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Unearthing Abraham's Altar: The Cultic Dimensions of *dīn*, *islām*, and *ḥanīf* in the Qurʾan

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The religious developments of Islam's earliest decades have been subject to extensive research and vigorous debate in recent scholarship. What was the main thrust of the Prophet Muhammad's preaching? What led the Prophet and his followers to form a distinct group apart from other communities of their milieu that are mentioned in the Qurʾan, namely, the *mushrikūn* ("pagans" or "polytheists"), Jews, and Christians? As scholars have looked to the Qurʾan to understand the religious developments of the Qurʾanic milieu, many have tended to locate the impulse behind these developments in the intellectual and theological realms of faith and conviction. For example, the Qurʾan's emphasis on monotheism and the resulting polemic against the *mushrikūn* are often understood as pertaining primarily to belief and doctrine, not to matters of ritual and practice.[1]

There is no denying the importance of doctrinal matters in the Qurʾanic milieu, but I would like to propose that many of the religious differences and conflicts referenced in the Qurʾan also had profoundly pragmatic dimensions that pertained to cultic rites of worship. By "cultic rites of worship" I mean those rituals associated with a sacred space—whether that be an altar, a sanctuary, or otherwise consecrated enclave—dedicated to a specific deity or deities and often featuring distinct taboos, purity requirements, guardians, and calendar of festivals. It appears that the rites performed in such cultic settings were central aspects of religion in Late Antique West Arabia. Accordingly, a vision of what constituted proper cultic worship—which rites to avoid, which ones to perform, and how to perform them—was crucial to the self-image of the earliest Muslims as well as the other communities that inhabited the same environment. Therefore, recognizing the precise parameters of these cultic visions is important to understanding the message of the Qurʾan, the criticisms that it levels at other religious communities, and the objections of these communities that are in turn addressed in the Qurʾan.

This study discusses three fundamental Qurʾanic terms and argues that each has a salient cultic dimension. These terms are *dīn*, *islām*, and *ḥanīf*. The common

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[1] This analytical perspective is operative in the following studies, among many others: Hawting, *Idea of Idolatry* (1999), 45–66, and Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers* (2010), 57–59.

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understanding of these concepts, both in Islamic learning and in modern scholarship, generally does not emphasize or recognize their cultic dimensions. For example, *dīn* is often rendered as "religion" in a broad sense, *islām* as "submission" (the intellectual and emotive disposition of resignation to God's will), and *ḥanīf* as a "pure monotheist" (a person who recognizes only one God) or a "gentile." By contrast, I propose different understandings of these terms in this paper. The first section argues that *dīn* in the Qurʾan often means "service" or "worship" and evokes the cultic actions that were associated with the veneration of Allāh and other deities. While it may not be incorrect to translate *dīn* as "religion," it should be borne in mind that cultic rites of worship played a more central role in the Qurʾanic conception of religion than we customarily associate with the term.

In line with this rethinking of *dīn*, the second part of the paper argues that *islām* signifies "complete dedication" or "exclusive devotion" to God, often of an individual's entire existence but other times of specific offerings or actions in a cultic setting. In the former sense, the idea of *islām* as complete devotion is not far from the notion of "submission." When *islām* pertains to cultic actions or offerings, however, the ideas of "submission" or "surrender" do not convey accurately the meaning of *islām*, which signifies the devotion of specific offerings or acts of worship to Allāh alone and the refusal to make such dedications to other deities. Therefore, in most instances translating *islām* as "complete/exclusive devotion" or "dedication" is preferable insofar as it is applicable both to the general and the cultic meanings of *islām*.

In line with the analyses of the first and second parts, the third section of the paper proposes that *ḥanīf* denotes a "cultic worshipper"—that is to say, a person who worships God through rites such as cultic prayer, sacrifice, and pilgrimage. As scholars have long noted, the Aramaic cognates of *ḥanīf* denoted a pagan or an otherwise deviant person. I propose that already in the pre-Islamic era some Christians and/or Jews applied the label *ḥanīf*, in the sense of "pagan," to those residents of the Hijaz who engaged in cultic worship at the various shrines of this area. Both the Arabian locations of these rituals and some of their features (such as the sacrifice of animals, in particular camels) were likely redolent of paganism for many Late Antique Jews and Christians. When the Prophet and his followers endorsed such cultic rituals, especially those associated with the Meccan sanctuary, it appears that some Christians and/or Jews branded the Believers also as *ḥanīf*s, i.e., as involved in Arabian cultic (and thereby pagan) worship. As this term had come to be associated strongly with cultic worship (as opposed to only with paganism as an abstract idea), the Qurʾan did not reject this characterization of the Prophet and his followers, but instead dissociated the concept of *ḥanīf* from its polytheistic connotations. In defending the cultic worship that lay behind the term *ḥanīf*, the Qurʾan attributed such worship to the figure of Abraham, similar to the strategy that was deployed previously by the Emperor Julian in defense of sacrifices (on which see below). By describing Abraham as the founder of the Meccan sanctuary and as a *ḥanīf* who was nevertheless "not among the *mushrikūn*," the Qurʾan upheld the rites associated with this sanctuary and insisted simultaneously that the performance of these rites did not render one a polytheist. As I show, this understanding of the term *ḥanīf* makes sense not only of its Qurʾanic usage but also of its varied meanings in Arabic poetry and its interpretation in early Islamic exegesis. It also establishes continuity between this aspect of polemic in the Qurʾanic milieu and a similar polemical discourse against the Meccan cult that is clearly attested in some non-Muslim writings of the post-prophetic era.

In rethinking the terms *dīn* and *islām*, the following analysis relies largely on the Qurʾan (as well as early Arabic poetry in the case of *dīn*), while to reinterpret *ḥanīf* I draw not only on the Qurʾan and poetry but also on the religious literature of Late Antiquity, from both before and after the rise of Islam. There exists also a substantial body of secondary scholarship on the terms investigated here. To keep the study at a manageable length, my discussion of secondary scholarship is limited to what has been necessary to articulate my hypotheses regarding the concepts of *dīn*, *islām*, and *ḥanīf*. I plan to provide a critical, detailed examination of previous scholarship in a future monograph. It goes without saying that rethinking central concepts such as *dīn*, *islām*, and *ḥanīf* has major ramifications for various aspects of the Qurʾanic worldview and the character of the Prophet Muhammad's movement. Indeed, much of the Qurʾan's discourse and polemic find new meaning if we better appreciate the significance of cultic worship to the religious differences of the Qurʾanic milieu.

Dīn: from "Religion" to "(Cultic) Worship"

The term *dīn* appears ninety-four times in the Qurʾan and is often seen to carry at least two distinct meanings: first, that of "judgment" (whence the construct

yawm al-dīn, "the Day of Judgment"), and second, that of "religion," understood as an intellectual, social, legal, and ritual complex.[2] Scholars often trace these two meanings to separate etymological roots, the first Semitic (cf. Aramaic *dīnā*) and the second Iranian, reflected in the Middle Persian word *dēn*.[3] It is also sometimes recognized that beyond these two senses, *dīn* may have had a third set of meanings in pre-Islamic Arabic.[4] If that is the case, then some of these meanings may be reflected in the Qurʾan—either distinctly from the Semitic and Iranian senses of "judgment" and "religion" or as connotations attached to these two senses, particularly to the latter. Previous semantic analyses of Qurʾanic *dīn* suggest that it conveys the ideas of obedience, devotion, and commitment to God or recognition and worship of Him.[5] What these analyses have in common is a tendency to view the connotations of *dīn* primarily in intellectual-emotive terms: *dīn* denotes religion as an object of faith (reflected in one's beliefs and feelings).[6] As for practical consequences, scholars often connect *dīn* to leading a moral life in its entirety. As a result, they generally do not associate *dīn* with a specific or concrete sphere of religious life.[7]

In contrast to this understanding of *dīn* as "religion" in a broad sense or as "religion" *qua* faith and internal conviction, it seems that in the early Islamic period *dīn* often pertained specifically to rites of worship, such as cultic prayers and sacrifices. Indeed, it is possible that *dīn* in Arabic originally signified "servitude" or "service," was used in this sense to denote the practical and cultic worship of various deities, and through a process of semantic extension came to denote religious observances and ideas in a more general sense.[8] This broad conception of *dīn* already appears in the Qurʾan, but there are also many passages in which the cultic dimension of *dīn* is in focus.

To be clear, it is not my contention that no occurrence of the term *dīn* in the Qurʾan should be translated as "religion." The Qurʾan certainly does not view the realm of cultic rituals as divorced from convictions, nor are ethical, legal, or social considerations absent from the Qurʾanic conception of proper religiosity. My point, rather, is twofold: first, that in many Qurʾanic passages *dīn* should be translated as "worship/service" or "way of worship/service" instead of "religion"; second, that even when *dīn* seems to have a broader meaning that can be conveyed by the term "religion," it should be borne in mind that cultic rites of worship are central to the Qurʾanic vision of religiosity, a centrality that was diminished with Islam's expansion and is not fully recognized in scholarship.[9]

The cultic connotations of *dīn* can also be gleaned from ancient poetry. For example, *dīn* signifies pilgrimage in a line attributed to al-Nābighah al-Dhubyānī: "Farewell (lit. 'may my Lord keep you!'), for it is not permitted to us / to frolic with women when the *dīn* [i.e., pilgrimage] beckons" (*ḥayyāki rabbī fa-innā lā yaḥillu lanā / lahwu l-nisāʾi wa-inna al-dīna qad ʿazamā*).[10] Similarly, *dīn* refers to rites of pilgrimage and sacrifice in two lines attributed to ʿAmr b. Qamīʾah,[11] while

[2] For example, Badawi and Abdel Haleem (*Arabic-English Dictionary* [2008], 321) enumerate seven meanings for *dīn*: "religion, faith"; "true religion, true faith"; "the teachings of the religion"; "worship, obedience, submission"; "law, custom, code"; "judgment"; and "reckoning, counting, calculation." As Sinai notes, *dīn* in the sense of "judgment" appears only in those Qurʾanic surahs that are generally assigned to the early Meccan period (*Key Terms*, s.v. *dīn*).

[3] Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary* (1938), 131–33.

[4] Smith, *Meaning and End* (1964), 93–94.

[5] See for example Izutsu, *God and Man* (1964), 219–29; Haddad, "Conception of the Term *Dīn*" (1974); and Dakake, "Qurʾanic Terminology" (2019). While Dakake defends translating *dīn* as "religion," she notes that *dīn* in the Qurʾan is polysemous and has distinct connotations that are not usually associated with the modern notion of religion.

[6] Thus, Dakake speaks of religion's (i.e., *dīn's*) "essential interiority" ("Qurʾanic Terminology," 350).

[7] For example, when Izutsu notes that *dīn* in the Qurʾan can pertain to practice, he has a broad conception of *dīn* in mind, one that "compris[es] all the creeds and ritual practices" to which a community adheres (*God and Man*, 227), not a particular domain of religious rituals.

[8] I have noted the cultic aspects of *dīn* previously in "Ascent of Ishmael" (2019): 436. See also Al-Azmeh, *Emergence of Islam* (2014), 50–52, 204, and the forthcoming study by Sinai (*Key Terms*, s.v. *dīn*), which also surveys the poetic references to *dīn*.

[9] On whether *dīn* in the Qurʾan and pre-modern Islamic writings denotes a sphere separate from the secular, see Dakake, "Qurʾanic Terminology" (2019): 348–49 and, more extensively, Abbasi, "Premodern Muslims" (2020).

[10] The next line continues: "when we journey briskly on narrow-eyed camels that are bridled / seeking God, righteousness, and festive meals (*mushammirīna ʿalā khūṣin muzammamatin / narjū l-ilāha wa-narjū l-birra wa-l-ṭuʿamā*). See Khafājī, *Ashʿār al-shuʿarāʾ al-sittah*, 1:214. In the *Kitāb al-aṣnām*, the first hemistich features *waddun* (the god Wadd) instead of *rabbī* (my Lord). See Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-aṣnām*, 10. For an analysis of these two versions and their potential implications for the religious thought of Hijazi pagans, see Sinai, *Rain-Giver*, 54–55. For a critique of Sinai's analysis, see al-Azmeh, "Further to the Pre-Muḥammadan Allāh" (2021): 426.

[11] "I see that my *dīn* agrees with theirs / when they offer their firstlings and sacrifices (*wa-annī arā dīnī yuwāfiqu dīnahum / idhā nasakū afrāʿuhā wa-dhabīḥuhā*); and another waystation in pilgrimage that I [also] visit / which brings benefits that cannot be

Khuzāʿī b. ʿAbd Nuhm's embrace of "Muḥammad's *dīn*" (*dīn Muḥammad*) is contrasted with his prior habit of offering sacrifices before the idol Nuhm.[12] The term *dīn* also refers to cultic rituals in a tradition attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās, which discusses the adherence of pre-Islamic Arabs to two *dīns* (*dīnayn*), namely, those of Ḥums and Ḥillah.[13] This understanding of *dīn* accords with the fact that many occurrences of the verb *dāna* in early Arabic literature signify "to serve" or "to worship" rather than "to adopt a religion" in a broad sense. For example, we read in the *Kitāb al-aṣnām* that Zayd b. ʿAmr b. Nufayl declared, *fa-lā-l-ʿuzzā adīnu wa-lā-bnatayhā*, which means, "I *worship* neither al-ʿUzzā nor her two daughters"—not "I have stopped *following the religion* of al-ʿUzzā and her two daughters," which would necessitate the existence of a distinct "religion" of al-ʿUzzā.[14]

Moreover, in many instances in which *dīn* is understood as meaning "obedience," it seems more accurate to understand it as conveying the idea of service or subservience, which underlies the notion of "worship" and its associated cultic rituals.[15] Finally, the meaning of "custom" or "habit" that *dīn* sometimes carries in early Arabic literature may also be considered an extension of its association with rituals of worship, which are often done repeatedly and habitually.[16] Considering the fact that the idea of "service" or "worship" accounts for these various usages of the term *dīn* and the verb *dāna*, it does not seem strictly necessary to see *dīn* in the religious sense as a Middle Persian loan word, although it is possible that *dīn* came to mean "religion" not only as a result of semantic extension from "worship" but also semantic loan (*Lehnbedeutung*) under the influence of Middle Persian *dēn* (whether directly or through an intermediary language).[17]

Turning to the Qurʾan, a cultically-inflected notion of *dīn* seems operative in many passages. Let us first discuss Q 6:161–63, in which the Prophet is asked to make two professions:

> Say: My Lord has guided me to a straight path, an upright *dīn*, the religion/rite of Abraham (*millata Ibrāhīm*), a *ḥanīf* who was not a polytheist (*mā kāna min al-mushrikīn*).
>
> Say: Indeed, my prayers (*ṣalāt*), my offerings (*nusukī*), my life, and my death belong to God. He has no partner . . . and I am the first to be *muslim* (*awwal al-muslimīn*).

Here the Prophet's embrace of the "upright *dīn*" (*dīnan qayyiman*) is followed by the declaration that his *ṣalāt* and *nusuk*, as well as his life and death, belong to God alone. Several early exegetical authorities see the second term as denoting the act of sacrifice (i.e., read as *nusk* = *dhabḥ*) or referring to animals that are sacrificed (i.e., read as *nusuk* = *dhabīḥah*), particularly those offered during the lesser and greater pilgrimages.[18] That the declaration to follow the upright *dīn* is followed by reference to *ṣalāt* and *nusuk* seems to capture the central place of rites of worship—particularly prayers and sacrifices—within the Qurʾanic conception of *dīn*.

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dispensed with" (*wa-manzilatin bi-l-ḥajji ukhrā ʿaraftuhā / lahā nufʿatun lā yustaṭāʿu burūḥuhā*). See Lyall, *Poems of ʿAmr*, 15 (Arabic text) and 20 (translation, which I have revised).

[12] "I went to Nuhm in order to slaughter before him / a sacrificial victim, as I used to do (*dhahabtu ilā Nuhmin li-adhbaḥa ʿindahu / ʿatīrata nuskin ka-lladhī kuntu afʿalu*) . . . But I refrained, for my *dīn* today is Muhammad's *dīn* (*abaytu fa-dīnī l-yawma dīnu Muḥammadin*)" (*Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 39–40).

[13] Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makkah*, 1:179.

[14] *Kitāb al-aṣnām*, 22. Other phrases in the same work that use the verb *dāna* in the same meaning include the following: 1) "The Arabs turned to the worship of idols" (*dānat al-ʿarab li-l-aṣnām*, p. 13); 2) "like the one who washed his hand of Lāt even though he used to worship him" (*ka-lladhī tabarraʾa min lātin wa-kāna yadīnuhā*, p. 16); and 3) "by al-Lāt and al-ʿUzzā and those who worship them" (*wa-bi-l-lāti wa-l-ʿuzzā wa-man dāna dīnahā*, p. 17).

[15] For example, after Imruʾ al-Qays reportedly boasts that people were their slaves (*ʿabīd*), he proceeds to say that they shall return "to serve us (*tadīnū lanā*) in submission and toil" (*Dīwān Imruʾ al-Qays*, 279). As another example, the expression *fī dīn-i fulān* ("in somebody's *dīn*") is often taken to signify obedience to someone (as noted in Izutsu, *God and Man*, 223). However, a better translation may be "in somebody's service," which captures the idea of servitude or subservience that is conveyed in many contexts. This meaning seems operative in Q 12:76, according to which Joseph took his brother (Benjamin) *fī dīn al-malik*, that is to say, in service of the king or as servant to the king. What support of this reading is that in the previous verse, Joseph's brothers declare that the requital for the thief would be himself, in other words, the thief would be given over to the Egyptian authorities as a slave or servant.

[16] Incidentally, the same extension has occurred for the English term "ritual," which can signify one's habitual behavior.

[17] Cf. Izutsu, *God and Man* (1964), 225.

[18] See the commentaries of Muqātil b. Sulaymān (*Tafsīr Muqātil*, 1:600), ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī (*Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, 1:222–3), and al-Ṭabarī (*Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 10:46). Hūd b. Muḥakkam al-Huwwārī glosses *nusukī* as *ḥajjī wa-dhabḥī* ("my pilgrimage and my sacrifice"; *Tafsīr Kitāb Allāh*, 1:578). Al-Māturīdī's commentary mentions three positions, one equating *nusuk* with *dīn* (attributed to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī), a second explaining *nusuk* as sacrifices offered during the Ḥajj, *ʿumrah*, and other occasions, and a third glossing *nusuk* as *ʿibādah* ("worship" or "service"). See al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt ahl al-Qurʾān*, 5:277.

Appreciating the cultic connotations of *dīn* leads to the recognition that the Qurʾan's monotheistic call was no disembodied intellectual polemic but rather a summons geared towards concrete actions that often unfolded in cultic settings. The Qurʾan demanded from its audience both to change their cognitive and spiritual orientations and to abandon the veneration of deities other than Allāh, a veneration that was not only or even primarily intellectual and emotive but was performed practically, through actions such as prayers and sacrifices.[19] Such practical veneration was often conducted at or in the vicinity of cultic spaces such as altars, sanctuaries, and sacred grounds. This is why the Qurʾan declares that "the places of worship (*al-masājid*) belong to Allāh, so do not invoke [there] anyone along with Allāh" (72:18). The invocation of Allāh alone in places of worship (*al-masājid*) is elsewhere described with a phrase that features the term *dīn*: in Q 7:29, the Prophet relays to his audience that they shall "set [their] faces upright in every place of worship" (*wa-aqīmū wujūhakum ʿinda kulli masjid*) and "invoke God while dedicating *dīn* entirely to Him" (*wa-dʿūhu mukhliṣīna lahū l-dīn*). Here also the term *dīn* should be understood as denoting religious service or worship, not "religion" in a broad sense. Similarly, when the Qurʾan commands the believers to fight the pagans until "all *dīn* belongs to Allāh" (*yakūn al-dīn kulluhū li-llāhi*, Q 8:39), what it indicates is that people were henceforth not allowed to worship other deities alongside Allāh in the Meccan sanctuary. It is therefore more accurate to translate this phrase as "all worship/service belongs to Allāh" instead of "all religion belongs to Allāh," as some translators do.[20]

In short, the performance of *dīn* came about in cultic settings ("places of worship") and involved the invocation of deities, presumably through actions such as prayers and sacrifices. When the Prophet asked others to dedicate their *dīn* to Allāh alone, he was calling on them both to make a cognitive adjustment and to abandon the cultic veneration of beings other than Allāh.[21]

The just-mentioned Q 7:29 holds another clue for the intimate connection of *dīn* with cultic veneration. This clue appears in the imperative to "set your faces upright in every place of worship" (*aqīmū wujūhakum ʿinda kulli masjid*), the first part of which is connected directly with the term *dīn* elsewhere in the Qurʾan: in Q 10:105, God asks the Prophet to "set your face upright for *dīn* as a *ḥanīf*, and never be a polytheist." A similar formula featuring the term "face" (*wajh*) appears in Q 6:79, in which Abraham declares, "I have turned my face (*wajjahtu wajhiya*) towards the One who created the heavens and the earth, as a *ḥanīf*, and I associate nothing with God." To express that "I have turned my face" (*wajjahtu wajhiya*) to God not only signifies spiritual devotion but also likely evokes (and in the case of Abraham, anticipates) practical actions that unfold in a cultic setting.

The cultic connotations of the phrase "I have turned my face" seem evident in the fact that it appears in early Islamic sources as a formula that preceded prayers and sacrifices. For example, according to a report that appears in several collections of *ḥadīth*, the Prophet recited the following text before he sacrificed two rams on the Feast of Sacrifice:

> I have turned my face (*wajjahtu wajhiya*) towards the One who created the heavens and the earth, as a *ḥanīf*, and I associate nothing with God (Q 6:79). Indeed, my *ṣalāt*, my offerings (*nusukī*), my life, and my death belong to God. He has no partner . . . and I am the first to be *muslim* (*awwal al-muslimīn*, Q 6:162–3) . . .[22]

We have already encountered this text, the first two lines of which are attributed to Abraham in *Sūrat*

[19] For a learned survey of Arabian cults and divinities, largely based on early Islamic sources but also utilizing archaeological data as well as anthropological and comparative perspectives, see al-Azmeh, *Emergence of Islam* (2014), 164–278. See also the valuable discussion in Ådna, *Formation of Sacrifice* (2014), 87–123.

[20] Donner also suggests that in this expression, *dīn* likely means either "service" or "obedience" ("*Dīn*, *Islām*, und *Muslim*" [2018], 136). I thank Juan Cole and one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing my attention to Donner's study, which argues that many occurrences of the term *dīn* in the Qurʾan should be translated as "obedience" or "service" instead of "religion." My position is therefore similar to Donner's, although he envisions *dīn* qua obedience or service largely in intellectual and spiritual terms, and not as a primarily cultic matter.

[21] Contrast with Helmer Ringgren's analysis of the verb *akhlaṣa* in such expressions, where he conceives of worship in intellectual and emotive terms, with no reference to cultic rituals: "*ixlāṣ* has something to do with *recognizing* God as the only Lord. . . . they call on God, making their *religion* pure unto Him . . . and place all their *hope* on Him" ("Pure Religion" [1962]: 93–96; emphases mine). Similarly, Izutsu claims that in this expression *dīn* "cannot but mean personal faith in God" (*God and Man* [1964], 228).

[22] Ibn Mājah, *Al-Sunan*, 4:300. A similar guidance with regard to animals (*uḍḥiyyah*) sacrificed on the Feast of Sacrifice is attributed to the sixth Shīʿī Imam, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq in Ibn Bābawayh, *Man lā yaḥḍuruhu l-faqīh*, 2:503. According to a report in *al-Kāfī*, Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq advised recitation of a similar text when sacrificing an animal (*ʿaqīqah*) after the birth of a child: al-Kulaynī, *Al-Uṣūl min al-Kāfī*, 6:31.

al-Anʿām (v. 79). The next two lines appear later in the same sura in relation to the Prophet as a follower of Abraham's upright *dīn* (v. 161) and entail that the Prophet dedicated his prayers and sacrifices (as well as his life and death more generally) to Allāh alone. Several *ḥadīth*s report that the Prophet recited the same lines taken from *Sūrat al-Anʿām* (and with echoes in other Qurʾanic texts) at the beginning of his *ṣalāt*.[23]

Therefore, when the Qurʾan asked the Prophet to "serve God while dedicating *dīn* entirely to Him" (*faʿbudi llāha mukhliṣan lahu l-dīn*) (Q 39:2), this meant in the first instance that the Prophet's cultic worship—particularly, his prayers and sacrifices—were to be devoted to Allāh alone. As the next verse asserts, the Prophet's approach differed from those who worshipped (*naʿbuduhum*) other deities with the ostensible goal that the latter "bring us near to Allāh" (*li-yuqarribūnā ilā llāhi zulfā*). Presumably, such worship did not consist merely or primarily in contemplation of or spiritual devotion to various deities but involved their cultic veneration. Indeed, the phrase "so that they bring us near to Allāh" (*li-yuqarribūnā ilā llāhu zulfan*) evokes the term *par excellence* for sacrifice, namely, *qurbān*, which means "that which brings [the worshipper] near" to a deity.[24] When in cultic settings ("places of worship"), the Meccan *mushrikūn* offered prayers and sacrifices to deities other than Allāh, sometimes claiming that these offerings could bring them near to Allāh. However, the Prophet devoted his offerings entirely to Allāh and invoked Him alone—in other words, he did not engage in the cultic veneration of lesser deities.[25]

Islām: from "Submission/Surrender" to "(Exclusive) Devotion/Dedication"

If occurrences of the term *dīn* in the Qurʾan often carry cultic connotations, then it seems warranted to rethink the significance of words that are closely associated with *dīn*. Among such words are the verb *aslama* as well as its infinitive *islām* and the active participle *muslim* (in singular and plural forms)—which appear respectively eight, twenty-two, and forty-two times in the Qurʾan.[26] These terms came to serve as proper designations for the Prophet Muhammad's movement: *islām* for his religion, *aslama* for the decision to embrace it, and *muslim* for someone who adhered to it—although the Qurʾan associates these terms not only with the Prophet and his followers but with other historical figures as well (such as Joseph and Lot). The precise meaning and origin of the term *islām* have been subjects of scholarly investigation. The prevailing understanding is that *islām* means "submission" or "surrender" to God and resignation to His will.[27] Scholars have also proposed a number of other theories about the word's meaning. For example, it has been suggested that *islām* was originally associated with the figure of Musaylimah (a contemporary of Muhammad who also claimed to be a prophet), or that it conveys the idea of salvation, a covenant with God, heroic "self-sacrifice" and "defiance of death" in service of the Prophet Muhammad, or the "prophetic tradition of monotheism."[28]

The idea of submission does seem to capture the meaning of *islām* and its derivatives, especially when they appear in a political or "secular" sense (though admittedly these cannot be sharply separated from religious associations in the Qurʾan).[29] However, in line

[23] See, e.g., al-Nasāʾī, *Al-Sunan al-Kubrā*, 1:466. For a discussion of various versions of this *ḥadīth* and their legal import, see al-ʿAynī, *ʿUmdat al-qārī*, 5:296. In addition to opening prayers and sacrifices with this supplication, the Prophet reportedly recited a formula that included *wajjahtu wajhī* before going to sleep (or advised someone to recite it before their sleep). See, e.g., Ibn Abī Shaybah, *Muṣannaf*, 5:322f.

[24] See similarly the *Kitāb al-aṣnām*'s description of how the Himyarites worshipped the god Nasr at a temple: "they worshipped in it (lit. 'they sought proximity [to Nasr] in it,' Ar. *yataqarrabūna ʿindahu*) through sacrifices (*bi-l-dhabāʾiḥ*)" (*Kitāb al-aṣnām*, 11).

[25] See also Q 2:193, 10:104, 12:40, 24:55, 39:11–15, 98:5, 109:1–6.

[26] Based on *The Quranic Arabic Corpus* < https://corpus.quran.com/qurandictionary.jsp?q=slm, accessed March 24, 2022>.

[27] Badawi and Abdel Haleem gloss *islām* as "total surrender," "the religion of Islam," and "(act of) surrendering, submitting" (*Arabic-English Dictionary* [2008], 452). According to Smith, *islām* means "obedience or commitment, the willingness to take on oneself the responsibility of living henceforth according to God's proclaimed purpose; and submission, the recognition not in theory but in overpowering act of one's littleness and worthlessness before the awe and majesty of God" (*Meaning and End* [1964], 103). Donner defines *islām* as "a believer's intellectual decision to submit to God's will" (*eine geistige Entscheidung des Gläubigen . . . sich Gottes Willen zu ergeben*; "*Dīn*, *Islām*, und *Muslim*" [2018], 131).

[28] For the first four suggestions, see Ringgren, *Islam, ʾaslama and muslim* (1949), 3–5. For the last hypothesis, see Cole, "Paradosis and Monotheism" (2019): 405–25, which builds on the suggestion made previously in El-Badawi, *Qurʾan and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions* (2013), 50ff. For a cogent examination of these various proposals, see Sinai, *Key Terms*, s.v. *aslama*.

[29] Such as Solomon's ultimatum to the Queen of Sheba ("do not defy me, but come to me in submission"; Q 27:31). As Menahem Kister notes, the Qurʾanic story (Q 27:20–44) "plays with the double meaning of *aslama* [in verses 31, 38, 42, 44], as it plays with

with my rethinking of the concept of *dīn*, I would like to suggest that when used in a primarily religious context, it would be more accurate to render *islām* as complete and exclusive dedication or devotion. On the cultic level, *islām* signifies the devotion of one's worship (such as prayers and sacrifices) to Allāh alone. Put differently, *islām* refers to the exclusive dedication of acts of worship to Allāh, a meaning that is not well captured by the term "submission." In its more general sense, *islām* refers not only to the dedication of specific acts or offerings to Allāh but rather to an individual's complete devotion of himself or herself to God—on the practical, cognitive, and spiritual levels. The notion of "submission" can convey this general, existential meaning of *islām*, but the advantage of using "exclusive devotion" or "complete dedication" is that they maintain the connection between the cultic and general uses of *islām*.[30]

That complete devotion/dedication (in a cultic or a general sense) may be a more accurate rendition of *islām* than the common notion of "submission" can be seen in several Qurʾanic verses that connect *islām* with exclusive worship of God. In Q 40:65, for example, the Qurʾan exhorts its audience to "invoke Allāh while making your *dīn* entirely His" (*fa-dʿūhu mukhliṣīna lahū l-dīn*)—that is to say, worship Allāh alone. The next verse addresses the Prophet and connects *islām* with exclusive worship of Allāh: "Say: 'I have been forbidden to worship those whom you invoke besides Allāh . . . and have been commanded to devote [my worship] exclusively to the Lord of the worlds." What I have translated here as "devote [my worship] exclusively" is the verb *aslama* (in the first person singular, Ar. *uslima*). Because this verse sets up an opposition between *aslama* and the worship of deities other than Allāh, it seems more likely for *aslama* to indicate exclusive worship of Allāh instead of the more abstract concept of "submission" to Him.[31]

If *islām* signifies complete dedication or devotion, then the corresponding verb *aslama* ("to devote" or "to dedicate") is transitive and in need of an object to be dedicated. In fact, in four Qurʾanic passages, *aslama* takes the noun *wajh* ("face") as its object.[32] For example: "who has a better *dīn* than the one who devotes his *wajh* to Allāh (*aslama wajhahū li-llāh*), is righteous, and follows the religion/rite of Abraham as a *ḥanīf*?" (Q 4:125).[33] As an object of *aslama*, *wajh* seems synonymous with *nafs* ("self"), an interpretation found in many commentaries.[34] The phrase *aslama wajhahū* thus means "he dedicated/devoted himself." Naturally, in cultic contexts, an individual offered as a substitute for herself or as a symbol of her devotion concrete offerings—such as animals, agricultural products, or prayers as verbal sacrifices (see the "fruit of lips" in Hebrews 13:15 and Psalms 141:2).

The connection between *islām* and cultic worship finds reinforcement in a passage discussed above: "say: my prayers, my sacrifices (*nusukī*), my life, and my death belong to Allāh" (Q 6:162). This verse is followed immediately by emphasis on God's unicity and a

the double meaning of 'great throne' in verses 23, 26" ("*Islām* – Midrashic Perspectives" [2018]: 404).

[30] Of course, such existential devotion can also be conceived in cultic terms. See, for example, the remarks of Saint Augustine: "a man himself who is consecrated in the name of God and vowed to God is a sacrifice, inasmuch as he dies to the world that he may live for God" (*City of God* X.5–6.125–26).

[31] See also Q 27:91, which describes the Prophet as *muslim* after mentioning his commitment to worship "the Lord of this town, who has made it inviolable."

[32] In one of these cases, the transitive use of *aslama* is followed by two further occurrences of *aslama* that have no explicit object: "say: I have devoted my face to Allāh . . . and say to those who were given the Book and the uninstructed ones: 'do you devote [yourselves to Allāh alone]? If you devote [yourselves], then you will be guided" (Q 3:20). Presumably, then, in the latter two instances also *aslama* is to be understood as having *wajh* (or rather, *wujūhakum*, 'your faces') as its implied object. This suggests that even when no object accompanies this verb (or its participle) in the Qurʾan, the object may be implied. Nicolai Sinai takes the same position in *Key Terms*, s.v. *aslama* and supports it with further arguments.

[33] The term *millah* may be translated as "religion," although I would argue that cultic observances are central to this notion (in line with my understanding of the terms *dīn* and *ḥanīf*). Similarly, Anthony glosses *millat Ibrāhīm* as "the cultic community of Abraham's progeny" ("Meccan Sanctuary" [2018]: 33). However, as might be expected, a more intellectual understanding of this term prevails in Qurʾan scholarship. In their dictionary, for example, Badawi and Abdel Haleem define *millah* as "religion, creed, form of belief" (*Arabic-English Dictionary* [2008], 895). It has been suggested that *millah* is adopted from Syriac *melltā*, which means "word" and was used to translate the Greek term *Logos* (Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary* [1938], 268–69). This suggestion has been recently developed by Juan Cole, who argues that "the Logos of Abraham [i.e., *millat Ibrāhīm*] is the acknowledgment of God's indivisible oneness along with willingness to submit to his will" ("Dyed in Virtue" [2021]: 597). In my view, this intellectual understanding needs to be coupled with recognition of the practical aspect of *millah*.

[34] Al-Zamakhsharī thus glosses *aslama wajhahū li-llāh* as *akhlaṣa nafsahū li-llāhi wa-jaʿalahā sālimatan lahū lā taʿrifu lahā rabban wa-lā maʿbūdan siwāhu* ("[the individual] purified himself for God and made himself entirely His, without recognizing any other lord or object of worship besides Him"). See *al-Kashshāf*, 1:568. I have translated *akhlaṣa* as purified according to al-Zamakhsharī's own definition in *Asās al-balāghah*, 1:262.

description of the Prophet as the first to embrace *islām*: "He has no partner . . . and I am the first to be *muslim*" (Q 6: 3). The Prophet thus earned the title of being a *muslim* by virtue of devoting his cultic worship (e.g., prayers and sacrifices) as well as his entire existence (life and death) to Allāh alone.

A similar connection between *islām* and cultic rituals is implied in the prayer of Abraham and Ishmael as they build the Meccan sanctuary. The patriarchs ask God to "make us *muslims* to You and make from our descendants a community that is *muslim* to You" (Q 2:128). Having prayed that God make them and some of their descendants *muslim*, the patriarchs then immediately ask God "to show us our rites of worship (*manāsik*)." This supplication implies that being *muslim* is connected with the proper performance of *manāsik*—namely, cultic rites of worship such as animal sacrifices (Q 22:34)—just as Q 6:162 indicates that being *muslim* involves dedicating one's *nusuk* (as well as prayers, life, and death) to God alone. Incidentally, several early reports also define *islām* primarily in terms of cultic conformity. In a widely-transmitted *ḥadīth*, for example, the Prophet explains that a person will be counted as *muslim* if s/he "prays the way we do, faces our *qiblah*, and eats of our sacrifices" (*man ṣallā ṣalātanā wa-staqbala qiblatanā wa-akala dhabīḥatanā fa-dhālik al-muslim*).[35] The peace agreements that the Prophet offered the peoples of several areas (including Yemen) also allegedly defined a *muslim* as someone who takes the Kaʿba as *qiblah*, performs the Islamic prayer, and eats of the meat of animals sacrificed by Muslims.[36]

Interestingly, the formula *aslama wajhahū* is strikingly similar to the already-discussed *wajjaha wajhahū* ("he turned his face to"), which is attributed to Abraham in a similar context: "[Abraham:] I have turned my face (*wajjahtu wajhiya*) to the One who created the heavens and the earth, as a *ḥanīf*, and I am not among the polytheists" (Q 6:79). Presumably *wajh* had a similar range of meaning when used as an object of the verb *wajjaha* in relation (reportedly) to the Prophet's sacrifices and prayers (as noted above). The association of the phrase "I have turned my face" (*wajjahtu wajhiya*) with cultic contexts corroborates the idea that *aslama wajhahū* also carried cultic connotations.[37]

As noted above, the broader meaning of *islām* as devoting oneself completely to God is not far from the idea of "submission" or "surrender." But "devotion" has important advantages to the other terms commonly used to translate *islām*. For one, rendering *islām* as "devotion" preserves the connection between the cultic and general meanings of *islām*—that is to say, between serving God through specific acts of worship as well as one's entire existence.[38] To put the matter differently, "devotion" communicates both the transitive meaning of *islām* (when the object is either the individual or the acts and objects offered in her worship) and its reflexive meaning (when its implied object is the human individual), whereas "surrender" or "submission" cannot communicate the transitive meaning effectively. Moreover, "devotion" or "dedication" captures the active, positive meaning of *islām* better than the terms "submission" or "surrender." The latter terms evoke the negative connotations of helplessness and passivity, and often denote actions that one does against her/his will. This may be true of other creatures

[35] Al-Bukhārī, *Al-Jāmiʿ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, 1:87. See also Gordon, "Sacred Orientation" (2019), 21, with references to various versions of this *ḥadīth*. I thank Attash Sawja for drawing my attention to Gordon's dissertation.

[36] Gordon, "Sacred Orientation" (2019), 21–22. In this context, it is worth mentioning a *ḥadīth* attributed to the sixth Shīʿī Imām, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, who explains the difference between *īmān* and *islām* in the following way: "*īmān* (faith) in God means not to disobey him" while "*islām* [applies to] whoever worships and sacrifices as we do" (*al-islām man nasaka nusukana wa-dhabaḥa dhabīḥatanā*), in al-Ḥarrānī, *Tuḥaf al-ʿUqūl*, 275. This *ḥadīth*—one among several in which various Shīʿī Imāms define *īmān*, *islām*, and associated terms in this collection—defines *islām* as cultic conformity (corresponding to cultic *islām* as discussed in this study) while it associates *īmān* with acceptance of God's will more broadly (corresponding to existential *islām*). A similar distinction may be at work in Q 49:14–17, which insists that the Bedouin should not claim that they have faith (*āmannā*) but should rather declare that they have embraced *islām* (*aslamnā*). Here also *aslamnā* may refer to cultic *islām* (i.e., devoting worship and sacrifices to Allāh alone) while īmān may convey the sense of existential *islām*, that is to say, complete devotion to God on the spiritual level as well. This possibility is corroborated by another part of this passage (Q 49:16), which asks the Bedouin rhetorically, "are you informing God about your *dīn* when He knows whatever there is in the heavens and the earth?" The use of the term *dīn* indicates that the Bedouin had only embraced monotheistic worship but mischaracterized this embrace as a matter of faith instead of cultic observance.

[37] A similar range of meanings likely exists for the imperatives *aqim wajhaka* and *aqīmū wujūhakum* (Q 7:29, 10:105, 30:30, and 30:43).

[38] For some Jewish texts in which the cognate Hebrew *hishlīm* also conveys the idea of being wholly devoted to God, see Kister, "*Islām* – Midrashic Perspectives" (2018): 387, 393, as well as Sinai's discussion of Hebrew and Aramaic parallels to the Qurʾanic diction (*Key Terms*, s.v. *aslama*).

(Q 3:83), but not of humans, who decide of their own accord to devote their worship and their lives to God.

For *islām* to signify "devotion" or "dedication" in religious contexts coheres well with its basic meaning as "delivering to," "giving up," and "paying in advance."[39] This suggestion also has advantages over previous proposals about the meaning of *islām*. For example, Meir Bravmann argued that *islām* meant (a willingness to) self-sacrifice in battle[40]—somewhat like the ancient Roman concept of *devotio*, in which a general dedicated both himself and the enemy army to the gods of the underworld, thereby sacrificing himself for the victory of his army.[41] To the extent that *islām* carries the idea of complete dedication to God, it can certainly include military efforts ("sacrificing one's life through heroically fighting in battle," according to Bravmann[42]). However, *islām* in the Qurʾan also pertains to a broader range of activities (cultic and otherwise) as well as intellectual and emotive dispositions, so the notion of "exclusive devotion" does more justice to its varied usage in the Qurʾan.[43]

That *islām* connotes the ideas of completeness or exclusivity is a view found in classical Islamic sources as well as modern scholarship. For example, Helmer Ringgren's extensive analysis of the root *s-l-m* in the Qurʾan concluded that this root conveys the ideas of "wholeness, entirety, or totality" and thus either indicates that something is "sound and healthy . . . peaceful and harmonious" or signifies "*total* surrender or submission."[44] Building on this study, David Baneth argued that Q 39:29 contains an important clue for understanding the meaning of *islām*. This verse contrasts two different kinds of slave: "a man jointly owned by contending partners (*shurakāʾ*), and a man belonging entirely (*salaman*) to one man."[45] According to Baneth, the Qurʾan analogizes *muslim*s to the second kind of slave: *muslim*s belong entirely (*salaman*) to Allāh, or, put differently, they belong to Allāh alone. This use of the root *s-l-m* in the sense of "belonging to one only," Baneth suggested, lies behind the verb *aslama*, which he saw as "a denominative verb . . . in the meaning of 'he was, or became . . . exclusive property of one.' "[46] In the religious sense, then, Baneth understood *aslama* as "to belong to, or *to serve*, Allāh alone."[47] My suggestion is close to the second definition he provides—"to serve Allāh alone"—with the difference that I consider cultic worship as a particularly salient manifestation of this exclusive service.[48]

It is easy to see why *muslim* characterized the Prophet's followers vis-à-vis their pagan opponents. The latter practiced cultic worship of deities other than Allāh, whereas the former dedicated their worship to Allāh alone.[49] However, *muslim* also came to apply to the Prophet's followers to the exclusion of Jews and Christians. This usage of *muslim* is rooted in the Qurʾan itself, which suggests that one could be Jewish or Christian and yet not qualify as *muslim*: "Say to the People of the Book . . . : 'do you devote [your worship and yourselves to Allāh alone] (*a-aslamtum*)?' If they do (*fa-in aslamū*), then they are guided; but if they turn away, your charge is only to proclaim the message" (Q 3:20). In what way did some Jews and Christians fall short of monotheistic worship in the Qurʾanic view? Part of the answer is that the Qurʾan views aspects of trinitarian worship and theology as incompatible with exclusive devotion to Allāh. Later in the same surah, after relating the story of Jesus' life and

[39] See Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (1863–1893), Book I, 1412, column III to 1413, column I.

[40] Bravmann, *Spiritual Background* (1972), 7–26, and *Studies in Semitic Philology* (1977), 434–54.

[41] Versnel, "Two Types of Roman Devotio."

[42] Bravmann, *Studies in Semitic Philology*, 444.

[43] Indeed, a cultic understanding of *aslama* and *islām* make better sense of some passages cited by Bravmann in support of his theory. For example, he translates *aslamū muhajāti anfusihim* as "they defied death" (*Spiritual Background* [1972], 18). However, a literal translation would be "they dedicated their blood," which is likely an intentional reference to the image of animal sacrifices where the blood of the victim was poured forth or sprinkled on the altar or the ground.

[44] Ringgren, *Islam, ʾaslama and muslim* (1949), 13; emphasis mine.

[45] As Baneth noted, the word *slm* in this verse has been read variously as *salam*, *salm*, *silm*, or *sālim*. See al-Khaṭīb, *Muʿjam al-qirāʾāt*, 8:154–6.

[46] Baneth, "What did Muhammad Mean" (1971): 186.

[47] *Ibid*.: 187; emphasis added.

[48] Baneth did not mention any concrete manifestation of exclusive service, despite the fact that his main objection to "submission" was that it would have been "far too spiritual" a message for seventh-century Meccans ("What did Muḥammad Mean" [1971]: 184). For a cogent survey of scholarship on the meaning of *islām* that emphasizes the commercial potentialities of this term, see Jamil, *Ethics and Poetry* (2017), 3–29, 329–31.

[49] See Q 6:136 ("They dedicate to Allāh merely a portion of crops and cattle that He [Himself] has created, saying: 'this [portion] belongs to Allāh and this [other portion] belongs to our partners' ") and Q 39:45 ("when Allāh is mentioned alone, shudders the heart of those who do not believe in the Hereafter, but when those other than Allāh are mentioned, lo, they rejoice").

monotheistic teachings ("Allah is my Lord and your Lord, so worship Him," Q 3:51), the Qurʾan rejects the idea that a divinely sent human (*bashar*)—presumably alluding to Jesus in particular—would ask people to "be servants of me instead of Allah" (Q 3:79). In the wake of this discussion, the surah criticizes the People of the Book and asks, "do they seek something other than the worship of Allah (*dīn Allāh*), while everything in the heavens and earth is devoted to Him (*lahu aslama*), willingly or unwillingly?" (Q 3:83). Shortly after this verse, the surah makes the following declaration: "whoever seeks a way of worship (*dīnan*) other than exclusive devotion [to Allāh] (*al-islām*), that will not be accepted of him." What these verses criticize is the idea of Jesus being divine and the practice of worshiping him: he himself invites people to serve only Allāh (v. 51), while the Qur'an wonders why some people should seek to worship beings other than Allāh (v. 83) and declares that any form of worship (*dīn*) that deviates from exclusive devotion to the One God (*islām*) is not acceptable (cf. Q 5:72–73). In addition, the Qurʾan suggests, those Jews and Christians who rejected the Prophet did so in blind deference to their religious authorities and thus "took [these authorities] as lords besides God" (Q 9:31).[50] Those who have lords other than Allāh, of course, could not be counted as *muslim*s in the strict sense of the term.

But if the Qurʾan questioned the commitment of some Jews and Christians to strict monotheism, it seems that some members of these communities brought the same accusation against the Prophet and his followers. In particular, it appears that some Jews and Christians considered the cultic worship of Allāh through sacrifices and other rites associated with the Meccan sanctuary as pagan rituals.[51] There are traces of this counter-polemic in the Qurʾan, and to uncover these traces we need to turn to a discussion of the term *ḥanīf*, which appears in relation to both *dīn* and *islām* in the Qurʾan.

[50] For an in-depth discussion of this verse, see Zellentin, *"Aḥbār* and *Ruhbān*" (2016).

[51] The precise status of the Kaʿba, whether it is to be identified with the *bayt* ("House" or "Temple") mentioned in the Qurʾan, and whether it was central to the rites of *ḥajj* at the time of the Prophet have been debated in modern scholarship. For a recent discussion, see Hawting, "Sanctuary and Text" (2018). For a somewhat different perspective that takes ancient poetic references into account, see Sinai, *Rain-Giver*, 51–56. One's position in these debates does not affect my arguments here, as I am concerned primarily with the existence of cultic worship, not its precise location(s).

Ḥanīf: from "Monotheist" to "(Cultic) Worshipper"

A Conceptual Conundrum

The Qurʾanic term *ḥanīf*, appearing ten times in the singular and twice in the plural (*ḥunafāʾ*), has been a puzzle in modern academic scholarship. While most occurrences of *ḥanīf* in the Qurʾan describe Abraham in contexts that emphasize his monotheism, the Semitic cognates of this term often carry negative meanings—including "pagan," the exact opposite of a monotheist. For example, Syriac *ḥanpā* denotes a person who is "godless, ungodly, profane, pagan, heathen" and by extension a gentile or a follower of Greco-Roman religion, while the verb *ḥannep* means to "paganize" or "turn aside to idolatry."[52] In fact, the Arabic *ḥanīf* is used in a similar meaning in Christian Arabic literature and some Muslim writings as well.[53] But why does the Qurʾan use a term with such cognates and connotations in relation to Abraham and, by extension, the Prophet Muhammad and his followers?

Scholars have proposed different answers to this question. In works of Arabic lexicography, *ḥanīf* is sometimes connected to the verbs *ḥanafa* and *taḥannafa* in the meaning of "he turned away [from something]," whence *ḥanīf* is said to mean a Muslim on account of the fact that such a person "turns away from other religions, thereby inclining towards Truth" (*yataḥannaf ʿan al-adyān ay yamīla ilā l-ḥaqq*).[54] Other opinions include the following: *ḥanīf* refers to someone who purifies himself (*al-mukhliṣ*), someone who submits to God's decrees (*aslama fī amri llāh*) without twisting them, someone or something that is straight (*al-mustaqīm*), or someone who takes the Sacred House of Mecca as his *qiblah* in imitation of Abraham.[55]

[52] Smith, *Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (1903), s.v. *ḥannep* and *ḥanpā*. In Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, the root *ḥ-n-p* conveys the ideas of flattery, deception, and hypocrisy, while in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic the verb *ḥannep* means "to favor." See Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic* (1990), 209, and *Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic* (2002), 474. See also de Blois, "Naṣrānī (*Ναζωραῖος*) and ḥanīf (*ἐθνικός*)" (2002): 18–19.

[53] *Ibid.*: 19–20.

[54] Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, s.v. *ḥanīf*.

[55] All cited by Ibn Manẓūr in *Lisān al-ʿArab*, s.v. Note that I am translating *mukhliṣ* and *aslama* as they are usually understood, which may not match their original meaning in the Qurʾan. For a discussion of the exegetical opinions cited by al-Ṭabarī on the term *ḥanīf* (which largely overlap with those mentioned by Ibn Manẓūr), see de Blois, "Naṣrānī (*Ναζωραῖος*) and ḥanīf (*ἐθνικός*)" (2002): 18.

Modern scholars generally understand *ḥanīf* as "monotheist" and thus effectively synonymous with *muslim*, largely on account of Qurʾanic verses in which *ḥanīf* is accompanied with emphasis on monotheism.[56] However, other theories have also been proposed about the meaning of *ḥanīf*. For example, Alfred Beeston suggested that the Christians of Najrān called their "Raḥmānist" neighbors to the south (who were monotheistic but non-Christian) *ḥanīf*s on account of the use of the label *ḥanpā* by Syrian missionaries for all non-Christians. Then, because of contact with the people of Najrān, Meccans were exposed to this application of the term *ḥanīf* to the monotheists of South Arabia and thus adopted the term "in the specific sense of monotheist," thereby providing the background for the Qurʾan's use of this term.[57] Alternatively, François de Blois argues that in the Qurʾan *ḥanīf* means "gentile" or "a person in the state of religious innocence, not bound by Jewish law."[58]

A Resolution

As just noted, Qurʾanic passages that use the term *ḥanīf* in relation to Abraham or the Prophet and his followers often also emphasize the importance of monotheistic worship and the rejection of idolatry. In Q 6:79, for example, Abraham proclaims: "I have turned my face (*wajjahtu wajhiya*) towards the One who created the heavens and the earth, as a *ḥanīf*, and I associate nothing with God" (*wa-mā ana min al-mushrikīn*). Similarly, in Q 6:161 the Prophet is asked, "Say: My Lord has guided me to a straight path, an upright *dīn*, the religion/rite of Abraham (*millata Ibrāhīm*), a *ḥanīf* who was not a polytheist (*wa-mā kāna min al-mushrikīn*)." Scholars often take such formulaic rejections of polytheism to mean that *ḥanīf* is simply the antonym of "polytheist." However, in the light of the negative connotations of Aramaic terms that correspond to *ḥanīf*, one wonders if the persistent rejection of polytheism that accompanies occurrences of *ḥanīf* is a clarification rather than emphatic repetition of the same concept. In other words, perhaps the Qurʾan insists that *even though* Abraham was a *ḥanīf*, he was not a polytheist.[59] If so, what activities did *ḥanīf* entail that may have appeared polytheistic to some of the Prophet's contemporaries but were claimed as both Abrahamic and monotheistic by the Prophet and his followers?

A simple answer suggests itself on the basis of the cultic thread that I have followed so far in this paper. As it happens, several passages that feature the term *ḥanīf* also use the term *dīn*, as is the case in the just-cited Q 6:161. If *dīn* in the Qurʾan often indicates cultic worship through prayers, sacrifices, and other rites associated with the Meccan sanctuary, then *ḥanīf* may also have something to do with the cultic worship of Allāh. Such worship, particularly the animal sacrifices that were offered to Allāh, may have appeared pagan in the eyes of some Jews and Christians. As I discuss below, Late Antique Jews and Christians usually viewed the cultic centers of other communities as pagan shrines, and the Kaʿba may have been similarly regarded. This would explain why the Qurʾan repeatedly emphasizes

[56] Geiger thus glosses *ḥanīf* as a "believer in God's unity" (*gotteseinheitgläubig*) (*Was hat Mohammed* [1902], 119). Hirschfeld suggests that *ḥanīf* signifies "a man who holds heterodox views regarding certain ecclesiastical matters" and that the Prophet used this label for Abraham and for himself to indicate "his secession from the paternal gods" (*New Researches* [1902], 26). This is quite close to the view that *ḥanīf* stems from the verb *ḥanafa* ("to incline away"), a position that is also taken by Rubin ("Ḥanīf" [2002], 402–403). By contrast, Lammens asserts that in the Qurʾan, *ḥanīf* "is a simple adjective meaning 'orthodox' or, more commonly, 'monotheist'" ("Les Chrétiens à la Mecque" [1914]: 196). According to Horovitz, *ḥanīf* in the Qurʾan means *muslim* (*Koranische Untersuchungen* [1926], 59). Watt suggests that Qurʾanic *ḥanīf* signifies a follower of pure monotheism, insofar as the Qurʾan contrasts *ḥanīfiyyah* "both with polytheism and with the 'corrupted' monotheism of the Jews and Christians" ("*Ḥanīf*"). Fred Donner suggests that *ḥanīfiyyah* may have referred to "a vague pre-Islamic monotheism" and that *ḥanīf* appears to mean "a 'natural' monotheist not belonging to one of the established monotheistic religions" (*Muhammad and the Believers* [2010], 58, 258; see also Donner, "*Dīn*, *Islām*, and *Muslim*" [2018], 132). According to Angelika Neuwirth, the adjective *ḥanīf* "bundles together independence from the established religions and exemplary piety" (*Qurʾan and Late Antiquity* [2019], 403). Badawi and Abdel Haleem define *ḥanīf* as "inclined towards [God], inclined away [from false deities] and so considered upright" (*Arabic-English Dictionary* [2008], 239).

[57] Beeston, "Himyarite Monotheism" (1984), 151.

[58] De Blois, "Naṣrānī (*Ναζωραῖος*) and ḥanīf (*ἐθνικός*)" (2002): 23.

[59] That Qurʾanic rejections of polytheism may have a clarificatory purpose is suggested by a number of scholars, including Henri Lammens ("Les Chrétiens" [1914]: 196) and Sirry ("Early Development" [2011]: 353). However, in Lammens's view, this clarification simply indicates that the Prophet was "vaguely" aware of the original meaning of *ḥanīf* as pagan even though he was using it in a completely different, unrelated sense. For Sirry, the clarification was necessary because the Prophet represented himself as belonging to the tradition of "the pre-Islamic *ḥunafāʾ* in Arabia," who were probably branded by Jews and Christians as *ḥanīf* in the sense of "heretic" ("Early Development" [2011]: 354).

that Abraham was not a polytheist, even though he was a *ḥanīf* like the Prophet and his followers.

If *ḥanīf* denoted someone who performed the cultic rites associated with the Meccan sanctuary, we would expect the Qurʾan to use *ḥanīf* in contexts that also mention the sanctuary.[60] Indeed, a number of Qurʾanic texts meet this expectation. Most evident is a passage in *Sūrat al-Ḥajj* (Q 22:25–37). This passage refers to the holiness of "the sacred mosque" (*al-masjid al-ḥarām*) and asserts that God asked Abraham to "purify My house" and "proclaim pilgrimage among people." According to this text, pilgrimage provides an opportunity for people to "mention God's name on certain days over the livestock He has provided them"—an apparent reference to epiclesis accompanying animal sacrifices—as well as to fulfill the vows they have made and to circumambulate the sacred house (vv. 25–29). The passage then notes that people have to be "*ḥunafāʾ* for God without associating partners with Him" (v. 31). Having emphasized the necessity of monotheistic worship, the text refers again to sacrifices that are offered at the sanctuary, particularly the camels (*al-budn*) that are slaughtered there as a sign of piety towards God (vv. 33–37). Verse 31, therefore, is sandwiched between references to the Meccan sanctuary, cultic worship, and sacrifices. Consequently, when this verse urges the believers to be "*ḥunafāʾ* for God without associating partners with Him," it seems to emphasize that believers must perform their cultic worship only in veneration of Allāh and without dedicating it to other deities.

In two other passages, the term *ḥanīf* appears in the context of discussing the Meccan sanctuary and its significance. One of these passages is Q 2:124–52, which again emphasizes Abraham's role in purifying God's house for those who worship there and describes Abraham and Ishmael as entreating God to show them the rites of worship (*manāsik*) to be conducted at the sanctuary (vv. 125–28). After narrating episodes that describe the patriarchs as *muslim*s and note their divinely ordained *dīn*, the passage praises Abraham in the following terms: "They say: 'be Jews or Christians so that you may be guided.' Say: 'Nay, [we follow] the religion/rite (*millah*) of Abraham, a *ḥanīf* who was not a polytheist'" (v. 135). The text then goes on to discuss the subject of the *qiblah*, asking the Prophet and his followers to face "the sacred mosque" (*al-masjid al-ḥarām*) wherever they are (v. 144). Again, therefore, the term *ḥanīf* appears in between two units of text, each of which discusses the Meccan sanctuary, one its past foundation and the other its present significance. The final passage to consider is Q 3:93–97, in which the command to "follow the religion of Abraham, a *ḥanīf* who was not a polytheist" is followed by reference to the house (*bayt*) that is in Bakka and the obligation of people to perform pilgrimage to this house (*ḥijj al-bayt*). The appearance of the term *ḥanīf* in texts that also refer to the Meccan sanctuary and its associated rituals thus corroborates the hypothesis that *ḥanīf* denotes a person who performs these rituals.

[60] I owe this point to Nicolai Sinai.

Ḥanīf *in poetry*

Occurrences of *ḥanīf* in early Arabic poetry seem to support the idea that this term is related to the observance of cultic obligations. Though there is sometimes disagreement as to which verses genuinely reflect the pre-Islamic meaning of *ḥanīf*, the various candidates have been collated and discussed by several scholars. However, there is no agreement about the precise meaning of *ḥanīf* in ancient poetry. According to Theodor Nöldeke, in some verses *ḥanīf* denotes a pagan, as *ḥanpā* does in Syriac, but in other lines *ḥanīf* refers to "a hermit or an ascetic" (*ein Einsiedler oder Büßer*).[61] How this second meaning developed, Nöldeke admitted, remained unclear. These two meanings have been noted by other scholars as well, who sometimes emphasize one over the other. Horovitz suggested, for example, that *ḥanīf* usually meant "pious" (Ger. *fromm*) in ancient poetry, and that the Prophet used the term with this meaning in mind when he equated it with *muslim*.[62] By contrast, Faris and Glidden showed that in both pre-Islamic and early Islamic poems, being *ḥanīf* was often contrasted with being Christian, indicating that "the opposition between Christian and *ḥanīf* had almost become proverbial."[63] In a similar vein, François de Blois holds that

[61] *Neue Beiträge* (1910), 30.

[62] *Koranische Untersuchungen* (1926), 58. Horovitz also acknowledged that Arab Christians sometimes used *ḥanīf* in the sense of "heathen" under the influence of Syriac *ḥanpā*. As to how *ḥanīf* had come to mean "pious" in pre-Islamic Arabic, Horovitz suggested that perhaps some orthodox Christians called sectarians *ḥanīf* in the meaning of "pagan," but the term became associated with these sectarians permanently and, because the latter embraced ascetic practices, came to signify piety and asceticism in general.

[63] Faris and Glidden, "Development of the Meaning" (1939): 3–4.

in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry *ḥanīf* means "pagan," that is to say, the same meaning that *ḥanpā* has in Syriac.[64]

The idea that *ḥanīf* referred to a cultic worshipper can easily explain its apparently conflictual meanings in ancient poetry. For, on the one hand, the person who engaged in a distinctly Arabian form of cultic worship stood out from Jews and Christians, who may have viewed that person as "pagan" precisely on account of his/her distinctive worship. On the other hand, the cultic rites in question often involved practices of an ascetic nature that one performed in a consecrated state, such as residing by a sacred shrine (*jiwār* or *iʿtikāf*), circumambulation, abstention from sex and wine, fasting, and making offerings to a deity. The solemnity of these rituals and their renunciatory character explain why *ḥanīf* appears to signify ascetic piety in some contexts.

For example, a poem likely composed in the Umayyad period praises red wine of Gorgāni vintage (*ṣahbāʾ jurjāniyyah*) and notes that it had received no religious treatment in the course of preparation: neither had a *ḥanīf* circumambulated it (*lam yaṭuf bihā ḥanīf*), nor had a Christian priest (*qass*) attended to its fire, nor again had a Jewish scholar (*ḥabr*) supervised its making.[65] The point of emphasis seems to be the wine's inherent fervency and power to uplift without any spiritual intervention. What matters in this context is the image of a *ḥanīf* performing circumambulation, from which we can surmise that *ḥanīf* signified someone engaged in Arabian cultic worship, including circumambulation around the Kaʿba.

This interpretation also fits other lines that feature the term *ḥanīf*. These include Abū Dhuʾayb al-Hudhalī's description of his beloved's long residence in a "tent" (*khaymatan*) outside of settled territory as "a *ḥanīf*'s stay (*ka-muqām al-ḥanīf*) in the two months of Jumādā and the two months of Ṣafar," which may evoke the practice of residence by a shrine, known in Arabic as *jiwār* or *iʿtikāf*.[66] The Qurʾan suggests that staying in the vicinity of the Kaʿba was an established practice, as it describes God's command to Abraham and Ishmael to "purify my House for those who circumambulate it (*al-ṭāʾifīn*), those who reside by it (*al-ʿākifīn*), and those who bow and prostrate" (Q 2:125; cf. Q 2:187 and 22:25). Furthermore, as noted by Brannon Wheeler, several reports speak of special tents in which residents stayed to perform the cultic rituals associated with *jiwār/iʿtikāf*.[67] The exegetes often gloss *al-ʿākifīn* in Q 2:125 as *al-muqīmīn*, providing another tenable link between Abū Dhuʾayb's phrase (*muqām al-ḥanīf*) and the practice of *iʿtikāf*.[68]

Another relevant reference appears in verses attributed to Abū Qays b. al-Aslat, the leader of a clan of Aws in Yathrib who refused to embrace Islam. Abū Qays reportedly boasted that his people were neither Jewish nor Christian, but rather, "when we were created, we were created / with our worship distinct from (that of) any other generation (*ḥanīfan dīnunā ʿan kulli jīlī*); we lead the sacrificial animals walking obediently in iron / their shoulders bare under the clothes."[69] It is noteworthy that here the description of *dīn* as *ḥanīf* (apparently in the sense of "distinct," but presumably also alluding to *ḥanīfiyya*) is followed by reference to the sacrifice of animals, another cultic practice that is presented as differentiating Abū Qays and his people from Jews and Christians.

The Development of the Meaning of Ḥanīf

I would therefore suggest the following scenario for the application of the term *ḥanīf* in the Qurʾan: it seems that already in the pre-Islamic period some Christians and/or Jews described the non-Jewish and non-Christian residents of Hijaz as *ḥanīf*s, that is to

[64] "Naṣrānī (*Ναζωραῖος*) and ḥanīf (*ἐθνικός*)" (2022): 19.

[65] The lines are attributed to Uqayshir al-Yarbūʿī or Ayman b. Khuraym/Khuzaym, poets of the early Umayyad period. For the different versions of this difficult poem, see *Dīwān al-Uqayshir*, 68–70. Cf. Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-buldān*, 2:120–21.

[66] Joseph Hell, *Der Diwan* (1926), 14 (Arabic text), 25–26 (German translation).

[67] Wheeler, *Animal Sacrifice* (2022), 58–61.

[68] See, for example, al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, *s.v.* Abū Dhuʾayb's reference to the two months of Jumādā or the two months of Ṣafar (i.e. Muḥarram and Ṣafar) as the duration of his beloved's stay may also be rooted in a practice of *iʿtikāf* for two months, which seems referenced in *ḥadīth*s that describe the value of helping a fellow believer as greater than "*iʿtikāf* for two months" in the Prophet's mosque (see al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, *al-Mustadrak*, 7:494 as well as the similar traditions attributed to the Sixth Shīʿī Imām in al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī, *Tafṣīl wasāʾil al-shīʿah*, 10:555–6). Another point worth mentioning is the later reference in the same poem to *ḥajj*. Finally, it is not clear to me why Abū Dhuʾayb mentions the two Jumādās or the two Ṣafars, but one feature of these periods of time is their contiguity respectively with *ʿumrah* (performed commonly during Rajab, thus after the two Jumādās) and *ḥajj* (undertaken before the two Ṣafars). Perhaps, therefore, the poem refers to a practice of residing by the Sacred House either before the Lesser Pilgrimage or after the Greater one. For some reports on the practice of *iʿtikāf*, see Wheeler, *Animal Sacrifice*, 57–61.

[69] Translated and discussed in Rubin, "*Ḥanīfiyya* and Kaʿba" (1990): 91.

say, as "pagans," perhaps especially when the latter engaged in their distinctive cultic rituals. This label reflected a negative estimation of these rituals as inherently polytheistic. Evidently, over time *ḥanīf* had come to signify not merely paganism in an abstract sense but adherence to these Arabian cultic rites. When the Prophet and his followers embraced the Kaʿba and its rites, that made them also *ḥanīf*s and thus subject to disapproval by some Jews and/or Christians.[70] In response, the Qurʾan dismissed the idea that being *ḥanīf*–that is to say, performing cultic worship in or with reference to the Kaʿba—was inherently polytheistic. In extricating such worship from the charge of polytheism, the Qurʾan asserted that Abraham himself had built and purified the Meccan sanctuary and instituted its rites. Therefore, if performing these rites rendered one *ḥanīf*, Abraham was the *ḥanīf par excellence*. And yet, though he was a *ḥanīf*, Abraham was "not among the polytheists" (Q 2:135, 3:67, 3:95, 6:79, 6:161, 16:120, 16:123). In short, Abraham engaged in cultic worship, but he venerated only Allāh and thus did not lose his monotheistic credentials. The Prophet Muhammad and his followers could therefore do the same.

The Rites of Others: Cultic Worship from the Bible to the Qurʾan

Previous scholarship on the Qurʾan and early Islam seldom has contemplated the possibility that the Prophet's Jewish and Christian contemporaries may have accused him and his followers of paganism. We are accustomed to seeing the Qurʾan and the Prophet on the attack, perhaps because we only have access to Islamic sources for understanding religious polemic between the Prophet and his opponents (whether pagans, Jews, or Christians). However, it seems reasonable to expect that at least some Jews or Christians would have levelled the charge of paganism at the Prophet and his followers. To appreciate this possibility, a brief discussion of biblical and post-biblical discourse on the topic of cultic worship is in order.

A negative view of the cultic spaces and sacrifices of non-Israelites is attested clearly in the Hebrew Bible. When discussing the impending conquest of Canaan, the biblical narrative advises the Israelites to destroy the cultic centers of the Canaanites.[71] The Israelites were also to avoid making treaties with the Canaanites, for otherwise when the latter worship their gods "and sacrifice (*wəzāḇəḥū*) to them, they will invite you and you will eat their sacrifices" (Ex. 34:15).[72] The biblical text not only prohibited participating in the cults of other nations; it also condemned the worship of Yahweh in a plurality of cultic centers across the land of Israel. There would be only one place which "the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name," and Israelites had to dedicate all their worship at this one location: "your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your donations, and all your choice votive gifts that you vow to the Lord" (Deut. 12:11). Of course, this place was to be the Temple of Jerusalem.

Rabbinic Judaism embraced both of these positions—namely, aversion to the cultic worship and sacrifices of non-Israelites, and insistence on the status of Jerusalem as the only legitimate place for the cultic worship of God.[73] As a result, even places described as holy in the Hebrew Bible were cut down to size by the rabbis and subordinated to Jerusalem.[74] As a tradition in Mekhilta's first tractate puts it, "before Jerusalem had been especially selected, the entire land of Israel was suitable for altars; after Jerusalem had been selected, all the rest of the land of Israel was eliminated."[75] It is therefore easy to imagine that at least

[70] Because the House of God and its rites have always been an integral part of Islam, the decision to endorse the Kaʿba may appear inevitable to us, but it is worth contending with the alternative possibility, which may indeed have appeared more desirable to some Jews and/or Christians contemporaneous with the Prophet. As put by Sean Anthony, "When Muḥammad absconded from Mecca and alighted in Yathrib, Mecca might as well have been left in the dust—abandoned and consigned to the cultural memory of the community" ("Meccan Sanctuary" [2018]: 27). Anthony continues to note that reverence for Mecca and its sanctuary was embedded in the Qurʾan from the Meccan period.

[71] "Tear down their altars (*mizbəḥōt*), break their pillars (*maṣṣéḇōt*), and cut down their sacred poles" (Ex. 34:13; see also Deut. 12:2). All biblical quotations are according to the NRSV translation.

[72] The Israelites went on to ignore these injunctions, the Torah laments, and thus partook of idolatrous sacrificial worship and meat (Num. 25:1–3).

[73] For references to various pagan cultic rites in rabbinic literature, see Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, 115–63. For a more extensive discussion, see Friedheim, *Rabbinisme et Paganisme*.

[74] Ben Eliyahu, "Rabbinic Polemic" (2009): 270–78. According to Ben Eliyahu, the rabbis considered "Jerusalem as the only proper destination for pilgrimage, and the Temple as the only proper place for carrying out the religious cult" (*ibid*., 280). See also Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple* (2006), 175–211.

[75] Lauterbach, *Mekhilta*, 3; cited in Keener, *Gospel of John* (2003), 614.

some Late Antique Jews would have viewed cultic worship in the Hijaz in a negative light. This view would have found support in those opinions, found often in rabbinic literature, that associate the gentiles strongly with idolatry. For example, according to an opinion preserved in tractate Avodah Zarah ("Foreign Worship"), an Israelite woman should not help a gentile woman give birth because a gentile newborn may be "a child for idolatry" (2:1).[76] Another opinion, attributed to Rabbi Eliezer in tractate Ḥullin, prohibits an Israelite from slaughtering an animal for a gentile on the grounds that "the unexpressed intention of a gentile is for idolatry" (Hull. 2:7).[77] If a gentile wanted to slaughter an animal, then, it was eminently possible that he or she would intend to dedicate the animal as a sacrifice for pagan deities.[78]

Of course, the Qurʾan is clear that Allāh is identical with the biblical God. On this account, one might reason that the Prophet's Jewish contemporaries would not have viewed the Kaʿba as a pagan shrine. Here it would be instructive to consider the Temple of Onias, established in Heliopolis and active during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. The existence of this temple went against the principle of cultic centralization in the Jerusalem Temple, so its efficacy and legitimacy were questioned (e.g., in Mishnah Men. 13:10). Even so, the Talmudic references to this temple recognize that it was no idolatrous shrine but rather dedicated to the worship of the One God. Could the same courtesy be extended to the Meccan sanctuary? What mitigated the problematic status of the Temple of Onias was the person of Onias himself, a *bona fide* Zadokite priest, as well as an oracle of Isaiah that could be invoked as a justification for this shrine's existence: "There will be an altar (*mizbêaḥ*) to the Lord in the center of the land of Egypt, and a pillar (*maṣṣêḇāh*) to the Lord at its border" (Isaiah 19:19).[79] However, no such justifications from the Bible or the Jewish tradition were readily available in support of the Kaʿba. Moreover, some of the rites associated with the Kaʿba clashed with the parameters of holiness and purity set out in the Bible. For example, Muslims worshipped God by offering camels as sacrifices, even though the camel is expressly described as an unclean animal in the Bible (Lev. 11:4, Deut. 14:7). It would not be surprising, therefore, if some Jews held negative views of the Meccan sanctuary and branded it as a pagan shrine in their polemic against the Prophet.[80]

Similar to Late Antique Jews, Christians also could have found the Hijazi location of Muslim cultic worship and the type of animals offered problematic. In his account of Simeon the Stylite (d. 459), Theodoret of Cyrrhus describes how the saint caused many pagan Ishmaelites to embrace Christianity, as part of which conversion the new converts not only "smash[ed] . . . the idols they had venerated" but also "disown[ed] the eating of wild asses and camels."[81] However, the sacrificial rituals of Muslims would have presented a more fundamental problem to Christians, because the latter had come to reject animal sacrifices altogether as wayward worship.[82]

[76] The translation is from *The Oxford Annotated Mishnah*, 2:686.

[77] *Ibid*., 3:131. Of course, others disagreed with R. Eliezer and allowed an Israelite to slaughter for a gentile.

[78] Of course, that the gentiles were prone to polytheism does not mean that they were inherently incapable of monotheism. For the rabbi's view of God's expectations from gentiles, see Zellentin, *Law Beyond Israel* (2022), 67–77.

[79] Both of these factors are mentioned in *b* Men. 109b (and already mentioned by Josephus). For a discussion of this temple, see Gruen, "Origins and Objectives" (2016). Note also a discussion of Isaiah 19:19 in Gad Barnea's article in this same issue of JNES ("The Migration of the Elephantine Yahwists under Amasis II").

[80] We know of two other ancient temples that were dedicated to the worship of Yahweh, namely, the one at Elephantine, destroyed sometime in the fourth century BC, and the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim, destroyed by John Hyrcanus around 128 BC. The temple at Elephantine was originally destroyed in the late fifth century BC, after which Judahite and Samaritan authorities supported its reconstitution on the condition that it be a site for incense and meal offerings, not animal sacrifices (Frey, "Temple and Rival Temple" [1999], 177). As for the Samaritan temple, it was of course viewed in later Jewish literature in a negative light. On these temples as well as that of Onias, see Frey, "Temple and Rival Temple" (1999). For example, according to a *baraita* mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud, a Samaritan cannot circumcise a Jew "because he circumcises for Mount Gerizim" (*b*. Avodah Zarah 27a). For this and other references to Samaritans and their temple in Jewish literature, see Stern, *Jewish Identity* (1994), 99–105, and Keener, *Gospel of John* (2003), 611–13.

[81] Cited in Fisher and Wood, "Arabs and Christianity" (2015), 297. For other negative references to the sacrifice or consumption of camel meat by nomads in Late Antique works of hagiography, see Caner, *History and Hagiography* (2010), 94–96 and Segal, "Arabs in Syriac Literature" (1984): 104–105.

[82] By contrast, after the Romans destroyed the Temple in AD 70, most Jews held out hope that the Jewish Messiah would rebuild the Temple and reconstitute its sacrifices. For the question of whether private sacrifices continued from AD 70 to the expulsion of the Jews in AD 135, see Petropoulou, *Animal Sacrifice* (2008), 147–49.

Already the New Testament's Epistle to the Hebrews, attributed erroneously to Paul, describes animal sacrifices as an inferior form of worship that was superseded by Jesus's death, the ultimate sacrifice. "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (10.4), declares the author of Hebrews, so Jesus came and offered atonement "not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption" (9.12). In a similar vein, the Gospel of John depicts Jesus as announcing the end of cultic worship when he informs a Samaritan woman that soon God will be worshipped neither in Samaria on Mount Gerizim nor in Jerusalem (John 4:21). Rather, "true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth . . . God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:23–24). In later Christian discourse, animal sacrifice came to be seen not simply as unspiritual and inadequate but as a negative, even inherently pagan practice. This was to some extent the result of Christian opposition to Greco-Roman cults and their public sacrifices, the idolatrous associations of which were extended to the ancient Israelite cult as well. As the author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* (likely active in the second century) put it, the Jews "who think that they are consecrating sacrifices to [God] by blood and burnt fat, and whole burnt offerings . . . seem to me to be in no way better than those who show the same respect to deaf images."[83] In the words of Augustine, Christians offered God "bloody victims" only when they died in His way.[84]

If offering sacrifices to God was still suggestive of polytheism, then why had God asked the Israelites to make such offerings? According to Justin Martyr, sacrifices were God's concession to the Jewish people: He asked the Jews to sacrifice to Him only to prevent them from sacrificing to other deities, and He called the Temple of Jerusalem His house so that "by uniting yourselves to him in that place, you might abstain from the worship of idols."[85] In other words, God allowed the Israelites to worship Him through sacrifices in one place as a way to channel and limit their idolatrous habits. At the appropriate time, the mission of Christ and the destruction of the Temple rendered this cultic system obsolete. Instead of offering animal sacrifices, Christians worshipped God through other means, by dedicating themselves as martyrs,[86] offering prayers ("the word rising as smoke from holy souls"[87]), performing baptism and, what came to be seen as the Christian sacrifice *par excellence*, offering the eucharist.[88]

Considering these developments, it would not be surprising if some Jews and Christians regarded the cultic rites performed or endorsed by the early Muslims (not to mention their Hijazi predecessors) as redolent of paganism. From the Jewish perspective, this negative assessment would have stemmed from two main factors: the idea that cultic worship belonged only at the Temple of Jerusalem, and the view that some of the cultic rituals endorsed by the Prophet's followers (such as the sacrifice of camels) did not match the requirements and standards of worship stipulated in the Torah.[89] Many Christians likely shared these two reservations, but had a yet more fundamental reservation about animal sacrifices, which by Late Antiquity had become inextricably linked with paganism in Christian thought.[90] It is thus not unlikely that some Jews

[83] Cited and discussed *ibid*., 268.

[84] Augustine, *City of God*, X.3.120–21.

[85] *Dialogue with Trypho*, 36. The same argument is made by several other writers. See, for instance, Aphrahat (Lehto, *Demonstrations* [2010], 368) and Jacob of Sarug's homilies (Thekeparampil, "Jacob of Sarug's Homily" [1993]: 63–64).

[86] Heyman, *Power of Sacrifice* (2007). See the arresting words of Ignatius of Antioch: "I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts that I may be found the pure bread of Christ" (*To the Romans* 4.1–2, cited in Daly, *Sacrifice* [2019], 103)."

[87] Clement of Alexandria, quoted in Nasrallah, "Embarrassment of Blood" (2011); see also Aphrahat asserting that "sacrifices and offerings have been rejected [and] prayer has been chosen instead" (Lehto, *Demonstrations* [2010], 144). Similarly, Jacob of Sarug praises Melchizedek for realizing that "the sacrifice of animals will be an insult to the Lord" and for approaching God "with noble thoughts which are superior than [*sic*] sacrifices" (Thekeparampil, "Jacob of Sarug's Homily" [1993]: 57–58).

[88] The first Christian writer to make an explicit and detailed argument for the equivalence between eucharist and animal sacrifice was Cyprian (d. AD 258), the bishop of Carthage (Ullucci, *Christian Rejection* [2012], 113–17); see also Daly, *Sacrifice* (2019), 114–20.

[89] Still, Jewish communities continued to celebrate the Passover often by slaughtering a lamb and eating it. And even though the rabbis insisted that this lamb is not sacrificial, some Christian authorities begged to differ and condemned the practice. See Shepardson, "Paschal Politics" (2008).

[90] Thus, when Leontios (a bishop of Neapolis in the first half of the seventh century) wanted to reject the Jewish charge that Christians were pagans on account of their veneration of images, he pointed out that Christians had eliminated the sacrificial worship of other nations: "Where now are their [i.e., the pagans'] customary sacrifices of sheep and oxen and children to the idols? Where are the odors; where are the altars and sprinklings of blood? We Christians know nothing whatever of altar or sacrifice" (Déroche, "L'Apologie

and Christians would have branded the pre-Islamic residents of Hijaz and subsequently the Prophet's followers as "pagans"—in Arabic, as *ḥanīf*s—on account of their recognition of the Meccan sanctuary and its associated cultic rituals.

The Qurʾanic strategy of enlisting Abraham in support of cultic worship such as animal sacrifice is reminiscent of a previous defense of this practice by the Roman emperor Julian (r. AD 361–63), known in the Christian tradition as "Julian the Apostate." A vigorous advocate of pagan cults and a zealous performer of animal sacrifices, Julian took Christians to task for their aversion to this practice. In particular, he claimed that by abandoning and scorning animal sacrifices, Christians effectively rejected their own spiritual forefather, namely, Abraham. Christians could not claim the mantle of Abraham, Julian argued, for "you do not imitate Abraham by erecting altars to [his God] or building altars of sacrifice and worshipping him as Abraham did, with sacrificial offerings. For Abraham used to sacrifice even as we Hellenes do, always and continually."[91] Julian thus utilized the Torah, which depicts Abraham as building altars and performing sacrifices (Gen. 12:7–8, 13:18, 22:9–10), to criticize the Christian rejection of such practices.

A similar logic seems at play in those passages of the Qurʾan that describe Abraham as the founder of the Meccan sanctuary and its rites of pilgrimage and sacrifice. When the Qurʾan declares that "Abraham was neither Jewish nor Christian but he was rather a *muslim ḥanīf*" (Q 3:67), it indicates (as Julian had) that the Christian (and Jewish) ways of worship through reading scripture and performing the Eucharist differ from that of Abraham, who venerated God through cultic rites such as animal sacrifices. When the Qurʾan rejects the demand for the Prophet's followers to "become Jews or Christians" and instead exhorts them to observe "the religion/rite of Abraham as a *ḥanīf*," it is similarly assuring the Prophet and his followers that there is nothing wrong with their cultic worship and that, in fact, they stand closer to Abraham on this score than do Jews and Christians. And when the Qurʾan claims that the People of the Book were "only commanded to serve God by dedicating their worship (*dīn*) entirely to Him as *ḥunafāʾ*" (Q 98:5), it suggests that the Jewish and Christian ways of worship were imperfect because they had abandoned practices such as animal sacrifice which God had commanded them to perform.[92] The major difference between the Qurʾanic position and that of Julian was that the Roman emperor was a proud devotee of various Greco-Roman divinities, whereas the Qurʾan defended cultic worship and yet categorically rejected polytheism at the same time.

Arabian Cultic Worship in Polemic against Early Islam

Non-Muslim writings provide clear evidence that the charge of paganism was in fact levelled at the early, post-prophetic Muslims because of their cultic rites and sacrifices. A letter likely penned by Athanasius of Balad in 684 (when he was the Syrian-Orthodox patriarch) seems to have the early Muslims in mind when it admonished Christians who "mingle together with pagans (*ḥanpē*)" and criticized the fact that such Christians ate from the pagans' sacrifices (*debḥē*).[93] Jacob of Edessa, in a letter written in the late seventh or early eighth centuries, responded to a question concerning "a holy table which Arabs (*ṭayyāyē*) have eaten meat on and left soiled with fat" by declaring that "a table on which pagans (*ḥanpē*) have eaten is no longer an altar."[94] Writing in the second half of the seventh century, Athanasius of Sinai related the story of a Christian man who witnessed Muslims sacrifice sheep and camels "in the place where . . . [they] have the stone and the object of their worship."[95] Thanks to a nighttime vision, this man and others in his company realized

contre les Juifs" [1994]: 69; cited in Barber, "Truth in Painting" [1997]: 1027–28).

[91] Wright (ed. and tr.), *Works of the Emperor Julian* (1923), 3:422 (Greek text), 3:423 (translation). For a recent discussion of Julian's writings and policies on animal sacrifices, see Ullucci, *Christian Rejection* (2012), 137–50. On Julian's religious views, see Wiemer, "Revival and Reform" (2020).

[92] A more conciliatory position is taken in other passages of the Qurʾan that avoid polemic over cultic matters and suggest that a plurality of cultic practices can be simultaneously valid (e.g., Q 5:48, 22:34, 22:67).

[93] Syriac text: Nau, "Litterature canonique" (1909): 128–29; English translation: Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims* (2015), 82–84 (quotation at p. 83). Cf. the discussion in Zellentin, *Legal Culture* (2013), 5–12. The *Life of Maximus the Confessor*, written possibly as early as mid-seventh century, also associates the conquering armies with "paganism" (Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, 66).

[94] Jacob of Edessa, *Letter to Addai*, question no. 25, translated in Michael Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims* (2015), 162. In another part of the same letter and in another letter, Jacob distinguishes Muslims ("Hagarenes") from pagans (*ibid*., 167–69).

[95] Shoemaker, *A Prophet Has Appeared* (2021), 110.

that Muslim sacrifices "do not rise up to God" but rather nourished a demonic being.[96] In other words, Muslim worship was no better than pagan worship, even if Muslims themselves did not realize it.[97] The East Syrian recension of the Legend of Sergius-Baḥīrā, likely stemming from the ninth century, describes the "Sons of Ishmael" (i.e., Muslims) as "pagans" (*ḥanpē*) who every year worshipped a demon named "Awkbar" through sacrifices (*ʿābdīn leh debḥē*), presumably a reference to the Feast of Sacrifice.[98] In the Armenian version of the putative letter sent by Leo III to ʿUmar II, dating perhaps from the late eighth or ninth century, the Byzantine emperor described the Meccan sanctuary as "a pagan altar of sacrifice,"[99] decried the Prophet's "profane sacrifice of a camel"[100] as well as the various rites of the Kaʿba as "ridiculous superstitions,"[101] and seems to have castigated animal sacrifices as "the carnage of demon[s]."[102] And in the early ninth-century *Life* of Anthony (né Rawḥ) al-Qurashī, who was an Arab nobleman and a former *ḥanīf* who reportedly converted to Christianity, he welcomes his sentence of execution meted out by Hārūn al-Rashīd on the grounds that it would expiate his greatest sins, namely, "having gone on pilgrimage to Mecca, having sacrificed on ʿĪd al-Aḍḥā, and having killed Christians during raids against the Byzantines."[103]

There are other texts that evince a negative view of Muslim sacrifices. One is the *Disputation of Bet Ḥalē*, likely composed in the eighth century. The Muslim interlocutor of this document was proud of his religion (*tawdītā*) on account of adherence to "the commandments of Muḥammad and the sacrifices (*debḥē*) of Abraham."[104] By contrast, the monk who responded to this interlocutor declared that thanks to Christ's sacrifice, Christians worshipped through the Eucharist and were thus "freed from animal sacrifices (*debḥē d-ḥayyūtē*) and from bloodshed (*eshād dəmā*)."[105] That Muslim sacrifices may have elicited a negative reaction from the Jews was implied by Theophanes (d. 818), who included in his Chronicle the story of ten Jews who had joined the Prophet because they thought that he was the messiah. These men "remained with him," Theophanes informs us, "until his [first] sacrifice . . . But when they saw him eating camel meat, they realised that he was not the one they thought him to be."[106] Here it seems that the problematic action is specifically the sacrifice of a camel and the consumption of its meat.[107]

Ḥanīf *and Cultic Worship: Precedents and Lost Threads*

If some Jews and Christians of the early post-prophetic era branded the cultic rites and sacrifices of the early

[96] "Around midnight, one of us sat up and saw an ugly, misshapen old woman rising up from the earth . . . we all saw her take the heads and feet of the sheep that they had sacrificed and toss them into her lap, and then she descended into the netherworlds whence she had come" (Shoemaker, *A Prophet Has Appeared* [2021], 110). Athanasius's second-hand informant and his party reportedly concluded that "that old woman is the fraud of their faith" (*ibid.*).

[97] Cf. the words of Paul: "what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God" (1 Cor. 10:20). For a discussion of other texts which accuse Muslims of idolatrous proclivities, in particular with reference to cultic rites, see the helpful survey by Roggema, "Muslims as Crypto-Idolaters" (2003), 3–11.

[98] Roggema, *Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā* (2009), 298–301.

[99] Arzoumanian, *History of Lewond* (1982), 92. According to Cecilia Palombo, this alleged correspondence had its origin in "Christian apologetic-polemical works composed in the late-Umayyad and early-Abbasid period" in Syria-Palestine ("'Correspondence' of Leo III and ʿUmar II" [2015]: 251). See also Hoyland's discussion of this text in *Seeing Islam* (1997), 490–501.

[100] Arzoumanian, *History of Lewond* (1982), 99.

[101] *Ibid.*, 100.

[102] *Ibid.*, 101. Accordingly, (pseudo-)Leo III rejects the Kaʿba's association with Abraham and claims that "[t]his House was existing long before Muhammad, and was the object of a cult among your people, while Muhammad not only did not abolish it, but also called it the dwelling of Abraham" (*ibid.*, 100).

[103] Cited and discussed in Christian Sahner, *Christian Martyrs* (2018), 88. I thank Mahdi Saleh for bringing this text to my attention.

[104] Taylor, "Disputation" (2015), 208.

[105] *Ibid.*, 218.

[106] Hoyland, *Seeing Islam* (1997), 506. As far as I know, no Jewish source from the early Islamic period describes the Kaʿba as a pagan shrine. This may result from the general dearth of Jewish sources from this period, for, as Robert Hoyland points out, "the seventh and eighth centuries remain woefully deficient in sources for Jewish history" (*Seeing Islam*, 238). However, a number of authors from the tenth century suggest that the Kaʿba continued to house idols even after the Prophet's conquest of Mecca. For a recent discussion, see Gordon, "Sacred Orientation" (2019), 190–92. I am also grateful to Gordon for answering some questions about the topic of the *qiblah*.

[107] Not all non-Muslims viewed the Meccan sanctuary as a pagan shrine. In fact, some even accepted its association with Abraham. The East Syriac work called the *Khuzestan Chronicle* features an appendix, likely composed in the second half of the seventh century, which mentions the "tent/dome of Abraham" (*qūḇteh d-aḇrāhām*), presumably a reference to the Kaʿba. This work accepts that the Kaʿba was built by Abraham "for God's worship and the offering of sacrifices" (Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims* [2015], 53). Similarly, the so-called *Chronicle of Zuqnin* distances the Prophet's teachings from paganism: the Arabs had been "much addicted to the worship of demons and the cult of idols" but when the Prophet came, he "turned them away from all sorts of cults and had told them that there is a single God" (Palmer, *West-Syrian Chronicles* [1993], 56).

Muslims as pagan practices, then that increases the likelihood that the same charge was made against the Prophet and his close followers in the context of religious polemic. The evidence of poetry (examined above) suggests that even before Islam some Jews and Christians had applied this label to the residents of Hijaz who venerated various deities in the cultic centers and fairs of this region. Indeed, the connection between the label *ḥanīf* and the performance of cultic rites is found within the Islamic tradition itself. Specifically, according to some exegetical authorities, *ḥanīf* denoted someone who performs the pilgrimage. As it happens, this view is not uncommon among the early exegetes. That *ḥanīfiyyah* refers to pilgrimage or that *ḥanīf* means "pilgrim" is attributed to Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. *c.* 102/720), al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim (d. 105/724), ʿAṭiyyah b. Saʿd al-ʿAwfī (d. 110/728), al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), and even Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687).[108]

Al-Ṭabarī may have played a role in marginalizing this interpretation. He voiced opposition to it because identifying *ḥanīfiyyah* with pilgrimage to the Kaʿba would imply that polytheists who performed the pilgrimage before Islam would count as *ḥanīf*s. Al-Ṭabarī rejected this possibility and pointed to Qurʾanic verses (such as Q 3:67) that describe Abraham as a *ḥanīf* and yet emphasize that he was not a polytheist.[109] Al-Ṭabarī's discomfort with the possibility that *ḥanīf* could be applied to polytheists can be contrasted with the opinion attributed to Qatādah d. Diʿāmah (d. *c.* 117/735). This Baṣran successor (and a student of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī) reportedly acknowledged that "*ḥanīfiyyah* can be embraced in polytheism" (*wa-qad takūnu ḥanīfiyyah fī shirk*). In fact, according to Qatādah, it was because of this very possibility that the Qurʾan clarified that Abraham was a *ḥanīf* and yet not a polytheist.[110] Perhaps al-Ṭabarī was responding to such an opinion when he asserted that pre-Islamic pagans could not have been considered *ḥanīf*s.

Precisely such a possibility, however, was entertained by the Baṣran philologist, Abū ʿUbaydah (d. 209/824–25), who offered an interesting explanation for changes in the meaning of *ḥanīf*. According to Abū ʿUbaydah, in pre-Islamic times *ḥanīf* initially referred to "those who followed Abraham's religion (*dīn Ibrāhīm*)." Then, various elements of this religion were forgotten, except for circumcision and pilgrimage. As a result, "those who circumcised and performed the pilgrimage were called *ḥanīf*." Effectively, therefore, "those Arabs who worshipped idols said: 'we are *ḥanīf*s and follow Abraham's religion,' " even though they had corrupted Abraham's monotheistic teachings. Thankfully, the advent of Islam revitalized Abraham's religion, so that "today, *ḥanīf* means Muslim."[111] Here we have a developed theory that accommodates the pre-Islamic association of *ḥanīfiyyah* with idolatry and the rituals of the Meccan sanctuary, while explaining (much like the Qurʾan) that these rituals were originally monotheistic and thus extricable from their pagan associations.[112]

Among modern scholars, Uri Rubin and Suliman Bashear have emphasized the connection between *ḥanīfiyyah* and pilgrimage in early Islamic sources. In particular, Bashear highlighted the importance of venerating the Kaʿba and performing pilgrimage to some early conceptions of the term *ḥanīf*, recognized that such veneration was a key factor distinguishing early Muslims from Jews and Christians, and even noted briefly that some Christian authors viewed the rites associated with the Kaʿba as idolatrous.[113] However, as he was concerned primarily with analysis of Arabic sources from the second and third Islamic centuries, Bashear did not focus on the meaning of *ḥanīf* in the Qurʾan or the nature of religious polemic between the Prophet and his contemporaries. In addition, Bashear's essay did not discuss the specifics of Muslim ritual (such as animal sacrifices) or the reason why some Jews and Christians may have branded these rituals as idolatrous.

[108] *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 2:592–93. These views are cited in works of other genres. For example, in his *Gharīb al-Ḥadīth*, Ibrāhīm b. Isḥāq al-Ḥarbī (d. 285/898) relates the opinions that *al-ḥanīfiyyah* means "pilgrimage to the House" (*ḥajj al-bayt*), *ḥanīf* means "pilgrim" (*ḥājj*), and the plural *ḥunafāʾ* (in Q 22:31) means "pilgrims" (*ḥujjāj*). See al-Ḥarbī, *Gharīb al-Ḥadīth*, 1:292–93.

[109] *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, 2:594.

[110] The full quotation from Qatādah is as follows: "*ḥanīfiyyah* can be embraced in polytheism. And to *ḥanīfiyyah* belongs circumcision as well as forbidding marriage with [one's] mother and daughter and sister. But God said: '[follow Abraham's rite as] a *ḥanīf*, but he was not a polytheist' (Q 16:123)," cited in ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *Tafsīr*, 1:60.

[111] *Majāz al-Qurʾān*, 58 (*ad* Q 2:135).

[112] The stories of various individuals described as *ḥanīf*s who, even before Islam's emergence, venerated the Kaʿba in monotheistic fashion may have served the similar purpose of showing that cultic worship at the Kaʿba and associated sites did not necessitate embrace of polytheism. For a more sanguine analysis of these reports, see Rubin, "*Ḥanīfiyya* and Kaʿba" (1990).

[113] Bashear, "Ḥanīfiyya and Ḥajj" (2004). Rubin's study is cited in the previous note.

Qurʾanic Reinterpretations

The understanding of the term *ḥanīf* advanced in this study necessitates reinterpreting Qurʾanic passages that feature this term. One of these passages is Q 30:30, which addresses the Prophet Muhammad: "set up yourself (lit. 'your face,' *wajhaka*) for *dīn* as a *ḥanīf*." This text seems to ask the Prophet to serve God as a *ḥanīf*, that is to say, to worship God through the cultic rites associated with the Meccan sanctuary. After this command, the verse proceeds with a clause that seems to pertain to the term *ḥanīf*: "God's making (*fiṭrat Allāh*) upon which He has made people; there is no altering God's creation." This explanation of the proper *dīn*—namely, of being a *ḥanīf*—as something that fits all people on account of their primordial formation is one reason why *ḥanīf* is often understood as denoting a "natural" monotheist. However, the polemical background to the term *ḥanīf* and its association with cultic rites suggests another understanding for this verse. As we saw above, one of the arguments that Christians made against animal sacrifices was that these were a concession to the idolatrous proclivities of the Israelites, and that the coming of Jesus abolished the utility of sacrificial worship and necessitated serving God in other ways. The Qurʾanic statement under consideration can be read as a response to such supersessionism. That is to say, Q 30:30 seems to posit that the worship of God through cultic rites cannot be abrogated because it conforms to humans' natural constitution, which has remained stable since God created them.

The Hypothesis of Ḥanīf *as "Gentile"*

If we assume that Qurʾanic *ḥanīf* is connected ultimately with Aramaic terms such as *ḥanpā*, how is one to explain the radical shift in its meaning from a negative appellation to a positive one? I have offered an answer to this question by suggesting that from the initial meaning of "pagan," *ḥanīf* came to refer to the distinctive hallmarks of paganism in the eyes of some Jews and Christians, namely the performance of cultic worship in Arabian sanctuaries, a reformed version of which was endorsed by the Qurʾan. In a widely cited essay, François de Blois has offered a different explanation.[114] According to de Blois, Aramaic *ḥanpā* could mean not only "pagan" (a matter of belief and practice) but also "gentile" (a matter primarily of ethnicity), insofar as most pagans were gentiles. As Christianity spread among the latter, Christian leaders sought to combat the negative associations of having a non-Jewish ethnic identity. In particular, Paul argued that Abraham found favor in the eyes of God on account of his faith before he was circumcised, and long before Mosaic law was given to Israel. The emblems of Jewish identity were therefore not integral to salvation, and gentiles could attain the kingdom as long as they had faith like Abraham (Gal. 3, Rom. 4). De Blois cites one text, the Syriac life of Clement of Rome, that describes Abraham as *ḥanpā* in the sense of "gentile."[115] He suggests, therefore, that the Qurʾan may be doing something similar and describing Abraham as a "gentile" who nevertheless believed in God, serving as a model for the Prophet Muhammad and his followers.

De Blois's argument is both interesting and erudite; it remains a tenable explanation for the meaning and derivation of *ḥanīf* in the Qurʾan. I believe, however, that my hypothesis has certain advantages over that of de Blois. First, as noted by de Blois, it is worth considering that Syriac translations of the New Testament use *ḥanpā* generally with negative connotations, and that "in non-biblical texts . . . *ḥanpā* almost always means 'non-Christian', reverting to the original negative implications of the word."[116] It seems doubtful, therefore, that the description of Abraham as *ḥanpā* would have been sufficiently common among Christians to have made the term enter Arabic as an appellation of the patriarch.[117] Second, de Blois acknowledges that the meaning of "gentile" does not seem to fit the occurrences of *ḥanīf* in pre-Islamic poetry.[118] By contrast, understanding *ḥanīf* as "cultic worshipper" fits both its qurʾanic attestations and its occurrences in early poetry. Third, the idea that *ḥanīf* pertains to ethnic identity does not account for the appearance of *ḥanīf* in Qurʾanic passages that discuss the Meccan sanctuary and/or rituals of worship—namely, Q 2:125–35,

[114] de Blois, "Naṣrānī (*Ναζωραῖος*) and ḥanīf (*ἐθνικός*)" (2002): 20–25.

[115] *Ibid*.: 23.

[116] *Ibid*.: 22.

[117] In addition, "gentile" (or "Jew") seems an anachronistic label for Abraham, not to mention that Paul is more interested in grafting gentiles onto Abraham's family tree than turning Abraham into a gentile: "if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring" (Gal. 3:29).

[118] De Blois suggests that *ḥanīf* means "pagan" in the ancient poetic corpus ("Naṣrānī (*Ναζωραῖος*) and ḥanīf (*ἐθνικός*)" [2002]: 19).

3:95–96, 6:161–62, and 22:25–37. Fourth and finally, it does not explain why Q 98:5 claims that God had commanded the *ahl al-kitāb* to "serve God while dedicating *dīn* entirely to Him as *ḥunafāʾ*." Here again, being gentile or uncommitted to Jewish law does not seem to serve the context well, whereas the reference to serving God that appears at the beginning of this verse is consonant with the idea that *ḥunafāʾ* signifies the veneration of God through cultic rites of worship, which were originally observed by the Israelites but later abandoned by Jews and Christians.

Cultic Worship beyond *ḥanīf*

If the term *ḥanīf* reflects the disapproval of some Jews or Christians towards the cultic observances of the Prophet and his followers, are there other signs of such polemic in the Qurʾan? Indeed, if one reads the Qurʾan with attention to the significance of cultic matters, other indications emerge of the presence of cultic polemic in the early Islamic milieu. For example, as I will argue in a future study, much of *Sūrat al-Māʾidah* addresses questions pertaining to proper cultic comportment. In concluding the present study, it is worth pointing to the People of the Book's opposition to the change of *qiblah* as recounted in *Sūrat al-Baqarah* (vv. 142–50). According to the Islamic tradition, the Prophet and his followers used to face Jerusalem during prayer but began facing the Meccan sanctuary in the early Medinan period.[119] If some Jews and Christians viewed the Meccan sanctuary as a pagan shrine, that would explain their opposition to the change of *qiblah* better than the idea of religious competition (which our sources cite as the reasons for this opposition). It would also explain why *al-Baqarah* relates the foundation of the sanctuary by Abraham and Ishmael, who requested that God show them their "rites of worship" (*manāsikanā*) (Q 2:128). What this story defends is thus not only the origin of the Kaʿba as an Abrahamic sanctuary but also the rites (*manāsik*) associated with the Kaʿba, presumably because these rites were criticized by some Jews and Christians.[120]

That some Jews and Christians disapproved of the early Muslims' worship, including their animal sacrifices, can also explain the story of the ancient Israelites and the cow (*baqarah*) that appears in *al-Baqarah* (and gives it its name). Scholars have long recognized the similarity of this Qurʾanic story to the laws set out in Numbers 19 (which prescribes sacrificing a red heifer and using its ashes for purification after contact with or proximity to a human corpse) and Deuteronomy 21:1–9 (which prescribes killing a heifer as part of a ritual to purify the Israelites when someone is found dead in open country). Both the contents and the narrative structure of the Qurʾanic story are distinct, however, for it portrays the Israelites as asking a series of unnecessary questions about the cow, to each of which God relays an answer through Moses. Because of this repeated back and forth, the story of "the Israelites' cow" has attained proverbial status in Muslim culture as an event that encapsulates the Israelites' alleged penchant for finding fault in otherwise straightforward matters as well as their undue interest in legal strictures, an understanding of the story that is found in academic scholarship as well.[121]

However, even if we accept that the Qurʾan wanted to portray the Israelites as overly inquisitive and needlessly difficult, the question remains as to why the Qurʾan chose the topic of sacrifice for this purpose. Moreover, it is not merely the case that the Israelites wanted precise instructions to fulfill the divine commandment. Rather, the Qurʾan indicates that they were utterly reluctant to do so. For example, when Moses relayed God's command to the Israelites that they should "sacrifice a cow" (*an tadhbaḥū baqaratan*), the Israelites asked: "are you mocking us?" (*a-tattakhidhanā huzuwan*) (Q 2:67). Why would the Israelites answer Moses's command with disbelief? And even after God made successive stipulations and the Israelites finally made the sacrifice, the Qurʾan asserts that "they nearly did not" (Q 2:71). Why would the Qurʾan suggest that the Israelites were averse to making this sacrifice, and that the strict conditions attached to it resulted from their own initiative?

[119] For references to scholarship on the change of *qiblah*, see Gordon, "Sacred Orientation" (2019), 35–37.

[120] We should also consider the possibility of reluctance on the part of the Qurʾan to wade into matters on which the Prophet and his followers may have been perceived to be in the defensive position. In the course of discussing the topic of *qiblah*, for example, the Qurʾan suggests that there is no point to litigate this topic further with the *ahl al-kitāb*: "everyone has a direction to which he turns, so compete with each other in good deeds; wherever you may be, God will bring you all together" (Q 2:148).

[121] For a discussion of this story and references to previous scholarship, see Aghaei, "Narrative Exegesis" (2018). See also Maghen's informative discussion of the story, its relevant Jewish intertexts, and its Islamic exegesis in *After Hardship* (2006), 123–45. I thank Nicolai Sinai for drawing my attention to Maghen's study.

The opposition of some Jews and Christians to the sacrificial worship of the earliest Muslims may furnish answers to both questions. If ancient Israelites found a straightforward request for sacrifice strange and tried various excuses to avoid honoring this request, as this story seems to indicate, then no wonder their successors scorned such worship when Muslims performed it.[122] Furthermore, the remainder of the story may contain an implicit criticism of the elaborate conditions of Judaism's cultic and dietary systems. If some Jews and Christians believed that Muslims were aberrant in their practices—for example, by not observing the strict rules about sacrificial victims set out in Judaism, or by offering and eating animals such as camels that the Jews and Christians considered unfit for consecration to God—the Qurʾanic story can be read as suggesting that God Himself was not very particular or strict about such matters.[123] In other words, the elaborate conditions of the Israelite sacrificial and dietary systems have their origin in the attitudes of the Israelites themselves, not in divine initiative.[124]

Conclusion

By offering new interpretations for the concepts *dīn*, *islām*, and *ḥanīf*, this study has argued that cultic rites of worship were a central topic of religious identity and polemic in the Qurʾanic milieu. The terms *dīn* and *islām* are commonly translated as "religion" and "submission," respectively. While these translations are not incorrect, they do not seem to convey accurately the meanings of *dīn* and *islām* in the Qurʾan and other early Arabic writings. In particular, *dīn* often seems to carry the idea of "worship" or "service" (or a person or community's way of worship/service), sometimes with particular reference to cultic rites such as prayer, sacrifice, and pilgrimage. Similarly, *islām* conveys the idea of "complete dedication" or "exclusive devotion" to God, sometimes of an individual in a general and existential sense but other times of specific offerings or actions that were performed in a cultic setting. In the Qurʾanic milieu, a fundamental difference between the polytheists (*mushrikūn*) and the Believers was that the former prayed and devoted their offerings to a host of deities whereas the latter dedicated their offerings and prayers to Allāh alone. The term *islām* captured this latter, monotheistic form of serving God that involved the devotion of one's acts of worship to Allāh alone. The term "complete devotion" thus captures both this cultic sense of *islām* as well as its more general, existential meaning, which correspond respectively to the transitive and reflexive meanings of *aslama*. While "submission" can also have a transitive meaning (a person can, for instance, submit a prayer to God), this is not a common usage in English, nor does the verb "to submit" convey adequately the devotional character of religious worship or its voluntary character.

Finally, the term *ḥanīf* seems to reflect fundamental disagreements between Jews, Christians, and early Muslims about the proper way of worshipping God. For some Jews and Christians, the cultic rites associated with the Meccan sanctuary, in particular animal sacrifices, represented pagan worship. As a result, those Jews and Christians likely described the residents of Hijaz who participated in such rites as *ḥanīf*s (reflecting the Aramaic meaning of this term as "pagan"), a label that was extended to the Prophet and his followers as they also accepted the Meccan sanctuary and its rites. From the Qurʾanic standpoint, however, the worship of God through sacrifices and other associated rites was perfectly acceptable, even necessary, and instituted by Abraham himself. As the term *ḥanīf* was strongly associated with the performance of these rites (rather than merely with the idea of paganism in an abstract sense), the Qurʾan embraced this characterization and even held up Abraham as the archetypal *ḥanīf* while emphasizing that Abraham's cultic worship was dedicated

[122] Maghen also refers to the topic of sacrifice by suggesting that perhaps "the general decline of sacrifice" may have made the practice an oddity to the author(s) of the Qurʾan, who in turn "projected their feelings onto [the story's Israelite] protagonists" (*After Hardship* [2006], 131). However, unlike Jews and Christians, the Prophet and his followers performed sacrifices, so the idea that they projected an aversion to sacrifice to the ancient Israelites does not seem sound.

[123] Contrast with Malachi 1, in which the prophet criticizes the Israelites for their dedication of inferior offerings: "When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not wrong? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not wrong? Try presenting that to your governor; will he be pleased with you or show you favor? says the Lord of hosts. . . . You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the Lord. Cursed be the cheat who has a male in the flock and vows to give it and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished" (Mal. 1:8–14).

[124] Incidentally, *Sūrat Āl ʿImrān* also pivots from a discussion of *islām* (vv. 83–85) to that of dietary regulations (vv. 93–94), a description of Abraham as *ḥanīf* (v. 95), and a defense of the Meccan sanctuary (vv. 96–97), a sequence that suggests the connection between dietary and cultic regulations and their significance to polemic with the People of the Book.

to one God alone. Abraham, then, was "a *ḥanīf* who was not a polytheist" (Q 2:135). Or, alternatively, Abraham was "a *muslim ḥanīf*," that is to say, a cultic worshipper who dedicated his offerings to God alone. The Qurʾanic term *ḥanīf*, therefore can be translated as "cultic worshipper."

This understanding of the term *ḥanīf* is corroborated by (and makes better sense of) its poetic attestations, which sometimes seem to have denoted an ascetic, but at other times signified a pagan individual who was neither Jewish nor Christian. If *ḥanīf* referred to someone engaged in cultic worship, then it had a Janus-like signification, because a person engaged in a distinctly Hijazi type of cultic worship both undertook actions of an ascetic nature (such as abstinence from sex and wine or residence by a sacred shrine) and may have appeared as characteristically pagan to Christians and Jews on account of the location of cultic worship and the various activities involved (such as animal sacrifices). The fact that several early exegetical authorities defined *ḥanīf* as someone who performed the pilgrimage also accords with the interpretation offered in this study. These exegetical opinions may reflect either an understanding of *ḥanīf* that was not uncommon in the first Islamic century (as reflected in ancient poetry) or an inference from the juxtaposition of *ḥanīf* and the Meccan sanctuary in some Qurʾanic texts (such as Q 22:31).

While cultic worship at the Meccan sanctuary and other related shrines was a vital element of religion in the Qurʾanic milieu, this element lost much of its centrality with the rapid territorial expansion of Islam and the further development of its theological, legal, and ascetic dimensions. For most Muslims of the post-conquest era, the Meccan sanctuary and its associated cultic spaces were no longer an immediate reality in their lives, nor did they make offerings in this sanctuary or worship God by sacrificing animals to Him on a regular basis. It was no wonder, then, that they understood terms such as *dīn*, *islām*, and *ḥanīf* in a way that conformed to their own religious practices and conceptions. However, the Qurʾan still preserves palpable evidence of the importance of cultic worship to the Prophet and his followers. This recognition can transform our understanding of much of the Qurʾan's contents, from its polemical statements to legal injunctions. We may even discover that some Qurʾanic surahs or passages originally accompanied cultic worship at the Meccan sanctuary. Recognizing the importance of cultic observances, then, can enhance our understanding of the Prophet Muhammad's life, his teachings, and the socio-religious developments of Islam's earliest decades.

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