

The title of this series has been “Islam, My Islam”. Had I seen a need, I could have written a series of companion pieces of comparable length entitled “Christianity, My Christianity” or “Judaism, My Judaism”. As I have stated elsewhere, I work very hard at maintaining a co-equivalency in my own mind between the three great monotheistic faiths. To me, the Books of Moses, the Gospels and the Koran represent the beginning, middle and end of God’s revelation of Himself to the world. Out of each of the foundational sacred texts, I pick and choose what it is that I believe, what it is that I give greater or lesser emphasis to in my own system of belief, that which I choose to participate in and that which I choose not to participate in (while scrupulously avoiding grafting anything onto the texts from outside of monotheism in spite of various intellectual temptations to do so). This is, of course, very much frowned upon by the entrenched theocratic hierarchies which have formed within Judaism, Christianity and Islam. One is advised to consult with experts in the faith, to find a rabbi (or a minister or an imam) who can guide you in your beliefs. What seems implicit to me (and what has seemed implicit from the time I began studying the Bible six years ago) is that one still has to choose for oneself. Even if one becomes convinced that Judaism is the only true path to God, one is still faced with the choice between Orthodox Judaism or Reformed Judaism, the choice between the innumerable nuanced variations within each of those primary divisions. If one becomes convinced that Christianity is the only true path to God, one has to choose between Catholicism and Protestantism, Greek Orthodox, Anglicanism, Baptist and so on. If one becomes convinced that Islam is the only true path to God, one has to choose between Sunni and Shiite faiths. To ask a rabbi or a minister or an imam to guide you in your beliefs, it seems to me, is comparable to asking an insurance salesman which kind of insurance you should buy. He may purport himself to be an impartial advisor and teacher, but it stretches human credibility to the breaking point (to me) to expect that he will, in the long run, do anything other than sell you his kind of insurance, the brand of insurance he has, self-evidently, bought” for himself and the brand of insurance which it is his livelihood to “sell”.

One of the things that I found to be fundamentally sound about Islam at the outset of my experience with it was the definition of the term “Islam” itself—submission to the Will of God—and the term “Muslim”—one who submits to the Will of God—which I see as “personalized” versions of the first pillar of Islam: acknowledgement of God’s implicit sovereignty over everything. “All that is in the heaven and in the earth is God’s”, “all things came from God and to God they are returning”. In computer terms, it’s a “0” or a “1,” in my view. You either believe in the pre-eminence of God’s sovereignty (“1”) or you believe in the pre-eminence of, well, anything else (“0”). The choice is your fundamental right (and, in my view, your primary responsibility) as an individual to make and you can make it only for yourself, not for others. Personally, I don’t believe the choice allows of the sort of grey areas to which the secular humanist mind is inclined. As a rabbi once said on the television program Passages when asked about the astronomically large numbers of people who, as North American opinion polls continue to indicate, profess a belief in God, “Yes, but how many of them believe in God, and how many of them believe that ‘God is love’, ‘God is nature’, ‘God is science’.” That is, how many people attempt to redefine God to suit their own purposes—to change God from a specific Being into a completely neutral state of existence? How many individuals

attempt to change God from the Absolute Playwright, Absolute Theatre Owner, Absolute Theatre Director whose Theatre is the Entire Universe into a part of the scenery, into the stage or into the theatre against which, upon which and/or within which those individuals enact their own small and fleeting lives? My own view is that there are two overall Realities. There is “1” Reality and there is “0” reality. Which Reality or reality you inhabit, which Reality or reality within which you reside (and which Reality or reality resides within you) is decided by whether you have consciously, knowingly chosen to submit yourself to the Will of God or whether that pre-eminent position in your life is occupied by anyone or anything else. I believe that submission to the Will of God is implicit in the Torah and in the Gospels (and in the Torah is implicitly directed at YHWH “God” and is implicit in God’s directive to man to “subdue the earth” and that the Koran’s frequent injunction against “joining gods with God” originates in opposition to the same misapprehension). I believe that this submission to the Will of God is what the Koran refers to when describing wealth and children as a temptation to man. How many husbands and fathers genuinely believe their first loyalty is to God, and how many pay only lip service to that loyalty? How many of Them even recognize that their loyalty shifted with their marriage and with the birth of their children and that God now comes in a very distant third, behind the wife and kids?

What is the Will of God?

Back when I was living a “0” life, that would have seemed a very sensible question to me. Having chosen “1” for myself, I believe that the question is both unanswerable in human terms and largely, if not completely, irrelevant to the discussion. To understand the Will of God, as one understands, say, a mathematical formula, would, it seems to me, require deluding oneself that one was, oneself, an omniscient being—which (I hope we could agree) one isn’t. In human terms, it seems to me that Reality, the Reality which is represented by God, the Reality which is God is inexplicable in human terms—and all other realities, which are explicable in human terms, are mere fragments of the single, all-encompassing Reality which is God’s Reality. God is not Nature, but Nature is a small part of the Reality which is God. God is not Love, but Love is a small part of the Reality which is God, God is not Science, but Science is a small part of the Reality which is God. This, I believe, is terrifying and alienating concept for the secular mind (which flatters itself that no reality is too large for its capacity to comprehend) and leads to accusation. “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” is, at essence, a secular indictment of God. To which the only sensible answer, my view, would be, “How would you know?” To sustain the indictment, to support the accusation, one would have to have first-hand experience with absolute power. “The more power a human being has the more he is likely to behave in a corrupt fashion as a result of it” is, I believe, a fairer and more demonstrable hypothesis—but is also worlds away from dealing with terms like “absolute power,” and, again, (as most secular discussions of God tend to do) presupposes that the one who is doing the discussing and the One Who Is Being Discussed function on a comparable level of existence. On the one hand you have a being who is, on average, between’ five and six feet tall, who will, average, live about seventy years and who didn’t get perfect marks in high school. On the other hand you have an Infinite Being, Who Exists Everywhere Simultaneously, Has Absolute Power and Absolute Knowledge of All

Things. Cogito ergo sum. I think, therefore I am. The larger implication, to me (and I suspect to most monotheists) is: well, fine, but what do you think? We all think (even feminists, on those rare occasions when they briefly stop worshipping their own motions, think). Islam, it seems to me is the only appropriate extension from Cogito ergo sum:

(My own thought is limited and I speculate that my thought must have originated in Some Largest and/or Unlimited Thought) (that is, thought has to “come from” somewhere) (“little things” come from “Big Things” whether you are talking about babies coming out of adults or moons coming out planets) (given that less limited thought i.e. a man’s thought is always going to be preferable to severely limited thought i.e. a baby’s thought when it comes to decision-making) (I, therefore, accept:) (that the submission of my limited thought to the directions of the Largest and/or Unlimited Thought is an inherently good thought, possibly the largest—which is to say, least limited thought—which I am capable) (as a corollary; I reject:) (a. the choice of believing that there is no Largest and/or Unlimited Thought b. the choice of believing that, if a Largest and/or Unlimited Thought exists that it is inaccessible to me c. the choice of believing that my own thought did not originate in Largest and/or Unlimited Thought d. the choice of believing that, if a Largest and/or Unlimited Thought exists it is unconcerned with, unaware of or hostile to my own limited thought) (that is, I reject the idea that a Largest and/or Unlimited Thought could be otherwise than beneficent) (and accept the fact that a Largest and/or Unlimited Thought would, by its implied beneficent Nature, communicate with limited thought; ergo, Scripture).

Put another way, it seems to me that to choose reality (Cogito ergo sum) over Reality (Cogito ergo sum ergo Islam) is to attempt to study astronomy seriously while refusing to accept any information obtained through a telescope, to implicitly suspect the telescope and to implicitly view the telescope an impediment to accurate perception (because it occupies a space between the eye of the observer and the thing observed it is, ipso facto, by definition, an impediment) and to have faith only in what one can see unaided with the naked eye. To adhere, in other words, to the humanist view that “man the measure of all things”. The result, if one was scrupulously honest in documenting what one was able to see with one’s naked eye, alone, would, of course, constitute a kind of astronomy, a scrupulously honest documentation of one’s unaided subjective observations of the actions and motions of stars, the sun, the moon and a certain number of planets. But when that documentation compared with the knowledge which results from accepting as self-evident that the telescope is a central, irreplaceable instrument in astronomy and the acceptance as a given that “the bigger the telescope, the better the information,” there is no comparison. In terms of Reality, rather than reality (to me) God is very much analogous to the Biggest Telescope (Largest and/or Unlimited Thought) when compared with the naked eye (limited thought). Without God, you are thrashing about in a wading pool within sight of the ocean. But it is your choice. The definition of the term “Islam” is not “Knowledge of the Will of God,” it is “submission to the Will of God.” It presupposes that God, as an omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent Being is better suited to directing your life than you are, just as the Hubble Space Telescope is better suited to the purposes of astronomy than is your naked eye — and by just, in my view, so comparably wide a margin.

## What is the Will of God?

I think it self-evident that—given that each human being is different—God’s Will, as it applies to each individual person who chooses to submit themselves to His Will, is different. One of the reasons that I am suspicious of organized religion and keep organized religion at arm’s length is that it seems to me that the Jewish, Christian and Muslim hierarchies (or, as I see them, “hierarchies”) accept as a given that God’s Will is the same for everyone. In my view, the “hierarchies” and those who support them have simply traded one collectivist misapprehension—the 19th century notion that “if God’s Will was to be done on the earth all of our lives would closely resemble those of the individuals who occupy the religious hierarchies” (that is, we should all live like priests, nuns, rabbis and imams)—and have simply traded that collectivist misapprehension for the (what is to me, anyway) equally specious collectivist view that we should marginalize the presence of God and His scriptures, his Prophets and his messengers in our lives and instead become “baby worshippers,” “marriage worshippers” and “family worshippers”. That is, that we should subscribe instead to the collectivist sensibility which has resulted from the shift in emphasis from the clergy to the laity in Judaism and Christianity and which has resulted in the (perhaps terminal) erosion of those two faiths into well-meaning but misguided... Maternalisms?...which, at essence, deplore God, deplore His scriptures, deplore His Prophets and his messengers. Which, in short, deplore everything except babies, marriage and family (and which deplores even marriage and family unless the wife-and-mother is in charge or it involves homosexuals). I likewise endeavour to keep at arm’s length anyone who purports to be an intermediary between God and man. On a purely personal, purely subjective level, I think it was and is God’s Will that I would attempt to self-publish 300 issues of a comic book. I do not extrapolate from that that it is God’s Will that everyone should attempt to self-publish 300 issues of a comic book. When I look at the entrenched hierarchies of the great monotheistic faiths—both in their much deplored Patriarchal forms and in their current Materialistic forms into which they have (as I see it) eroded—I see just such an extrapolation, a perpetuation of the view that it is the purpose of religious faith to determine how everyone should live and (more perniciously) whom they should interpose at the highest levels of their own lives between God and themselves. I am in complete agreement with those who believe that an entrenched priesthood is a most unlikely and unhelpful candidate for the position, but I am also of the view (to say the least) that I don’t see our present entrenchment of white-muslim-and-votive-candle-feminism or the elevation of Oprah Winfrey to beatification (although I’m sure her television program has “healed” many of her followers in exactly those limited and secular categories of “healing” with which they are almost exclusively concerned) as any great improvement. And this is, in fact, what I admire about the term “Islam,” the implied submission to the Will of God, without the interpolation of an intermediary between the individual and God.

Speaking again, personally, speaking (I’ll give away the game right here) subjectively—the only way that I believe any kind of faith can be discussed—I haven’t the faintest idea how much of it I’ve gotten right and how much of it I’ve gotten wrong. The, so far, 282 of the 300 issues, I mean. Or my life, for that matter. I don’t think I’m supposed to know

until the Last Day. Knowing would, I believe, defeat the intrinsic purpose of life: which, to me, consists not in knowing, but in choosing. Choosing what I think is right and, hopefully, doing it. Not what necessarily appeals to me, not what I think I would most enjoy, but what I think is right. What I think that God thinks is right. Not what Gloria Steinem thinks is right, or what George Bush thinks is right. Or what a priest or Pope John Paul II or a rabbi or an imam thinks is right. It would not surprise me in the least to find out I'm doing really, really badly (which would be the consensus view in the feminist society in which I live) and it would not surprise me to find out I'm doing really, really well. I think I would be surprised to find out what parts of my life were "high water" marks in the eyes of God and what parts of my life were "low points". That is, I take it as a given that, like all people, in submitting myself to the Will of God, I understand His Will in my life imperfectly—less imperfectly at some times and more imperfectly at others, but always, imperfectly. This, to me, is the meaning of jihad. "Striving in the path of God," the usually excruciating and seldom enjoyable process of the practical application of "submitting oneself to the Will of God". Jihad: overcoming the rationalizations that kept me smoking cigarettes for two years after submitting myself to the Will of God. Jihad: overcoming my pro just found apprehension at even attempting to fast in the month of Ramadan. Jihad: overcoming my unreasonable attachment to an electronic device (television) whose puerile, vacuous and moronic contents disgusted and revolted me better than 99% of the time. My plate was and is full with things that need to be done and things that need to be undone if I am to align myself with my own perception of the Will of God. It's more than a full-time occupation, it is a near-Sisyphian lifelong task.

So, it should come as no great shock that (in my view) for me, or for anyone, to pretend to "muck into" the lives of others, given that all of us, as imperfect beings understand the Will of God in our own lives imperfectly really seems ludicrous to me. I see no reason to exclude priests, ministers, bishops, popes, nuns, rabbis, imams or ayatollahs from that blanket statement. They are all imperfect people who have been selected—or elected—by imperfect people for their position. To me, "mucking into" the lives of others (returning to my previous metaphor) makes about as much sense as trying to help someone see through their telescope by sticking my telescope on the end of it. Good theory (I suppose) but, in practical terms, less than helpful. The extent of the advice that I could give would be: submit yourself to the Will of God and from then on, you're both on your own and in the custody of God. God can help you. I can't. I would feel safe in saying that there is nothing you won't experience that isn't a very common experience once you have submitted to the Will of God — exhilaration alternating with discouragement, genuine submission alternating with half-hearted submission, stubbornness, rebellion, resentment, joy, despair, astonishment, unremitting boredom, tranquility. That's what I've experienced, across the whole spectrum and back again. I can't say my life has improved in any conventional sense, but then I've always found life to be very hard and largely unrewarding work so, in a sense, I've really just changed from leading a completely pointless life of hard and largely unrewarding work to leading a life of hard and largely unrewarding work that has as its aim doing what I think is right in the eyes of God—'striving in the path of God' or, at least, striving to "strive in the path of God"—to resist temptation in a world that is largely devoted to multiplying and strengthening temptation.

I don't envision reward—or even “reward”—partly because I really don't think I'm very good at this and partly because of my own experience that life is implicitly unrewarding (I do, however, also accept the fact that once you see almost everything the world has to offer as a corrupting temptation—as I tend to do—it becomes very difficult to be rewarded in any conventional sense of the term). Most of the time, I can't picture how the “next life” would differ significantly from this one. The Koranic verses about the houris, the “wives of stainless purity” (a subtle but significant difference from the “virgins” they are described as being in the Western press—which I would attribute, in no small part, to the West's profound shortage of “wives of stainless purity” and consequent incomprehension of the very idea of what a “stainless” wife might be) (even, you know, theoretically) (say “stainless” to anyone in the West and the first thing they'll think of is steel) promised in the next world, strike me as hyperbolic—as opposed to those verses which depict this world as the “farmland for the hereafter,” resonating with the Gospel's promise that “many are called, few are chosen.” What I envision is more hard and largely unrewarding work, larger and more subtle temptations, more at stake and less chance of success. My preference would be for no afterlife whatsoever: complete oblivion, to cease to exist (which puts me very much at odds with the inmates of this particular asylum who—whether “0” or “1”—seem always to long for “more life, longer life” in this world even when they know that it is unattainable) but I'm not sure how much of my preference is “flesh-thinking” (I hold to the view that if your existence has manifested itself within a physical form you have either eroded from a higher state and/or have made a series of very stupid “0” reality decisions somewhere along the spiritual line). Perhaps once my flesh is actually dead, I will be able to perceive the nature of life more accurately and prefer life to oblivion, but right now? No, definitely not. It took me a while to recognize this not as a suicidal impulse (I didn't give myself life so I don't think it's mine to throw away) but analogous, rather, to having made elaborate preparations and large sacrifices to attend a party which turns out, upon your arrival, to be excruciatingly boring and not worth a fraction of what you had to give up to attend. The fact that you have to stay at the party for as long as eighty or ninety years, it seems to me, only emphasizes the level of stupidity inherent in your choice. I've been at this party for forty-six years now and I, for one, am more than happy to leave it at any time God sees fit (Anyone you want to say goodbye to? No. Anything you want to take with you? No. Anything you're going to miss? No.)

In choosing to submit myself to the Will of God and his absolute sovereignty, it occurred to me very early on that Islam was—and is—intended to be more inclusive than it proved to be once the descendants of Abu Sofyan and Hind got a hold of it.

Consider the first of the five pillars of Islam: Acknowledgement of God's sovereignty and acknowledgement of Muhammad as His prophet. On the face of it, this appears to be “Islamocentric” and implicitly anti-Jewish and or anti-Christian—and it has certainly been viewed that way for centuries. However, in my view, far from being anti-Christian, it seems to me to pose a very sensible question that Christians seems loathe to address and which I mentioned earlier in this series. Do you not suppose that God has—and had—absolute sovereignty over Jesus and Mary? It seems to me another “0” and “1” question over which Christianity has been tying itself up in theological knots for two

thousand years- trying to figure out how to make the answer simultaneously “0” (Because Jesus was God, the question is irrelevant) and “1” (Jesus was a man but co-equivalent with God so Jesus and God were equal). Even if you allow for Jesus being God’s son (which I don’t, but for the sake of argument, let’s discuss the point in purely Christian terms), isn’t a son correctly submissive to the will of his father? I mean, sure, many—if not most—sons aren’t, but isn’t submissiveness to the father’s will the ideal? And isn’t that, according to the Gospels, exactly what Jesus— both the Synoptic Jesus and the Jesus of John’s Gospel—spent a great deal of time preaching: that he was doing the Will of his Father, that he was doing the will of He who sent him into the world? Did he ever preach the opposite? That God should submit Himself to the will of Jesus? No, of course not. I do think it unfortunate that the conventional Islamic acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty includes the phrase “and Muhammad is His messenger”. Not because I don’t believe it (I do) but because the phrasing leaves a great deal to be desired, making it sound as if Muhammad was God’s only messenger. Unfortunate, particularly, because Muslims don’t believe that. The Koran explicitly names any number of individuals from the Torah and the Gospels who are included in the ranks of God’s prophets and messengers. At the same time, I can understand that Muslims would be reluctant to modify the first pillar into “There is no God but God and Muhammad is one of His messengers,” because it does seem to, you know, rather blunt the point. In my own prayers, I’ve chosen “There is no God but God and Muhammad is His last messenger and seal of prophets.” I’ve often wondered, how much of a problem would that be for Jews and Christians to incorporate into their own faith? For an Orthodox Jew, as an example, would acknowledgement that Muhammad was God’s last messenger jeopardize their own anticipation of Meshiach? Is Meshiach considered to be in the same category of prophet as Isaiah or Jeremiah, or does the mere fact of his exalted status take him out of the realm of the prophets and into the sort of realm occupied by Jesus in Christianity? And even leaving aside the “last” messenger part, after fourteen hundred years, don’t even Orthodox Jews acknowledge that Muhammad was a prophet of God? For a Fundamentalist Christian does the fact that Jesus has promised to return on the Last Day allow for Muhammad’s acknowledgement as God’s last messenger and seal of prophets? Or could it be acknowledge & because, indisputably—in this world—Jesus lived six centuries before Muhammad’s time? For me, of course, describing Muhammad as God’s “last messenger” causes no problem at all. Of all the pivotal figures in the histories of Judaism, Christianity; and Islam since 632, the nearest that I could see as being in the category of a messenger of God would be Martin Luther. And in the case of Martin Luther, I think it indisputable that—in calling into question the corruption that had been perpetrated against the Word of God by the degraded papacy of the Middle Ages—while he exhibited great bravery and profound faith in the face of nearly universal opposition and personal peril, he didn’t per-se bring anything new to the monotheistic table. There is no “Gospel of Martin Luther,” no additional Book which has been “sent down” that could be considered comparable to the Bible and the Koran. Unless you consider the Book of Mormon canonical, which I very much don’t.

Two of Islam’s five pillars, prayer and fasting in the sacred month of Ramadan, are bound inextricably together in my own perceptions because the first time I tried praying

five times a day was during my first Ramadan fast in 1999, so I'd like to address the two of them together:

If you'll recall, way, way, back at the beginning of this series of essays (back when the earth was, as it were, still cooling) it was my dissatisfying experience with the Anglican Church and the consequent sense of "something missing" when I stopped going to church which first led me to consider "fasting in the sacred month". If you'll also recall, praying five times a day seemed to me — as I contemplated fasting in Ramadan (particularly with the ritual ablutions, change of clothing, etc.) — excessive. What I anticipated with praying five times a day was that it would have the character of a marathon, an endurance rally. I assumed that, in this, it would have much in common with getting up at 8:30 every Sunday morning to put on a suit-and-tie and to struggle off to church (at first, through the always unpredictable Canadian winter wonderland and, subsequently, to sit in that same suit-and-tie for an hour and a half during the sweltering summer months in a church that wasn't air conditioned) to listen to homey little stories about mum, dad and the kids. That is, I considered fasting in the sacred month would be the same as I assumed all religious activities were: largely unpleasant rituals through which (if you weren't a mum, a dad or a kid) you gritted your teeth, sucked it up, bit the bullet, etc. etc. I thought that unpleasantness was the point of religious activities. Much to my surprise, what I had expected to be an ordeal turned out to be anything but. In fact, for me, it served to clarify very vividly the difference between "0" reality life and "1" Reality life. Not that I noticed it at the time. At the time, it just seemed an unexpected bonus that what I had thought was going to be an ordeal had turned out to be not that difficult, that I was going to be able to manage the twenty-nine days of praying and fasting with far less effort and exertion than I thought would be required. I had also given up caffeine, alcohol, meat, dairy products and masturbation for the sacred month. if you had asked me when I began that first Ramadan fast whether I would make it through the twenty-nine days, the answer, honestly, would have been "no". My thought in starting the fast was that I would give it a try and see how far I could get. I hoped I could make it through two weeks and I hoped that I would try again the following year and keep trying until I made it through the whole twenty-nine days—and (crucially) that I would then be able to make it through the full twenty nine in the years following. Ever since I began reading the Bible six years ago, I have never wanted to "take a step down," that is, to set myself to doing something, to do it for a while and then let it slide, as had happened with my church attendance. Having resolved to become a genuine churchgoer, I was (to say the least) not terribly impressed that I had only made it through six months. If you had asked me during the first two weeks of my first Ramadan fast what I was thinking about, the answer would have been "an ice-cold beer and a cheeseburger". That, to me, was the point of the fast—NOT doing things and how LONG I could not do them.

It wasn't until December of 2000 and my second Ramadan fast that—much to my own amusement—I could remember the first couple of days of my first experience with any clarity. The first couple of days, cranky about having to get up well before dawn to have something to eat and then being unable to eat or drink for the rest of the day, by the time the sun was going down, filled with bitterness and resentment...

[Let me interrupt myself to include a news item from Cairo which made me chuckle during last year's Ramadan, "23 die in car crashes linked to Ramadan fast": "Twenty-three people died in two automobile accidents near Cairo in incidents attributed to speeding at sunset just before the end of the Ramadan fast, police said yesterday. Seventeen were killed and 13 injured when two cars collided on Wednesday near ai-Fashn, 140 km south of Cairo. Six were killed and 11 injured near Beni Suef, 100 km south." It was nice, on the one hand, to know that I wasn't alone in my crankiness and nice to know, as well, that I lived in a part of the world where that level of crankiness at sunset wasn't a near-universal condition which put everyone's safety at risk.]

...at this hard, hard Islamic row I had to hoe (poor me!). As I usually do, I would buy my dinner on the way home. And what I would buy would be three desserts. Three non-chocolate (no caffeine!) things made up of various kinds of sugar and varieties of fat in a variety of shapes—layer upon layer—which I would devour in several large bites the minute (c'mon. C'MON!) the sun had dipped below the horizon. And with a (Hah! THERET) sense that a certain amount of Justice had been restored to the universe, I would sulk off to bed. A couple of days of that brought about the anatomical repercussion you would expect (GAH! POOR ME!) and then I switched to dried fruit, salads, and things of that kind. The interesting thing was that—having completely forgotten what those first couple of days of my first fast had been like—the following year, I did the same thing! And it wasn't until the expected anatomical repercussion hit a second time that I remembered, Oh, right. This. I did this last year, too, didn't I? Now, the reason that I forgot about it by the second year was that the difference in quality between praying and fasting in Ramadan in the second week as compared to the first couple of days was like the difference between night and day. Not only did the fasting and praying become easier, but everything became easier. My stamina increased dramatically, all my little aches and pains vanished, I slept soundly straight through the night, I awoke refreshed and eager to go to work, I was more alert, I was more patient, crises great and small had no impact on me whatsoever. Walking felt like gliding, a sensation which I hadn't experienced since I was about ten years old. "I remember being like this," I kept thinking, "I remember my life feeling like this: before I had experienced masturbation, before I had experienced sex, before I had experienced drugs, before I had experienced alcohol." (I was also aware that my newly recovered state was the one that I had wanted masturbation, sex, drugs and alcohol to return me to). What was interesting was that—when the twenty-nine days of my first Ramadan fast was up, I didn't want to stop. Having dreaded fasting, I now found myself dreading not fasting. My stamina won't be as great! My aches and pains are going to come back! I won't sleep as soundly! I won't be as refreshed in the morning! I won't be as alert! I actually kept going for about another week-and-a-half (and found out later that that's something of a "no-no" in Islam) and expected that I would, you know, crash. Like coming down off of acid (which was the closest analogous experience—in terms of profound impact—which I had to compare it to). But, of course, fasting in Ramadan comes veiy much from the other side of reality—that is, from Reality—so there was no crash. What I did experience was comparable to having spent a month with my head above water—having been previously unaware that my head and the rest of me had been underwater for more than twenty-nine years. As I ate my first food during daylight hours, ate my first roast beef sandwich, my first chocolate chip cookie, drank my first beer, each

event pulled my head a little further down until I was living underwater again, which—over a period of a week or two—seemed strange and then just seemed to be the way that I had always been. Drinking beer gradually ceased to be this peculiar activity—where I had to keep reminding myself of what (exactly) the theory was behind drinking a liquid which bad, at essence, “gone bad” (and tasted like it)—and, gradually, became again this thing that seemed to be a really good idea, particularly after a long week where I had all of these, you know, aches and pains and I wasn’t, you know, sleeping well and there were all these, you know, big and little crises that, you know, “got” to me.

After several days (or perhaps a week of two) of reacquainting myself with “underwater” life, it became apparent to me that, once more, in my life there was “something missing”. Clearly, what was missing was the purer state which I had experienced during my Ramadan fast which (however) kept bumping up against my certainty that I was not intended—it was not God’s Will—that I would live that way. The purer state which I had experienced had begun to erode almost immediately after the formal end of Ramadan (in early January that year). Whatever the reason for that erosion, it existed outside of my ability to comprehend it, like an unwritten law having greater force than any written law. It took me a while to consider the idea that I might actually begin praying five times a day simply as a way of life, the way of my life (I had returned to only reciting my prayer in the morning after getting ready for work and in the evening just before bed) as a way of filling that “something missing” hole in my world. It was an interesting experience making my series of choices—choosing not to perform the ritual ablutions, not to change clothing, to not observe the specific Muslim prayer times (calibrated to the minute: the sheet of Ramadan prayer times I had received from Reflections on Islam were for “Toronto and Vicinity” and noted that to each prayer time in Guelph you should add 3 minutes, in Hamilton 2 minutes, in London 8 minutes, in Waterloo 4 minutes. The beginning of Ramadan is also “subject to moon sighting,” that is subject to the sighting of the full moon by Muslim authorities. Even though, in the 20th century, we know—to the minute—when the moon becomes “full” in any geographic location on the globe, Islam still takes into consideration that if God chooses another time, just this once, we must be prepared) but to pray, instead, at the approximate times of Fajr, pre-dawn—described in the Koran as the hour in which it first becomes possible, by natural light, to discern the difference between a white and a black thread (which is undoubtedly the case in the Arabian Peninsula but, trust me, that at 5:56 am in Canada in December it is impossible, by natural light, to differentiate between one’s hand in front of one’s face and, say, the bottom of a mine-shaft, let alone a white and a black thread)—Zuhr, noon-time, Asr, mid-afternoon, Maghrib, sunset and Isha, evening, when the last traces of sunset have faded. And so that was what I did. Of course my Fajr prayers soon slipped from “pre-dawn” to “dawn” to “close-to-dawn” to “morning” (and, on Saturday mornings, after being out until 2 am, “mid-morning”) on the rare occasions where I have some kind of social engagement where I’m apt to have a glass of wine or two, I compress Asr, Maghrib and Isha into early afternoon, mid-afternoon and late afternoon. The further I get from Ramadan in the calendar the more . . . flexible . . . my prayer-times become, the more apt I am to stretch three beers on Friday night into five beers (and maybe a shot of Jack Daniel’s) (or two). At the halfway point (right around now, in fact) I begin to develop a genuine longing for Ramadan—the ritual ablutions, the change of clothing, the specific

prayer times, the day-long fasts—and the giant Muslim NO! sign which is, by my own choice, attached to it. Twenty-nine days, once a year, where I no longer have to ask myself if two coffees are too many, if I've been eating too much chocolate, if I've been eating too much meat, eating too few vegetables, masturbating too often, ogling too many pretty young girls. For twenty-nine days, by choice, I take those decisions out of my own hands and (two weeks in) begin to reexperience who it is that I actually am, under all these layers of small, creeping vices and their attendant rationalizations, and their attendant rationalizations' levels of attendant anxieties, and their attendant anxieties' levels of spiritual "discomfitedness"? You know, that stuffy feeling, the feeling as if your skin is on too tight? Yes, exactly. That feeling that you're probably, as a North American or European, feeling right now. That feeling that has made pharmaceuticals, recreational drugs, pornography, self-help books and holistic medicine the multi-to-the-nth-power-billion-dollar industries which they are today. Ramadan which, for me, is now and (inshallah) in all the years which remain of my life indisputably "home base," the way of thinking and the state to which I return once a year. Because there is no better experience, to me, than to experience being ten years old again at the age of forty-six.

Anyway, it has occurred to me, over the course of three fasts in the sacred month—speaking as someone who has studied Judaism, Christianity and Islam—that the five pillars of Islam seem to offer the greatest ecumenical possibilities of the three monotheistic religions. That is, I think Jews and Christians could both observe at least four of the five pillars, while leaving every other element of Judaism and Christianity intact and unchanged. Although Islam prohibits the consumption of alcohol, the prohibition of the consumption of alcohol is not one of the five pillars.

Of the two remaining pillars, the zakat, of course, I have addressed on several previous occasions and I still consider it to be an inherently good idea for each individual to contribute 2.5% of his or her accumulated wealth to feeding the poor in his or her city, town or region. I also don't think (I may be wrong) it should be that terribly difficult, in the ecumenical spirit in which I'm discussing these issues, to get synagogues and churches to agree to institute the zakat. Or for secular humanists to go along with it, for that matter. It probably is.. .terribly difficult, I mean. But I honestly can't see a good reason why it should be.

Coincidentally, the remaining pillar, the hajj—the pilgrimage to Mecca—was the subject of one of my few direct contacts with the Muslim world, a letter which I wrote to the host of Reflections on Islam, Ezz E. Gadd (who frequently answers viewers' questions on the air). Essentially, what I asked was: speaking as a person who believes in God's sovereignty, who believes that Muhammad was His last messenger and seal of Prophets, who prays five times daily, who pays the stated alms and who fasts in Ramadan, but who also believes that Judaism and Christianity are completely valid faiths in their present form, would I be considered a Muslim, insofar as making the hajj was concerned? And if not, by whose authority would Mr. Gadd claim that I wasn't?

(I am an incorrigible troublemaker: it interests me to take questions from other monotheistic debates and apply them to other situations: in this case freely adapting the

Scribes' and Pharisees' question to the Synoptic Jesus when they asked "by whose authority" he healed the blind, the lame and the lepers. His reply, of course was that he would answer their question if they would answer a question of his own, as to whether the Scribes and Pharisees believed that John the Baptist's ministry was divinely inspired or purely an "earthly" preaching. As the Synoptic Gospels tell us, the Scribes and Pharisees declined to answer because they knew that John was almost universally regarded by the people as a Prophet and they feared a backlash if they said that his was an earthly ministry — and they couldn't say his ministry was divinely inspired because the obvious question would be, Well, why didn't you follow him, then? When they said, "We cannot tell," Jesus basically said, "Then I cannot tell either by whose authority I do these things." Which got him out of a jam, no question, but which doesn't really add up in any logically sequential fashion—unless you draw the inference that what the Synoptic Jesus was saying was, "We're both working the same side of the street. You guys are afraid of the people if you tell the truth and I'm afraid of you if I tell the truth"—but, then, that's the Synoptic Jesus for you.)

The correct Muslim answer to my question (which I already knew, so I don't know why I asked it) was that Mr. Gadd's authority—as it is the authority for all theological Muslim answers to theological Muslim questions—is "sacred scriptures and prophetic traditions". As I've already said, I can go along with the sacred scripture part—the Koran—but "prophetic traditions" always sets off alarm bells and warning flags for me. A "prophetic tradition" that can be directly traced to Abu Bakr or Omar? I think I could bring myself to granting that authority. A "prophetic tradition" that began with Moawia or any of the other hereditary caliphs descended from Abu Sofyan and Hind? There, I would have a problem.

I was surprised and rather pleased when I got a phone call from Reflections on Islam telling me that my letter had been selected to be read and answered on the air the following Sunday. I was even more surprised when I watched the program and found out that Mr. Gadd's answer (based on "sacred scriptures and prophetic traditions") was yes, I would be considered a Muslim and could thus enter the sacred precincts and perform the rituals of the hajj. Obviously, it was the answer I wanted but (no big surprise, knowing me) once I had it, I found that I disagreed with it. Perhaps I idealize Islam a bit much, but I do tend to think that unless I was very clear in my own mind that I was never going to touch a drop of alcohol again for the rest of my life (I like to say that I am at least three beers a week away from being a good Muslim) and unless I regularly went to the mosque in Waterloo and prayed in the prescribed Muslim fashion, in my own view, I had no business venturing anywhere near the sacred precincts of Mecca. Of course, a year or so ago my parents' took me to a restaurant that is run by a Muslim family (my parents having mentioned that their son was fasting in Ramadan the family was eager to see this North American freak of nature for themselves) and I asked one of the sons (who was a waiter) if he had ever performed the hajj and he smiled and said, "No, not yet. I haven't committed enough sins." I burst out laughing. It's believed that after executing all the prescribed rituals of the hajj, the pilgrim returns home as cleansed of his sins as a newborn baby. My idea of Islam doesn't include putting off the hajj until later in life so you can get enough sins "under your belt" to make it worth the airfare. I'm sure, just

given basic human nature, that he's not the only Muslim that looks at it that way. And, perhaps, by that very human standard, I would qualify as a Muslim. So, assuming that Mr. Gadd was correct and his view would be shared by (gulp) Saudi immigration officials and (gulp gulp) the guardians of the sacred precincts—and I'm not correct—then even the fifth pillar of Islam is open to a much wider ecumenical interpretation than my own.

What I'm driving at (in my usual long-winded fashion) is that—so far as I can see—the conversion of the world to Islam is really not all that unattainable, depending on how you examine the logistics of the problem. It is unattainable right now, sure, particularly in the United States where you are not likely to get anything approaching a favourable reaction to anything Islamic—now or for many years in the future: at least for as long as it takes the War on Terrorism to curtail, suppress and/or eliminate Wahabite Islam. How long a period that will be really, I think, depends on how long it takes for the lessons learned from the aftermath of 11 September to sink in. I'm thinking particularly of the central lesson which I addressed earlier in this installment: the mind-boggling military hegemony which the United States holds in the world and which the United States demonstrated in Afghanistan and which the United States will not (Democrat or Republican) be surrendering to any other nation anytime soon. I'm sure the lesson hasn't fully sunk in with the Arab dictators who are the despotic heirs of the Koreish—the unspiritual sons of Abu Sofyan and Hind—the lesson is too large to be fully absorbed in mere months by parochial minds which have been insulated from geopolitical reality (what used to be called *realpolitik*) for too long. But there is no question in my mind that it will sink in (sooner, rather than later). When it does, I think Osama bin Laden's words “when people see a strong horse and a weak horse, they will naturally choose the strong horse”—representing as they do a sentiment near and dear to both the Arab and Muslim heart—will become more poignant in the coming years as Arabs and Muslims come to realize that if the dream of universal Islam is to be realized, the “line of least resistance” could well involve the integration of the five pillars of Islam into Judaic and Christian worship. Given the virtually universal belief in the freedom of the individual and in the pre-eminence of individual human freedoms over the authority of the state which is now shared by Jews and Christians of all denominations, and postulating a Judaic and Christian future (however distant) in which individual Jews and individual Christians would both acknowledge and practice the five pillars of Islam, a future—for all spiritual and practical purposes—in which Jews and Christians, in addition to being Jews and Christians would also be Muslims.. .I don't think it entirely outside the realm of possibility—were the momentum of society to begin moving in that direction and were the Koreish-style corrupt Arab and Muslim dictatorships to fail to democratize fast enough—that Islam might very well find itself, for all intents and purposes, absorbed by Judaism and Christianity. That Judaism and Christianity, in tandem, might yet prove to be the “strong horse,” of what might yet prove to be a virtually universal—and freedom-based—monotheistic faith.