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The Apocalyptic End of the World: The View from Islam

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The advent of the year 2000 passed with barely a whimper of apocalyptic upheaval. Despite the expected frantic rhetoric from some religious quarters, duplicated on the secular front by anxious prognostications of possible catastrophe occasioned by the infamous Y2K bug, nothing much of note seems to have happened. While some would just breathe a sigh of relief and want to forget about the whole thing, it seems to me rather to be a fortuitous time to reflect on what it means to believe that the world is coming to an end. Eschatology, or the teaching about “the last things”, has been a consistent, if variably emphasized, component of Christian belief. Closely related is the ideology and genre of apocalyptic, which can briefly be defined as the divinely disclosed history of a future of cataclysm and ultimate resolution. How are these traditional elements of the Christian faith to be carried into the new millennium?

In this brief communication, I do not intend to offer any definitive answers to this question. Rather, I would like to propose that in this new millennium the field for reflection on the end of the world necessarily needs to be broadened beyond the traditional boundaries of Christianity to encompass the range of different world religions that are increasingly part of our pluralistic outlook and experience. To forestall any misunderstanding, this broadening of the field of inquiry does not mean the abandonment of unique Christian doctrines or perspectives, but it does insist that such doctrines and perspectives cannot be articulated solely from within the Christian tradition itself. Christians have something valuable to learn by examining how other religious traditions have dealt with similar

circumstances and questions. More specifically, I suggest that it would be worthwhile for Christians to begin by turning to their neglected partner in the triad of Abrahamic traditions, namely Islam, and to inquire how Muslims have thought of the end of the world and its implications.

In a discussion of problems and obstacles in Islamic-Christian dialogue, the prominent Muslim philosopher, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, remarks that eschatology is “one of the theological issues where Christianity and Islam possess more common views and accord than any other two religions”. Yet it is precisely such eschatological doctrines that are used by some Christian groups “to ferment hatred against Islam on every level from the spiritual to the political” (1998:224-225). In the following, then, we will explore the end of the world from an Islamic perspective, so that commonalities with Christianity as well as unique elements will become apparent. But we will also proceed to analyze the diverse functions of such a notion and its use for both benefit and harm. In this way, it is hoped that materials and perspectives towards a critical engagement with eschatology and apocalyptic for the new millennium will be provided.

At this point, a strong caveat must be registered. In the following, a complex subject will be presented to an audience that is assumed to have little or no knowledge of the Islamic religion. The presentation will thus be necessarily simple and brief and will gloss over many points of contention that call for greater elaboration. The reader is referred to the bibliography for various works that treat the subject in far more satisfying depth and with greater erudition.

Belief in the “Last Day” is a basic and fundamental article of Islamic faith.¹ Known also as “the Hour” and by many other names, the “Last Day” signifies the ending of this world and the resurrection of the dead for judgement. This belief permeates and undergirds the Qur’an, the holy scripture of Islam. Many *surahs* or chapters of the Qur’an contain vivid references to the “Last Day”; here are two examples:

In the name of God the Compassionate the Caring

When the sky is torn

When the stars are scattered

When the seas are poured forth

When the tombs are burst open

Then a soul will know what it has given

and what it has held back (*al-Infitar* “the Tearing” 82:1-5)²

In the name of God the Compassionate the Caring

When the earth is shaken, quaking

When the earth bears forth her burdens

And someone says, "What is with her?"

At that time she will tell her news

As her lord revealed her

At that time people will straggle forth

to be shown what they have done

Whoever does a mote's weight good will see it

Whoever does a mote's weight wrong will see it

(*al-Zalzalah* "the Quaking" 99:1-8)³

As even the titles of the *surahs* or chapters of the Qur'an cited above indicate ("the Tearing", "the Quaking"),⁴ the end of the world will involve a cataclysmic break with normal reality, evidenced especially by the disruption of nature. Yet the ultimate focus is not on the disruptive event in and of itself, but rather on its function. On that "Day", all veils of human deception and ignorance will be torn away and a soul will truly know "what it has given and what it has held back". Such vivid descriptions of the end of the world are thus meant to underline a concern for humanity's good, not only in this world, but also in the world to come. They are thus part of the Qur'an's rhetoric of summoning humanity to surrender to the divine will and intention so as to enjoy eternal peace.⁵

The Qur'anic worldview is one in which God will bring a definitive end to history. The urgency with which this worldview is communicated in the Qur'an gives the impression that the "End" is imminent. It has been argued that it was precisely this vivid expectation of an imminent apocalypse that, at least partially, motivated and sustained the astonishing early spread of Islam, so that within one hundred years of its beginnings on the Arabian peninsula in the eighth century, Islam encompassed a world empire stretching from Spain in the west to India and Central Asia in the east.⁶ However, in actuality the Qur'an warns against human attempts to set a timetable for the "End" by its insistence that the time of the "Hour" is known to God alone:

They ask thee about the (final) Hour – when will be its appointed time?

Say:

"The knowledge thereof is with my Lord (alone):

none but He can reveal as to when it will occur.

Heavy were its burden through the heavens and the earth.

Only all of a sudden will it come to you"
 (*al-A'raf* "the Heights" 7:187a).⁷

It has been argued, in fact, that the Qur'anic worldview is not concerned with sequential time at all, but rather sees all things in an eternal present as events in direct relation to their Creator (Falaturi 1979).⁸ That human perceptions of time are not absolute is indicated by various Qur'anic passages in which, on the Last Day, earthly life will seem as if it had been but a fleeting moment:

They ask thee about the Hour –
 "When will be its appointed time?
 The Day they see it, (it will be) as if they had tarried
 a single evening, or (at most 'till) the following morn!
 (*al-Nazi'at* "Those Who Tear Out" 79:42,46)⁹

Since the Hour is "as the twinkling of an eye or even quicker",¹⁰ the Last Day can happen at any moment; it is imminent during anyone's lifetime.¹¹ And so the Qur'anic emphasis is on the immediate call for human response to the divine summons, rather than on chronologically arranged scenarios of the end of the world. Nonetheless, impelled by a few Qur'anic references to what has been interpreted as "signs of the End",¹² an elaborate set of apocalyptic expectations made their appearance in Muslim tradition.

While the certainty of the Hour is a foundational element of Muslim faith, the signs which herald imminence of the Hour, their order, and the precise roles of the apocalyptic figures associated with the coming of the End "are shadowy and contested in a rich and unwieldy literature of Muslim chiliastic traditions" (Damrell 1999:1). Many, but not all, of the signs are suggested in the Qur'an, but traditional exegetes have attempted mainly to analyze the particularities of each sign without being overly concerned with the construction of a consistent narrative (Smith & Haddad 1981:63). Thus, the following descriptions of various signs of the Hour are not to be understood as necessarily following a particular chronological order.

A major indication of the imminence of the Hour is the cataclysmic events described in the Qur'an which devastate the earth and reverse the process of creation: the sky will be ripped apart, the earth shaken and pounded, the mountains flattened.¹³ Corresponding to this reversal of nature is a time of extreme moral decay and disintegration among humans. More specifically, the approach of the Hour will be signaled by strife among believers and by a severe testing of the Muslim community

or *umma*. These trials and moral lapses are called *fitan* (singular: *fitna*), meaning seductive temptations in a moral sense, and seditious intrigues and civil strife in a political sense.¹⁴ One can see in these apocalyptic traditions a reflection or expression of the trauma of the dissension within the early Muslim community which led eventually, for example, to the distinct Sunni and Shi'a streams of Islam.¹⁵

Various specific apocalyptic figures and events were also associated with the coming of the Hour. The following tradition or *hadith* mentions ten such signs of the Hour:

Hudhaifa b. Usaid Ghifari reported: Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) came to us all of a sudden as we were (busy in a discussion). He said: What do you discuss about? They (the Companions) said: We are discussing about the Last Hour. Thereupon he said: It will not come until you see ten signs before, and (in this connection), he made a mention of the smoke, Dajjal, the beast, the rising of the sun from the west, the descent of Jesus son of Mary (Allah be pleased with him), the Gog and Magog, and land-slidings in three places, one in the east, one in the west and one in Arabia at the end of which fire would burn forth from the Yemen, and would drive people to the place of their assembly.¹⁶

While various other lists of signs of the End were compiled, the above list suffices to give a general impression of the content of apocalyptic expectation and speculation in the developing Muslim tradition. Several of the signs are connected to the disruptions or reversal of nature, such as the rising of the sun in the west and widespread earthquakes.¹⁷ The smoke and fire are likewise manifestations of cosmic upheaval and conflagration at the End.¹⁸

More enigmatic and suggestive are the various apocalyptic figures mentioned, some of which have analogues in the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions. First, is the figure of the Dajjal ("the Imposter"), or *masih al-dajjal* ("the deceiving or false messiah"), a false prophet at the end of time who assumed the identity of the Antichrist in Islamic tradition. This figure is not mentioned in the Qur'an, but is described in various traditions as one-eyed, riding a donkey like a messianic figure, and capable of performing great miracles that will enable him to deceive many, branding them with his mark. After ruling much of the earth for 40 days or years, he will be defeated by the Mahdi and/or by Jesus (see below). The Dajjal has obvious affinities with the false christs mentioned in the eschatological discourse of Jesus in the gospels, and with the

blasphemous and deceptive beasts of the apocalypse of John.¹⁹ The Muslim tradition of the Dajjal thus likely developed out of the apocalyptic heritage of late antiquity that Muslims shared with Christians.²⁰

Second is the beast, an enigmatic figure mentioned in the Qur'an as being produced by God from the earth as the Hour approaches.²¹ This beast speaks to people or wounds them;²² in the traditions, this wounding is described as marking people as believers or unbelievers. While perhaps related to the apocalyptic beasts of Daniel and Revelation,²³ in contrast the Qur'anic beast is relatively benign, functioning primarily to distinguish between believers and unbelievers rather than as a symbol of chaos in conflict with God.²⁴

Third, the return of Jesus is one of the established signs of the imminent approach of the Hour in Muslim eschatology. Christians generally do not realize the high esteem with which Jesus is regarded in Muslim belief. Jesus, along with Abraham, Moses and Muhammad, is counted among the more important of God's messengers to humanity; his birth from a virgin is accepted and the Qur'an calls him a "Spirit from God" and a "Word of God".²⁵ Although here is not the place to explore fully the Muslim image of Jesus,²⁶ it should be noted that, in contrast to Christian views, Jesus in Islam is not an incarnation of God, and the concept of the Trinity, as well as the sacrificial or salvific significance of Jesus' crucifixion, are rejected.²⁷ In fact, it is doubtful, from an Islamic perspective, whether Jesus actually died on the cross; the Qur'an describes the crucifixion as a "resemblance" or "likeness" and asserts that in actuality God raised Jesus to himself.²⁸

It is well established in Islamic tradition that Jesus will return as one of the signs of the Hour, although the Qur'anic allusions to this event are debatable.²⁹ When he returns, Jesus, according to various traditions, will kill the Dajjal or Antichrist, pray in Jerusalem according to the Muslim prayer ritual, "kill the swine, dash to pieces the crucifix, demolish the churches and synagogues, and kill the Christians who do not have (correct) belief in him."³⁰ Finally, after a peaceful reign, he will die and be buried beside Muhammad in Medina. Thus, Muslim eschatological belief in the return of Jesus, while having certain affinities with Christian eschatological beliefs about Jesus, definitely has its own Muslim particularity.

Fourth, the figures of Gog and Magog (*Yajuj* and *Majuj* in Arabic), already well established in Jewish and Christian eschatology,³¹ appear as

one of the signs of the approach of the End in Muslim apocalyptic. Mentioned twice in the Qur'an,³² Gog and Magog are a wild devastating people or force temporarily restrained behind an iron barrier or dam;³³ a sign of the End will be the breaking of this dam and the unleashing of this destructive force upon the earth. In the traditions, Gog and Magog are often described as cannibals; they will besiege Jesus and his followers, but God will miraculously destroy them.

Finally, Muslim eschatological traditions mention the figure of the Mahdi. The word means "rightly-guided one", and, although originally used merely as an honorific, it soon became a special designation for a descendent of the prophet Muhammad who will appear at the end of time to restore the Muslim community to its original perfection.³⁴ He will usher in a period of justice and truth, during which the entire world will accept Islam. He and/or Jesus will defeat the Dajjal.³⁵ Finally, he will die; after his death there will be a brief period of turmoil before the End comes.

The figure of the Mahdi does not appear in the Qur'an but is mentioned extensively in the Muslim traditions. However, there is some debate on the validity and application of these traditions, not least because of the differences between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims on this apocalyptic concept. For the largest community of Shi'a Muslims, the so-called "Twelvers" (*ithna'ashariyyah*), their twelfth Imam (leader and spiritual intermediary, directly descended from Muhammad), who is believed to have mysteriously disappeared into a state of occultation in 873 C.E., will return in the End as the Mahdi.³⁶ Sunni Muslims are less specific about the identity of the Mahdi, and some have expressed doubts about this figure and its messianic implications.³⁷ Nonetheless, belief in the Mahdi has persisted among both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims.³⁸

Obviously, there are many parallels between the Muslim apocalyptic beliefs described above and similar beliefs found in Christianity. Some of the same figures appear in both faith traditions, such as Jesus, the Antichrist, and Gog and Magog. A similar picture of degeneration and turbulence, with a temporary respite, before the End comes, is given in both traditions. To these similarities should be added the centrality of Jerusalem in the apocalyptic scenarios of both Christianity and Islam (and also, of course, Judaism). In Islam, the headquarters of the Mahdi, the slaying of the Dajjal and the prayers of Jesus according to the Muslim rite are all usually located in Jerusalem. In fact, an early Muslim tradition asserts that the Ka'ba (the holy sanctuary in Mecca, towards

which Muslims orient themselves for prayer and which they visit on pilgrimage) will come to Jerusalem at the end of time (Cook 1998:52).³⁹ It is little wonder that discussion and negotiation about Jerusalem, which bears the eschatological freight of three major world religions, tends to be so stormy!

There are also, of course, distinct differences between Muslim and Christian apocalyptic. For instance, biblical apocalyptic in the form of revelatory dreams and visions rarely occurs in the Islamic traditions (Amanat 1999:230). Apocalyptic figures or authors such as Elijah, Enoch or Daniel are seldom mentioned, and, as was mentioned above in the discussion of the Mahdi, there is a certain Muslim aversion to a full blown apocalyptic messianism. Jesus plays a much more subordinate role in Muslim apocalyptic than he does in the Christian one. And, theoretically at least, the strict monotheism of Islam has mitigated the dualism of apocalyptic scenarios such as those found in the book of Revelation.

More interesting perhaps than the similarities and differences in the content of Muslim and Christian apocalyptic are the uses and functions of such material. This is a large subject of which only some tantalizing hints can be offered here. A good example is the expectation of the Mahdi in Islamic apocalyptic. The Mahdi has frequently been identified with various historical persons throughout Muslim history and has thus functioned as the inspiration and symbolic focus of numerous political uprisings and revitalization movements in the Muslim world.⁴⁰ In turn, various Muslim rulers have appropriated the title Mahdi for themselves in order to contain the energy of apocalyptic fervor.⁴¹ Furthermore, the concept of the Mahdi was instrumental in the emergence of various heterodox groups from within Islam, such as those belonging to the Babi⁴² and Ahmadiyya⁴³ movements. These examples illustrate the tendency towards the historicizing of apocalyptic material by linking it with current recognizable historical personalities and events, a tendency that is also present in some contemporary Christian interpretations of biblical apocalyptic.

A similar tendency is at work when apocalyptic events are attached to significant calendrical junctures. For instance, the year 2000 C.E., a rather arbitrary date based entirely on the adoption of a particular calendar, has been viewed as being invested with apocalyptic significance by some Christian groups. For Muslims, who operate with a different calendar (the *anno hegirae* or A.H. calendar),⁴⁴ the year 2000 is not particu-

larly significant. However, various dates in the Islamic calendar, particularly the turn of the centuries, have likewise been invested with apocalyptic significance. Thus, early Muslim apocalyptic traditions pointed to the turn of the first (A.H. 100 = 718 C.E.) or second (A.H. 200 = 815 C.E.) Islamic centuries as apocalyptically significant.⁴⁵ Later, other prominent dates included the fifth century (A.H. 500 = 1106 C.E.) and the first Islamic millennium (A.H. 1000 = 1591 C.E.). Of course, as each of these dates passed, the apocalyptic tradition was accordingly adjusted to save it from deprecation; similarly, the Qur'anic references to the imminence of the Hour required reinterpretation (Bashear 1993). The Muslim scholar al-Suyuti (d. 1505 C.E.) countered the anxiety of Muslims regarding the approach of the year A.H. 1000 by writing a book in which he concluded that the first Islamic millennium would not end history but that the End might come with the year A.H. 1500 (= 2076 C.E.) (Murad 1997).

More recently, the past century C.E. saw the turn of the fourteenth Islamic century (A.H. 1400 = 1979 C.E.).⁴⁶ In the same year, the first successful modern Islamic revolution overthrew the despotic rule of the western-backed Shah of Iran. Not surprisingly, it was whispered that Ayatollah Khomeini, the spiritual leader of the revolution, was the Mahdi (Furnish 1999:22).⁴⁷ Also in 1979 C.E., a self-styled Mahdi and his supporters seized control of the Grand Mosque in Mecca only to meet a violent end at the hands of the Saudi Arabian authorities (Kechichian 1990). While these events were instigated by Shi'a Muslim activists, the Iranian revolution was celebrated also by many Sunni Muslims as heralding a new Islamic age in which Muslim civilization could again flourish, free of the domination of the West. Modern activist Shi'ism, which reinterpreted the signs of the End as the final stage in a revolution to establish an ideal Islamic utopia on earth, was mirrored by the goal of Sunni reformers and revivalists to realize a this-worldly ideal society. The future apocalypse became the present showdown with the forces of disbelief and imperialism (Amanat 1999:248ff.).⁴⁸

While one stream of modern Muslim interpretation of the significance of the End thus understands it as a call to struggle for a just Islamic society here and now (Islamic utopianism), another stream continues to view the signs of the End in a literal fashion, and searches for correlates of these signs in modern events. In fact, Cook (1998) argues that a new apocalyptic discourse has appeared in the popular tracts written by Arab

Muslims, a discourse that exhibits eerie affinities with the more extreme Christian apocalyptic speculations of the past century. In this material, classical Muslim apocalyptic is mixed with quotations from biblical books such as Revelation, Daniel, Ezekiel and Isaiah, and is further combined with anti-Semitic conspiracy theories drawn from Western fringe writers and fundamentalist missionary propaganda. All non-Muslims are pictured in this literature as united in their hatred of Islam, all events perceived as inimical to Islam are seen as part of a world-wide Jewish conspiracy, and the Dajjal is identified as the Jewish messiah, thus demonizing all Jews.⁴⁹ In an ironic reversal, these writers “have taken the negative, the other side of Christian apocalyptic beliefs and claimed that Christians do not truly understand the meaning of the texts” (Cook 1998:60).⁵⁰

A third stream of Muslim interpretation of the significance of the End offers a mystical perspective in which the Hour is understood as referring to each individual’s death.⁵¹ An analogy is drawn between the microcosm of the death of the individual (the “Lesser Resurrection”) and the macrocosm of the end of the world (the “Greater Resurrection”) (Chittick 1987:398-399). The signs of the End can then be interpreted as elements of each individual’s spiritual journey to God.⁵² Islam, then, seems to exhibit the three paradigms of the end of the world proposed by Stackhouse (1997) in his study of Christian apocalyptic: the literal approach based on a fundamentalistic reading of the religious texts, a psychological symbolic approach that individualizes the time of the End, and a social reform approach that advocates the building of an ideal society on earth.

In conclusion, the example of Islamic apocalyptic and its diversity, particularly in both its similarity with, and difference from, Christian apocalyptic, offers materials towards the delineation of the core ideas of apocalyptic in general, and the assessment of its dangers and benefits. We can see that apocalyptic, for instance, offers a way of making sense of upheavals and disturbances in the world by understanding them as tests or trials (*fitan*) before the End, and thus having a purpose rather than being arbitrary or random. On a more negative note, apocalyptic seems to encourage the projection of an enemy that threatens the survival of the faithful remnant of true believers, and thus opens itself to the insidious influence of modern conspiracy theories, which, once they take hold in the popular imagination, are extremely difficult to dislodge.⁵³ Furthermore, apocalyptic tends to portray a “do or die” situation in which no

alternative mediating positions are available.⁵⁴ However, to end on a more positive note, we can observe that apocalyptic ultimately brings a transcendent perspective to bear on human life by its insistence that earthly reality is transient and impermanent. While apocalyptic is thus a threat to the established order, which seeks either to repress or co-opt its destabilizing energy, it can also function as a potent tool of social and theological critique,⁵⁵ a warning against the deceptive comfort of the status quo. On this issue, Muslims, Jews and Christians seem to have much in common and much to work on together.

Nay, but ye do love the fleeting Now
and neglect the Hereafter.

(*al-Qiyamah* “the Resurrection” 75:20-21)⁵⁶

Notes

- 1 Belief in the Last Day, together with belief in God, God’s angels, God’s books, God’s prophets or messengers, and divine destiny, constitute the basic elements of Muslim belief (*iman*). See the basic introductions in, for example, Miller (1995:168-192), Denny (1994:107-112) or Elias (1999:61-65); an extended treatment can be found in Murata & Chittick (1994: 37-264).
- 2 Quoted from the translation of Michael Sells (1999:52). Muslims customarily refer to chapters or *surahs* of the Qur’an, not by number, but by the names of the *surahs*.
- 3 Quoted from the translation of Michael Sells (1999:108).
- 4 For other catastrophic terms used in the Qur’an for the occurrence of the Hour, see Arjomand (1999:239). The famous Muslim philosopher, theologian and mystic, al-Ghazzali (d. 1111 C.E.) compiled over one hundred names for this event (Chittick 1987:380).
- 5 The word “Islam” is based on an Arabic verb that means both “to surrender or submit” and “to have or make peace”. Thus, Islam, very briefly understood, is the surrender of oneself to God so as to enjoy peace and wellbeing both in this world and in the next.
- 6 P. Cassonova (1911) argued for the controversial theory that the single strongest motive for the mission of Muhammad and the early Muslim community was the immanence of the universal resurrection and last judgement, and therefore eschatological materials represent the oldest layer of Muslim tradition. For cautious reference to this theory see, for example, Arjomand (1999:245-246) and Bashear (1993:75). Cook (1996) argues for

this theory on the basis of the close connection between apocalyptic traditions and *jihad* (“struggle”, especially military action in this context) in the first two centuries of Islam.

- 7 Quoted from the translation of Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1997:398-399). A corresponding sentiment is expressed in 33:63. Jesus, in Mark 13:32-33, similarly warns that the hour is known only to the Father.
- 8 “The issue of time in Islamic understanding is not one of chronology per se as much as a means of expressing God’s provenance (*sic!*) over the affairs of the world and human responsibility within it” (Smith & Haddad 1981:9). In this sense, “eschatology can break out at any moment” (Brown 1987:155).
- 9 Quoted from the translation of Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1997:1597-98). A similar conception is found in 10:45, 17:52, 20:103-104, 23:112-114, and 30:55.
- 10 *Al-Nahl* “the Bee” 16:77, quoted from the translation by Yusuf Ali (1997:657). The disparity between God’s time and human time is further underlined by comparing a day with God to 1,000 (32:5) or 50,000 (70:4) human years.
- 11 Several references to the Last Day in the Qur’an are actually in the past tense, a literary device that emphasizes its inevitability (Lang 1995:49-50), but which also points to its present reality in the life of the believer: “...at each instant we are drawing nearer to the climax of time and history” (Smith & Haddad 1981:5).
- 12 *Surah Muhammad* 47:18 refers to the tokens or signs (*ashrat*) of the Hour, some of which have already come. *Surah al-Zukhruf* “the Gold Adornments” 43:61 speaks of someone or something, possibly the return of Jesus (see the list of interpretive possibilities in Hassan 1985:264), being a sign of the Hour (*ilm al-sa’a*). This last phrase, when it appears elsewhere in the Qur’an, is usually translated as “knowledge of the Hour” (see 31:34, 41:47, 43:85).
- 13 For example, 81:1-14, 82:1-5, 84:1-5, 89:21, 99:1-2, 101:5.
- 14 Thus, in the popular compendium of Muslim tradition or *hadith* entitled *Mishkat al-Masabih* (“Niche for lights”), the last section, which lists traditions regarding the trials and afflictions that will come to pass before the Last Day, is entitled *Fitan* (see the English translation by Robson 1964-66). Similarly, the apocalyptic section of the canonical collection of traditions known as *Sahih Muslim* is entitled *al-fitan wa ashrat al-sa’a*, “the trials and signs of the Hour” (see the English translation by Siddiqi 1977). For a discussion of traditions describing the degeneration of the Muslim community before the End, see Cook (1997:43ff.).
- 15 The great struggles of the early period of Muslim history over the legitimacy

of the leaders of the Muslim community (the caliphs or Imams) included the murder of the third caliph, Uthman (656 C.E.); the revolt of Talhah, Zubayr and A'ishah resulting in the battle of the Camel (656 C.E.); the battle of Siffin between the fourth caliph, Ali, and the Umayyad governor of Syria, Mu'awiyya (675 C.E.); the ensuing Kharijite schism and assassination of Ali (661 C.E.); and the accession to power of Mu'awiyya (661 C.E.). These events collectively make up the first *fitna* or great *fitna*, and became the paradigm for seeing any later period of political disturbances and revolt as a *fitna*. For Shi'a Muslims, the martyrdom, at Karbala in 680 C.E., of al-Husayn, Muhammad's grandson and the third Shi'a Imam, constitutes the paradigmatic *fitna* and is commemorated each year on Ashura in the first Islamic month.

- ¹⁶ *Sahih Muslim* 1202/6931, quoted from the translation of Siddiqi (1977:1503).
- ¹⁷ The rising of the sun in the west is not mentioned in the Qur'an, but is specified as a sign of the Hour in various prophetic traditions traced back to Muhammad. The association of earthquakes with the Hour is suggested in the Qur'an (22:1, 99:1). The above *hadith* emphasizes that the earthquakes heralding the End will surpass any previous earthquakes in that they will cover such a wide territory.
- ¹⁸ Smoke (*dukhan*) is associated with the Day in the Qur'an (*al-Dukhan* "the Smoke" 44:10-11). Some commentators, however, connect the smoke with some historical calamity and/or see in it an allusion to famine; see the notes on *surah* 44:10-11 in Yusuf Ali's translation (1997:1285). The fire is mentioned in the prophetic traditions, such as the one quoted above.
- ¹⁹ See Matthew 24:24, Mark 13:22, and Revelation 13.
- ²⁰ The word *dajjal* is likely a loanword of Syriac origin. The Peshitta translates the *pseudochristoi* of Matthew 24:24 as *meshihe daggale*, and this term was taken up into later apocalyptic material such as that found in Ephraem and Ps. Methodius (Abel 1965:76).
- ²¹ *Al-Naml* "the Ants" 27:82. The phrase *idha waqa'a al-qawl 'alayhim* "when the word befalls them" is usually understood as an allusion to the approach of the Hour.
- ²² These interpretations stem from alternative vocalizations of the text. See the notes on this verse in Yusuf Ali (1997:956) and Muhammad Asad (1984:586). Interestingly, both these translators prefer an allegorical interpretation of the beast as representative of gross materialistic values. In the traditions, however, the beast is taken literally and its description and actions are greatly elaborated.
- ²³ The Qur'anic beast (*dabba*) has been likened especially to the second beast

“like a bear (*dob*)” of Daniel 7:5 (Arjomand 1999:239).

- ²⁴ Arjomand (1999:240) observes: “The ancient myth of primal combat between the God of creation and the beasts of chaos that had given rise to the beasts of the Judeo-Christian apocalypses is now totally submerged under the Islamic monotheistic doctrine of salvation.”
- ²⁵ *Al-‘Imran* “the Family of Imran” 3:39,45; *al-Nisa’* “the Women” 4:171.
- ²⁶ For fuller treatments comparing Muslim and Christian conceptions of Jesus, see, for example, Robinson (1991) and Phipps (1996). See also Parrinder (1965).
- ²⁷ On the rejection of Jesus’ divinity and the Trinity, see especially *al-Nisa’* “the Women” 4:171.
- ²⁸ The verses in question here are *al-Nisa’* “the Women” 4:157-59. The most widespread Muslim interpretation of these verses is that someone who resembled Jesus was erroneously crucified in his stead, and that Jesus was raised by God into a state from which he will eventually descend as one of the signs of the End. Ayoub (1980) attempts to trace the development of the Muslim substitute theory of the crucifixion; in his extensive discussion of these verses, Robinson (1991:106-116, 127-141) suggests that the Muslim theory resembles the ideas of certain Christian gnostic sects.
- ²⁹ The most certain allusions are in *al-Zukhruf* “the Gold Adornments” 43:61 and *al-Nisa’* “the Women” 4:159, but they hinge on the interpretation of the antecedent of the third person singular masculine pronouns in these verses (see Robinson 1991:78-105).
- ³⁰ From the Qur’an commentary of Baidawi (d. ca. 1286 C.E.) on 43:61, as quoted in Gätje (1976:129).
- ³¹ See Ezekiel 38:1 – 39:29; Revelations 20:8.
- ³² *Al-Kahf* “the Cave” 18:94 and *al-Anbiya* “the Prophets” 21:96.
- ³³ The story in *al-Kahf* “the Cave” 18:92-101 describes the building of this barrier between two mountains by a figure named *Dhu al-Qarnayn* “Possessor or Master of Two Horns”, commonly identified with Alexander the Great. Gog and Magog, in this historical reading, are the wild unruly tribes threatening to invade the civilized Mediterranean basin.
- ³⁴ The term Mahdi was used in early Islam without eschatological significance, but during the period of political turbulence beginning in the late seventh century it became increasingly attached to hopes of a just ruler. As the realistic fulfillment of such hopes became increasingly distant, the figure of the Mahdi took on an increasingly eschatological significance (Hamblin & Peterson 1995:441).

- ³⁵ While there are strong similarities between the roles and functions of the Mahdi and of Jesus, suggesting perhaps some influence of one tradition on the other, for most Muslims the Mahdi and Jesus are two separate apocalyptic personages. Nonetheless, there is some ambiguity over the relationship between these two figures, particularly in the slaying of the Dajjal and the establishment of a reign of justice (Smith & Haddad 1981:69-70; Chittick 1987:382).
- ³⁶ On the distinctive eschatological piety of Shi'a Muslims, see Sachedina (1981) and Ayoub (1978). For instance, the Shi'a Mahdi will avenge the murder of the third Imam al-Husayn (see note 15 above).
- ³⁷ For example, the eminent Muslim historian and scholar, Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406 C.E.), criticized many of the traditions on which the belief in the Mahdi was based, and saw the dangerous use of this doctrine in political propaganda "to support a deceptive cause that the human soul in its delusion and stupidity leads [weak-minded people] to believe capable of succeeding" (Ibn Khaldun 1967:259). More recently, Muslim modernists such as Fazlur Rahman (1968:304) and Riffat Hassan (1985) have critiqued belief in figures such as the Mahdi as historical pessimism and escapist wish-fulfillment. See also Furnish (1999) for other modern examples of Sunni opponents of Mahdism.
- ³⁸ Furnish (1999) in fact argues that "Sunni skepticism about the Mahdi has given way, in recent years, to positive conviction about him", citing as evidence the recent popular writings of numerous Arab Muslims.
- ³⁹ Mekeel-Matteson (1999) argues that the Muslim Dome of the Rock was built on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem by the Umayyad dynasty (ca. 691 C.E.) to commemorate the future eschatological event of the Resurrection and Final Judgement. This early importance of Jerusalem receded somewhat in later Muslim history, only to be revived again in reaction to the Crusades (1097-1291 C.E.).
- ⁴⁰ For example, various Shi'a Muslim groups staged uprisings under the Mahdist banner in the early years of Islam. An outbreak of various Mahdist movements in the late ninth century resulted eventually in the establishment of the Fatimid dynasty in Egypt, with its rival caliph (Arjomand 1999). Among Sunni Muslims, probably the most well known Mahdist uprising occurred in the Sudan in the late nineteenth century, which succeeded in temporarily expelling the British colonial powers (Amanat 1999:234-237). For a richly layered examination of Muslim Mahdist discourse as a response to colonialism in Africa, see Umar (1999).
- ⁴¹ For example, several Umayyad and 'Abbasid caliphs found it expedient to describe their office in terms of the Mahdi (Arjomand 1999:256-261, Cook

- 1997:54).
- 42 Muhammad Shirazi (d. 1850 C.E.), the Bab, claimed to be the hidden Shi'a Imam, returning not to end the world but rather to usher in a new prophetic dispensation. His follower, Baha'ullah (d. 1892 C.E.) was acknowledged as the awaited universal messiah and established the Baha'i faith.
- 43 Mirza Ghulum Ahmad (d. 1908 C.E.) claimed to be both the awaited Mahdi and the second coming of Jesus, and launched an aggressive missionary movement, members of which were known as Ahmadis.
- 44 The Muslim calendar is dated from the migration (*hijra*) of Muhammad and the early Muslim community from Mecca to Medina in 622 C.E. Furthermore, in contrast to the solar Gregorian calendar, the Muslim calendar is strictly lunar, and thus an Islamic year is about 11 days shorter than a solar year, making synchronization of the two calendars difficult.
- 45 The year A.H. 125 was also invested with apocalyptic significance, likely reflecting the disintegration of Umayyad rule and the civil war preceding the rise of the 'Abbasids to power (Bashear 1993:93-94). The year A.H. 200 witnesses a fierce civil war between two rival 'Abbasid caliphs (Bashear 1993:94). Such upheaval was popularly viewed as the *fitan* heralding the approach of the End.
- 46 See Miller (1979) for a set of stimulating reflections on this milestone in Islamic history.
- 47 The temporarily successful Mahdist revolt in the Sudan similarly took place around the turn of the thirteenth Islamic century (A.H. 1300 = 1882 C.E.).
- 48 Thus, for Khomeini, the apocalyptic "Great Satan" was none other than the contemporary United States. For many Muslim activists, the Palestine-Israel conflict is seen in apocalyptic terms.
- 49 For example, the Gulf War of 1991 and the 1993 Oslo Accords are connected in this discourse with Western hatred of Islam, Jewish conspiracies, and plots by the Dajjal.
- 50 On modern anti-Western Muslim interpretations of Islamic apocalyptic, see also Smith & Haddad (1981:129). For a very different syncretistic blending of Islamic eschatology and popular Christian apocalyptic for teaching and propagation purposes, see Damrell (1999).
- 51 Bashear (1993:89-90) discusses the reinterpretation of a particular Muslim apocalyptic tradition on this basis, a reinterpretation necessitated by the postponement of the Hour. Waldman (1987:155) mentions Muslim modernists who either downplay Islamic eschatology or reinterpret it allegorically.

- ⁵² For example, Gog and Magog become the worldly agitations that distract the heart from spiritual knowledge, the conflict between the Dajjal and Jesus becomes the struggle between the ego and the spirit, and the appearance of the Mahdi becomes the attainment of "the pinnacle of every perfection" (Chittick 1987:401).
- ⁵³ Rational attempts to refute a conspiracy theory can always be rebuffed by the accusation that they are part of the conspiracy itself.
- ⁵⁴ Keller (1996) thus criticizes apocalyptic as a deep-rooted destructive cultural habit that polarizes absolute good versus absolute evil in such a way that the complete triumph of one side over the other is the only conceivable goal.
- ⁵⁵ Cook (1997) explores the function of Islamic apocalyptic as a vehicle of veiled social critique by the lower classes against the governing elite.
- ⁵⁶ Quoted from the translation of Pickthall (1953:422).

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