibril appears, and he is the one who is called the Holy Spirit. One verse says he blows into her vulva, and she conceived Jesus by virtue of this act of the 'Holy Spirit.'

As I was looking at this expression *ruh al-qudus*, I was wondering about the word *ruh*. In Hebrew *ruach* can mean 'breath' or 'wind,' and 'spirit.' The connection between

breath and spirit is that when someone dies, the last thing that happens is the exhalation of their last breath, The idea then develops in Hebrew thought that the breath of the person is their spirit. So, when God created human beings, he breathed the spirit of life into them, so they began to breathe and when they die the breath is exhaled when the spirit leaves them. What I was wondering was, what about the Arabic word *ruh*? What does that mean?

It turns out in re-Islamic poetry, *ruh* could refer to wind—wind is *ruh* or *rih*—but it also refers to blowing up a skin in which you might store wine or blowing on a fire to start it up. But there is no use of this word in early Arabic to refer to the breath or breathing. There was no conceptual link in early Arabic between the blowing word *ruh* and the concept of spirit.

So, in pre-Quranic Arabic *ruh al-qudus* means ‘wind of holiness’ or ‘blowing of holiness.’ That is why in the story, the angel Gabriel or Jibril, who is called this ‘wind of holiness’ or this ‘breath of holiness,’ is said to blow into Mary. What happened is that a phrase, a particular sequence of sounds, has been taken from Syriac, where it is a term for the Holy Spirit of Christian understanding. This then gets received into Arabic as *ruh al-qudus*. There was not the semantic justification in Arabic for using *ruh* to refer to ‘spirit,’ but it becomes a title for an angel.

This is an example of how an important concept in the Bible of the presence of God—the Holy Spirit—becomes attached to the angel Jibril through a misreading or mishearing of the story of the annunciation from Luke. In my book, I argued that this is a re-purposing of a key Biblical theological term to fit it into Islam’s angelology.

Cole: This is unmistakable evidence of borrowing: it is not

inheritance. We have a term taken from Syriac, which is given a completely different meaning that is disconnected and thus discontinuous from the source. Your central question is, "How do we explain the presence of so much Biblical material in the Quran?" And in this case, you find a pattern that looks like borrowing.

Durie: That is right. To make this argument, you need to have a model of the theology of the Quran, because you need to know how things are functioning within the system. If you have not described the system of the Quran, you cannot compare it with the system of the Bible.

One of the challenges for the field is that many of those that have worked on the Koran do not have a working model of the theology of the Quran – they are not trained theologically – and they also do not have a working model of the theology of the Bible. So, they have been dealing with systems that they do not discern. Their focus has been on literary history or philological concerns with individual words, not looking at how they fit into an entire system.

Cole: What is a nice, neat succinct description of the theology of the Quran?

Mark: In the Bible, the essence of the question of God and humanity is that human beings, while made in the image of God, and reflecting the glory of God, are plagued by sin: there is a breach in relationship with God which needs to be restored. This basic problem is laid out in the first chapters of Genesis.

In Islam, there is a different anthropology. The Islamic view

of the human person is that Allah makes a human to be a slave but is inherently weak and easily led astray. So what humans need is right guidance, and this right guidance is brought through the messengers of Allah. If humans receive the right guidance, they will be successful.

The call to prayer, which rings out from the minaret, includes the phrase “come to success, come to success.” Islam promises success. You cannot understand the Islamic awakening in the world today without understanding that principle. [In Islam] ignorance and being easily led astray is the problem; the solution is guidance through a messenger, of which Muhammad was the last and final one, the seal of all messengers; and the result is success in the world. In contrast, the Christian reading of the Bible is that the problem is sin; the solution is forgiveness; and the result is salvation and restored relationships.

To give you an example of how this works, in the elaborate story of Joseph in the Quran, Joseph is tempted to have sex by a figure we know in the Bible as Potiphar’s wife. When he refuses, he says it is because he does not want to become one of the ignorant: to do that would be to lapse into a state of ignorance of the commands of Allah. That is an example of theological repurposing, this story is used to validate the basic Quranic view of the human person. The Quran then goes on to say that Allah sent many messengers, and you should listen to the messengers, obey what they say, and then you will be rightly guided, and you will ultimately end up in paradise, if Allah is gracious to you.

Cole: With your creolization thesis, what is the substrate of Islam? What are the ideas, the culture, the practices, the world view, the concepts, and conceptions that have done the repurposing? This seems like a multi-million-dollar question. Do you care to speculate?

Durie: It is interesting to compare Islam with Voodoo, for which it is very clear that the substrate is West African religion. That polytheistic faith was reformed in Voodoo repurposing the names of Christian angels and saints and other Christian bits and pieces.

The issue with Islam is more complex. I do not think you could say that the substrate is a particular form of Arabian idolatry. That does not work. In any case, we do not know enough about pagan Arabian religion to be able to develop that argument. However, there is a lot of Arab culture that ends up in the theology of the Quran. The culture of raiding becomes part of the culture and theology of jihad. The power relations within Arabic culture –the idea of the *wali*, the guardian or patron-protégé relationship–these are projected into the theology of *shirk*: categories from Arabic culture are being elevated into the theological grid.

Also, some of theological developments come out of the life experience of the messenger and his community, the Quranic community. You see this particularly in the second part of the Quran, where he becomes a cult leader. He becomes a very powerful, dominant figure in everyone's lives and controls their lives in detail. That is clearly, I think, arising from the internal dynamics within the community. You could say some of it comes from his psychology. Ideas of atonement or retribution, and punishment are also brought into the Quran, I think from the culture. As for the idea of the *rasul* [the 'messenger']–there were stories current of past peoples who had been wiped out receiving prophetic warnings, and from this the Quranic messenger has used reason to extrapolate the office of the *rasul*. This was also influenced by the idea in the culture of an ambassador.

So, it is a combination of human reasoning and Arabic culture, combined with half-heard bits and pieces, Biblical materials

circulating in that environment.

One of the interesting things about linguistic contact dynamics where you got a creole emerging is that it takes place where people are uprooted and thrown together in a new context. What I have not explored in the book is whether there was a similar disruption or movement that could be the cause. For Haitian Creole it was the injection of people from West Africa into a Francophone environment in Haiti. For the Quran, could there have been an injection of a group of people with a sectarian outlook into a Christian or Jewish environment or milieu where they adapted bits and pieces from what they have heard, but without fully comprehending those elements?

What I found difficult in this project was the temptation to produce specific scenarios. There is a danger when dealing with what you do not know that you can fill in gaps that should not be filled in.

One tempting scenario is that there was a Quranic community which predated Muhammad –the historical Muhammad –which produced this remarkable text, and later developments in the Arab world –political and military developments –were associated with a leader who somehow got attached to the Quranic text. There could be something to this, as there's evidence that some parchments of early Quranic manuscripts predated Muhammad. If this were the case—that there was a Quranic community that predated Muhammad which became attached to the person of Muhammad—we would have to completely rethink the idea of where and how this community could have developed.

The short answer to the substrate question is that it is a combination of rational assumptions about God and what God would be like; a drawing on metaphors from Arabic culture, such as the master-slave relationship; plus, cultural constructs like the idea of *shirk* and of the *waly*, the partnership-guardianship relationship. All those things have been pulled together to make a new whole.

Cole: I have done counterterrorism work with a lot of Muslims –many people in the West do not realize how many Muslims are working in counterterrorism. And I have done interfaith dialogue, for Christians and Muslims to build understanding. Clearly everything you have said is unacceptable to a believing Muslim. So, I want to ask you about interfaith dialogue. Your whole thesis is that these are quite distinct religions: you are challenging the very notion, where we began, of Abrahamic faiths. What are the implications for interfaith dialogue of your book?

Mark: I think there could be a better understanding of each other. One of the challenges is that Muslims come to the task of interfaith dialogue with a pre-packaged view of what Christianity and Judaism is: they bring their frame. They bring the bat and the ball, they bring the dice, and say, “Let’s play!” Christians accept that frame, thinking “OK. We are Abrahamic faiths. We worship the same God. We both revere the prophets. And we honor the prophet Muhammad.” So off they go. But that frame is a bridge designed to lead into Islam. To build a relationship between Islam and Christianity based on Islam’s model of the two faiths is fundamentally flawed and will not produce good results. In fact, it can be dangerous.

As an example, there was a time, about 15 years ago in Melbourne, when there was a public crisis, and a need arose to make a public statement of compassion and care. The Christian leaders met with Muslim leaders and were wanting to make a public statement. The Christians wanted to say, “We respect the dignity of the human person, because everyone is made in the image of God,” but the Muslims would not have it, so the Christian and Muslim leaders produced a joint statement without an ‘image of God’ statement. In doing this the Christians obliterated their own theological foundations. The

Christians did not manage to stick to their doctrine, and they allowed a joint public statement to become Islamized. It became an Islamic statement. That is dangerous and naïve.

If Christians understood Islam better, they would be able to engage at deeper levels. For example, they could talk about the Christian doctrine of sin more effectively because they would understand that Islam has a different concept of sin. They could also present Christ more effectively because they could distinguish between an Islamic view of Jesus as a messenger and what the Bible says.

One of the challenges with Islam is that Muslims will imply that if you do not accept their frame, you are being disrespectful. I had a conversation with a Muslim who knew that I knew a lot about Islam. He said, "So you don't accept that Muhammad is a prophet?" I said, "No, I don't." He looked horrified. This was beyond the pale for him. Very often, Christians come under pressure in dialogues to speak of Muhammad as "the prophet." Even though they usually do not mean to imply that they believe he was a prophet this sends a message to the Muslims that they accept Islam's claim, and they believe that Muhammad is the final prophet. That is potentially deceptive and unhelpful.

It is very difficult to have an equal dialogue when Muslims come with an elaborate model for what Christianity teaches, but Christians come out of ignorance to Islam with the assumption that Islam is just some bowdlerized version of Christianity.

I really hope that Christians would take these issues on board and be more effective in their dialogues, being able to explain points of divergence, which are important for us in the way we live together.

This is important for politics. In Europe, for example, the growing minorities of Muslims will be looking for more sharia-

consistent expressions of politics. They will not be happy with the separation of powers that exists in many Western nations because Islam consolidates power into one office. They will want Islamic to be respected. They will push for religious pluralism, with different laws for diverse groups, because Islam expects this.

If non-Muslim interlocutors are not aware of the theological drivers of those outcomes and the significance of them and how profoundly different a society will be produced by legal pluralism, they may go down that track naively, not understanding where it ends up, and the consequences that could result.

I have been motivated to try and equip the church to have a sensible dialogue. I believe in interfaith dialogue. It is useless if you have the most liberal people on each side talking to each other, but if you have serious believers on both sides talking each other, then the onus is on the Christians to skill up, to understand how Islam sees Christianity, and to understand Islam in its own terms as well. What is the nature of the human person? What is the basic structure of the religion? Without that understanding, the dialogue will be frustrating; it will be like dancing around an object without ever looking at the object.

It is also a challenge interfaith dialogue is a key component of Islam's presentation of itself to the West. When most Muslims enter dialogue, they understand that they are there to present an Islamic world view, to transform society around them into an Islamic frame. Christians are often more naïve: many do not see the purpose of the dialogue in those terms. So that is another challenge.

Cole: I agree with much of that. We should not be focusing not just on commonalities, but on differences. We are sharing in a

pluralism which is something very superficial rather than something deep. We pretend away the differences and we feign respect for every single religion, practice, identity, belief, but we never stop to ask, "What do these people actually believe, what drives their ideas?" Isn't it better to know that we disagree?

Durie: There is an idea in our culture that you should focus on commonalities and not to do that is somehow disruptive and dangerous. An example of theological work which tried to find common ground was Miroslav Volf's book on Allah. But I am personally very interested in differences. I think if you want to understand a religious system—the structure of a system—you need to pay attention to differences. It is in the inconsistencies and the differences that the structure becomes apparent to you.

I discern in Christians a tendency to just focus on commonalities and to be frightened by any other conversation. I am struck by the beginning of John's gospel where it says we have seen Jesus "full of grace and truth." One of the errors of our age is that there is a lot of emphasis on grace and not as much on truth. The impetus to love your neighbor as yourself can lead you to look for the commonalities and to dwell on them, and to find discussion of difference somehow offensive. But Jesus said, "Love your enemies." Embedded in that proposition is an understanding that you could be radically different from someone in your views and expectations, but still be able to care for them as people. We should not be threatened by the differences. We need to sit with others, enjoy them, and work out what they mean.

When Christians enter these dialogues, they need preparation. If you can understand what the basic Islamic grid is, it helps you know what questions to ask and how to present what you believe, because you will know what is likely to cause

challenges for them. If you do not know that, then you have no idea what to present or how it might be heard. There is also the challenge of listening to people and asking, "Well, what do you believe about this?" and "How far would you go?" When you have the knowledge and the skill to do that, that's when dialogue becomes interesting: you can explore differences by gracious engagement with what the other person thinks. You can often be really surprised and shocked and amazed.

In our age, we have forgotten how to think about religion and how to explore it. When I was ordained, I left the university where I had been head of department. Several my colleagues came to the ordination service. One of them said afterwards, "Ah, I never knew Christianity was so text-based." I thought, "You are a clever guy and a brilliant scholar but there are very basic things you don't know about the Western heritage and the Christian tradition."

That is one of my passions: to help people have the skills to engage in these discussions and think about implications. I've absolutely no doubt that this issue of the relationship between Christianity and Islam will be a core political issue for the century ahead.

You alluded earlier to the fact that interest in Islam has gone up and down. People were very interested after 9-11, now we have COVID to think about, or the war in Ukraine, or China. In my view, Islam and the rise of Islam, the trajectory of Islam, it is decline as well, will be one of the central themes of the 21st century. We have not gone past that period; it is barely begun. So, I see my work is investing into that conversation, equipping the church and society in general to conduct that conversation in a more enlightened, informed, and effective way.

Cole: I have no doubt you are right, because anything that has

billions of adherents in an increasingly globalized, interconnected, inter-relating world is going to have to ipso facto a massive impact on the shape of the global future in a way it did not when we f lived in separate communities. Today there is no part of the world that does not have Muslims or Christians.

We are living through a very strange paradox, because we are in an age that is empirically more plural than it has been in terms of cultures, ideas, and expressions of individuality, and yet in some ways, we are more ignorant than we have ever been. Due to certain cultural ideas, we do not want to know about differences. I constantly come across scholars who are trying to find something that can unite people and bring them together. Of course, that is a natural consequence of pluralism, because one of the things you get from a pluralistic culture is a breakdown of a national identity, but it is interesting that they are not interested in the differences. They do not care what Islam's system is. They could not care less what Christianity's system is. They are looking for anything that can bind all people together, and the more plural you get, by definition, the more superficial the glue must become, because it is like trying to find an essence for something that has 1000 different expressions.

Durie: I think people in our culture, in the West, do want to believe that all religions are the same in their impact. We have lost the ability to understand the incredible power of religion to transform societies and nations over time. We are seduced by the particularity of individualism. Obviously, people believe different things and we are not all the same. Just because something is in the Bible, does not mean people live it out. That evidence is before us all the time. But the reality is that faiths do exert profound cultural impact. Saudi Arabia is the country it is today significantly because of Islam. Britain is the country it is today significantly

because of the influence of Christianity. Northern Europe is what it is today significantly because of the influence of Lutheranism. But we have lost the ability to understand how that works. We do not have the subtlety to understand the complexity of the relationship between faith and culture. It is not just a one-on-one relationship.

If someone is teaching 'love your neighbor as yourself' generation after generation, it changes the language, it changes the culture. There is an argument to be made that the meaning of the English word love is due to the influence of the New Testament. This has become part of the air we breathe, but we have lost the ability to trace that influence. We cannot understand the power of that. That is why we see countries that are sleepwalking into profound and unrecognizable differences in world view and outlook, while even to raise that seems offensive and disturbing.

One analogy I sometimes use is a ship with a compass and a map. The ship can go all over the place, but every now and again someone looks at the map and they turn the ship's course back on track, and eventually they end up at their destination. The compass and the map do not determine every bit of the journey, but they do keep re-orienting the course.

Religion is like that: it keeps bringing people back to a world view. It shapes people at the level of very fundamental outlooks, such as "What does it mean to be human?" This is

THE QUR'AN AND ITS BIBLICAL REFLEXES

Investigations into the Genesis of a Religion

MARK DURIE



something that Christianity has an answer to. You see it in the Sistine Chapel where God reaches out to touch his creation in Adam. You see the “image of God” there. The implication of that idea for the way we live is profound. Islam’s view that human beings are easily let astray and need guidance produces a very, very different political system. It produces a different society with distinct pathologies and distinct potentials and needs.

How profound that is: this is something we have forgotten about and do not want to think about. It is too threatening. If all religions are **not** the same, I should choose one, or at least have opinions that differentiate them. But to do that is contrary to the spirit of the age, so in a very lazy way we just hit the alarm clock and sleep in for another few hours. We do not engage with the reality of what is happening.

Part of the core of my work is to help people understand what it means to live in a spiritual world, to have the categories, the concepts, to understand the power of faith and people’s view of the world from a spiritual perspective. We desperately need that in our time, in our age.

Cole: The same tendency that has given us a cultural and historical amnesia about the profound impact of the Judeo-Christian tradition is the tendency that overlooks, underestimates or is blind to the fact that the religion of Islam could shape enough Muslims with a coherent world view that it could have social, cultural, political, economic implications. We have now convinced ourselves as a society that we were not shaped by Christianity and Judaism: they were just some sort of superstitious phase that we went through that did not actually shape our core values and principles, which are secular. Therefore, we do not need to even think about what view of the world or of the human being Islam has, because religions are just private beliefs, things that people

do think or do in their homes. We let them build their churches, mosques and synagogues and temples, and they go away and do their stuff. And meanwhile it is science and rationalism that shape our public culture.

Durie: We see religion as a symptom, not a cause. Or an instrument, the “opiate of the masses.” We do not see it as a cause, but it is profoundly a cause, because religions answer the fundamental life questions and those answers shape everything else.

One of the most worrying things about our society today is our inability to really grapple seriously with religion. We have pushed Christianity out of our mind, it has left us very vulnerable and unable to deal with religious ideologies in general.

Cole: Mark, on that optimistic note, we must bring the discussion to an end, but congratulations on the book: it is a superb piece of scholarship. I have longed admired the analytical acumen you bring to bear on Islam. You are willing us to probe and challenge and question and be creative. a topic that a lot of people are very nervous about. This discussion is contributing to honest conversations about the political, theological, and cultural ideas that shape who we are in the 21st century, which includes Muslims, Christians, Jews, and people without any faith. You have just contributed to the program. I am thrilled to have you on, so thank you very much.

[Table of Contents](#)

Dr. Mark Durie is a senior research fellow at the Jeffrey Center for the study of Islam at the Melbourne School of Theology. He has PhDs in both linguistics and Islamic Theology. He has held visiting academic positions in linguistics at MIT, UCLA, UC Santa Cruz, and Stanford. In 1992, while head of the Department of Linguistics and Language Studies at Melbourne University, he became the youngest person elected to the Australian Academy of Humanities.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](https://twitter.com/NERIconoclast)