Imitation as a Religious Duty:
Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives

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Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde was born on October 16, 1854, in Ireland. Raised in the plush setting of Westland Row in mid-nineteenth-century Dublin, Wilde made his later reputation, for better and for worse, principally in England. Oscar Wilde as a poet, novelist, memoirist and all-around aesthete was often imitated; he himself tended to imitate the ways of earlier nineteenth-century English writers of the aesthetic school. Gilbert and Sullivan did not intend their operetta *Patience* to be a satire of Wilde, but Wilde helped to propagate the idea that his type of aestheticism was related to the eccentricities of Reginald Bunthorne, the central figure of fun in that operetta. Oscar Wilde, never a person prone to false humility, once declared that “Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery that mediocrity can pay to greatness.”

Many religious traditions have words for the path first trodden by their founders, human or divine, paths that when we follow them lead us to imitate our forerunners. The drum-thumping lyrics of the hymn “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” feature a third verse that sums up such imagery: “Like a mighty army/ Moves the Church of God;/ Brothers we are treading/Where the Saints have trod./ We are not divided;/ All one body we:/ One in hope and doctrine,/ One in charity.” The paths trodden by the holy ones in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions of faith have led in various directions over the long and complicated histories of those religious
families. There are many similarities—as well as striking dissimilarities—among Jews, Christians and Muslims, similarities and dissimilarities about the paths taken and the paths not taken by our forefathers and foremothers in the faith.

IMITATION AS A RELIGIOUS DUTY
IN THE TRADITION OF ISRAEL

The faith tradition of Israel begins not with Adam and Eve but with Abraham. In the Book of Genesis, the first eleven chapters give us the reason why God narrowed down the beginning of God’s people to one nomadic herder, his childless wife, and the relatives and servants who traveled with them from Ur in what is now southern Iraq to Haran in what is now southern Turkey, and then again from Haran into the land of Canaan, present day Israel and Palestine: “Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you’” (Gen 12:1). Abram, whose name was eventually changed to Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob, whose name was later changed to Israel, explored the land of promise, each in his turn. In reading the accounts of these explorations one can sometimes feel that the story is a trifle repetitious.

Thus, according to the Yahwistic narrative, Abram traveled south to the Negeb and then over into Egypt, because “there was a famine in the land” (Gen 12:10) which he had so recently entered. In Egypt, however, the matriarch Sarai, passed off by Abram as his sister, faced great peril. The maternal ancestress of the succeeding generations of Abram’s descendants was taken into the harem of Pharaoh, but a plague convinced Pharaoh to return Sarai to Abram. Much later, the Elohist source in Genesis narrates how Abraham made a similar journey with Sarah, this time into the region of Gerar, on the eastern end of the Philistine territories. There Abraham also
passed Sarah off as his sister, but King Abimelech of Gerar, more attuned to God’s word than Pharaoh, realized the mistake he had almost made and returned Abraham’s sister-wife to him. A similar story is told by the Yahwist a few chapters later in Genesis about the sojourn in Gerar of Isaac, the only son of Abraham and Sarah, along with his second cousin and bride, Rebekah. Genesis suggests that King Abimelech of Gerar was an upright Philistine. In separating from Isaac he swore a covenant: “‘We see plainly that the LORD has been with you; so we say, let there be an oath between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you so that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the LORD’” (Gen 26:28-29).

The thirteenth-century Spanish Talmudist, Moses ben Nahman (1194-1270)—sometimes known as Nahmanides or by the Hebrew acronym RaMBaN—wrote extensive commentaries on the Torah. In his commentary on the Book of Genesis RaMBaN sees much more than poor editing in these repetitive stories of the patriarchs and the matriarchs:

I will tell you a principle by which you will understand all the coming portions of the Scripture concerning Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is indeed a great matter which our Rabbis only mentioned briefly, saying: “Whatever has happened to the Patriarchs is a sign to the children.” It is for this reason that the verses narrate at great length the account of the journeys of the patriarchs, the digging of the wells, and other events. Now someone may consider them unnecessary and of no useful purpose, but in truth they all serve as a lesson for the future: when an event happens to any one of the three patriarchs, that which is decreed to happen to his children can be understood.²

Note how RaMBaN specifies that the plagues afflicted on pharaoh and the Egyptians at the time of the Exodus follow the example of the earlier plague that afflicted the pharaoh who
had taken the matriarch Sarai into his harem: “Nothing was lacking in all the events that happened to the patriarchs that would not occur to their children.” RaMBaN returns to this theme. In his commentary on the encounter and reconciliation between Jacob and Esau in the land of Edom: “There is yet in this section a hint for future generations, for everything that happened to our father with his brother Esau will constantly occur to us with Esau’s children, and it is proper for us to adhere to the way of the righteous by preparing ourselves in the three things in which he [Jacob] prepared himself: for prayer, for giving him [Esau] a present, and for rescue by methods of warfare, to flee and to be saved.”

To understand the last quotation from RaMBaN about dealing with Esau’s children, it must be understood that for many centuries the rabbis had referred to Rome as Esau or Edom, pagan Rome at first but then Christian Rome as well. In Bereshit Rabbah, the great rabbinical meditation on the Book of Genesis that was basically complete by the end of the fifth century CE, the authors comment on the fact that when Jacob/Israel returned to the promised land he felt it necessary to propitiate his brother Esau, from whom he had taken the birthright. The rabbis contributing to Bereshit Rabbah see the equivalent to Jacob’s propitiation of Esau in the taxes and other exactions they have to pay to Roman officialdom. In the biblical text, Esau refused the propitiatory gift brought by Jacob/Israel at first, but he eventually accepted it (Gen 33:9-12). The rabbis of Bereshit Rabbah comment somewhat wryly: “And he [Jacob/Israel] urged him. And he [Esau] took it” [Gen 33:11]: he [Esau] pretended to draw back, but his hands were stretched out.” The rabbis in the Roman- and later Byzantine-ruled Middle East found out how to get along with the powers that be. Nearly a millennium later RaMBaN saw wisdom in following this precedent set by Jacob/Israel in the patriarchal era, citing the precedent set by a sage of the Amoraim period (third century CE): “When Rabbi Yanai entered Rome, in the court of the kings
of Edom, [on a mission] concerning public matters, he would peruse this section of the Torah in order to follow the advice of the wise patriarch [Jacob/Israel], for it is he that the generations are to see and emulate.”

Money—whether taxes or gratuities—talks.

Prophecy in Israel probably preceded but also accompanied and counterbalanced kingship as it developed. Among the rulers of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah, there seems to have been something of competitive imitation in iniquity, concretized in following Gentile ways. Thus, in the Northern Kingdom, “the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God . . . They had worshiped other gods and walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs that the kings of Israel had introduced . . . They built for themselves high places in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city; they set up for themselves pillars and sacred poles” (2 Kings 17: 7, 8, 9-10). Likewise, the Southern Kingdom of Judah went in the same bad direction, but at a slower pace: “Judah also did not keep the commandments of the LORD their God but walked in the customs that Israel had introduced” (2 Kings 17:19).

The prophets in the history of Israel sometimes imitated each other over generations as did the patriarchs, but nowhere more obviously than in the stories told of Elijah and Elisha. Elisha succeeded Elijah in his prophetic role, but Elisha had asked to receive from God a double portion of Elijah’s spirit (2 Kings 2:9). While Elijah had provided the widow of Zarephath with enough wheat meal and oil to enable her to bake for herself, her son and the visiting prophet as long as the drought lasted (1 Kings 17:8-16), Elisha provided another widow with enough cooking oil to enable her to pay off otherwise crippling debts (2 Kings 4:1-7). Elijah had raised from the dead the son of the same widow of Zarephath for whom he had multiplied wheat meal and oil (1 Kings 17:17-24); Elisha does the same thing, but much more elaborately, for the son of
a Shunammite woman (2 Kings 4:18-37). Imitation of Elijah—inheriting his prophetic mantle—spurred Elisha into imitative and perhaps even competitive miracle-working.

In the post-Exilic era scribes like Ezra—specialists in Torah—provided guidance for the Judeans who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. The king in Babylonia sent Ezra back to Jerusalem to set up orderly Jewish religious governance there: “And you, Ezra, according to the God-given wisdom you possess, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River who know the laws of your God; and you shall teach those who do not know them” (Ezra 7:25). Since Davidic kingship was never established again, the role of Torah scholars—rabbis—grew in importance over the next few centuries. Rabbinic authority kept the worldwide Jewish community intellectually united after the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in the year 70 CE and the exiling of Jews from Jerusalem and its environs after the revolt of Bar Kokhba in 132-135. In Babylonia, Central Asia, Egypt, North Africa, Greece, Italy, Spain, and France fairly large Jewish communities developed over the next millennium, as well as smaller but very vibrant communities in places like South India, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Horn of Africa.

In eighteenth-century eastern Europe, around the same time that modernizing Jews in Germany were moving into the Haskala, the Jewish enlightenment, and its later grandchild, Reform Judaism, a countervailing wind was blowing, especially in Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania. Devotional Jewish movements of hasidim surrounded charismatic rabbis and mystical masters called zaddikim.

The first and most famous of these zaddikim was Israel ben Eliezer (ca. 1700-60), usually known by the honorific title “the Baal Shem Tov,” the master of the holy name; he is often referred to by the acronym Besht. Tales of the Besht’s exemplary life live on in Hasidic teaching
to the present day. One particular tale narrates the way in which the Besht arranged for his own marriage. He had contacted a learned rabbi and asked permission to marry his daughter, but the rabbi with whom he had made the arrangement died before the marriage was formalized. The Besht had insisted that his future bride and her family, and especially her brother who had succeeded his father as rabbi and head of the family, should not know the Besht’s scholarly or mystical attainments. Presenting himself to his prospective in-laws, the Besht disguised himself by “putting on clothes like those worn by loafers.” The bride’s older brother was astonished when his sister said she would marry the disguised Besht: “It is surely God’s will,” she declared, “and perhaps a virtuous child will be born from the marriage.” The Besht wanted to live in poverty and simplicity, not in the usual affluence that attended great rabbis; his future wife, who had come to know his spiritual and intellectual eminence, cooperated in this plan.

*Hasidim* to the present day continue in the footsteps of the Besht and other great *zaddikim* of the last three centuries. Several Hasidic rabbinic dynasties are known right here in New York City and its suburbs. Different as these Hasidic Jews look from their non-Hasidic neighbors, even those who are Jews, it is in their very difference that they demonstrate their imitation of past rabbis and their fidelity to God. To imitate one’s *zaddik*, to walk in the paths of ancestors in the faith, lies close to the heart of what the faith of Israel has meant for nearly four millennia.

**IMITATION AS A RELIGIOUS DUTY**

**IN THE TRADITION OF CHRISTIANITY**

Following Jesus and walking among the disciples of Jesus following him are repeated motifs in the Gospels, especially Mark, Matthew and Luke. The first Galilean disciples of Jesus were fisher folk whom Jesus called to a new form of fishing: “As Jesus was walking along the
sea of Galilee he saw Simon and Andrew, Simon’s brother, casting about them in the sea; they were fisher folk. Jesus spoke to them: ‘Come after me and I will make you become fishers of human beings’” (Mark 1:16-17). My translation of this passage is deliberately literal, to the point of clumsiness. Simon and Andrew are called while they are actually engaged in fishing, casting their net “in the sea.” Gainfully self-employed, Simon and Andrew had much to lose in following Jesus. The command of Jesus to Simon and Andrew was peremptory, followed up with something a little comic, the suggestion that they were being called to a new form of casting the net. Immediately after the call of Simon and Andrew, James and John were called as well (Mark 1:18-19). Employed by their father, Zebedee, James and John, not fishing but repairing their father’s nets, had less to lose than the self-employed Simon and Andrew; Zebedee had other employees, although he may have felt quite differently about the loss of his sons and heirs.

Matthew and Luke both narrate variants of another story about a disciple called by Jesus who held back from such discipleship because of family concerns. “Another of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead’” (Matt 8:21-22). In this rather harsh motif Matthew models the following of Jesus on the manner in which the prophet Elijah had called Elisha (1 Kings 2:1-12). But the heavenly mission of the disciples of Jesus finally and completely descended on them not with a prophet’s cloak but with wind and fire on the day of Pentecost, fulfilling what Jesus had promised: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”’ (Acts 1:8). That discipleship—and the making of other disciples—completes the Gospel of Matthew in its conclusion: “Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father
and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age’’ (Matt 28:18-20).

The Gospel of John, very different from Mark, Matthew, and Luke, narrates how John the Baptist sent some his own disciples to follow Jesus as a sacrificial victim: “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29; also see 1:36). In John’s Gospel Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, was one of those disciples sent by John the Baptist to follow Jesus. Andrew communicated to Simon Peter an interpretation of Jesus very different from that of John the Baptist: “We have found the Messiah” (John 1:41). The disciples of John the Baptist directed to follow Jesus seem to have missed the point of what John had said, mistaking Jesus for a worldly king, refusing to hear that Jesus was a sacrificial lamb. This motif of Jesus as God’s sacrificial lamb reaches its apex in John’s Gospel after the account of the death of Jesus on the cross. His legs were not broken to hasten death because he was already dead; the evangelist sees it as a fulfillment of a direction given in Exodus 12:46 about not breaking the bones of the Passover lamb: “These things occurred so that the scriptures might be fulfilled, ‘None of his bones shall be broken’” (John 19:36).

The writings of Paul, a Greek-speaking Jew raised in the Diaspora and also a Roman citizen, combine with the notion of followership or discipleship the Hellenistic motif of imitation, and especially imitating a teacher. Passages from the Greek Old Testament may have fused the Greek notion of such mimesis with the Hebrew image of following in the footsteps of a teacher. Thus, for example, the Alexandrian Jewish Book of the Wisdom of Solomon sees in childlessness of the wise not a tragedy but an opportunity for the practice of virtue: “Better than this is childlessness with virtue . . . When it is present, people imitate it, and they long for it when it has gone” (Wis 4: 1, 2a). Paul underlined the theme of imitation several times in the
letters he composed between the early fifties and the early sixties of the first century. He urged his new Gentile converts to imitate him and his fellow evangelists as models of what Christian living might mean in the concrete. In what is generally accounted his first epistle, written together with Silvanus and Timothy to the Christian community in Thessalonica around 51 CE, Paul recalled how the Thessalonians “became imitators of us and of the Lord” (1 Thess 1:6); then they in turn became “an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia” (1 Thess 1:7). Those early Gentile Christians in northern Greece demonstrated how to follow Jesus and also how to cast the net to catch other Gentiles as well. Not only did the Thessalonians imitate the Christian exemplarity of their three evangelists, but they also learned how to imitate “the churches of God,” the primitive Christian communities of Palestine. “For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did” (1 Thess 2:14). Writing about three years later to the fractious Christian community at Corinth, Paul boldly offered them his own exemplarity, especially since other teachers, and most notably the eloquent Alexandrian Jewish Christian, Apollos, had attracted some of Paul’s congregation away from him: “For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me” (1 Cor 4:15-16). That could sound a trifle egotistical if Paul did not return to the same imagery later in the same epistle: “Be imitators of me as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). Paul had always insisted on his own right to speak as a witness of the risen Jesus who had given him a Gentile mission; imitating Paul might mean taking on the vocation not only of a disciple but also of an evangelist and finally, even the vocation of the Lord Jesus himself who first brought the good news of the reign of God (Mk 1:15). In the Deutero-Pauline letter to the Ephesians,
author urges the readers to go even further in their mimesis or discipleship to a merciful Lord: “Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:1-2).

In the later history of Christianity, the imitation of Jesus proved central to a spiritual movement begun in the late fourteenth century in what is now the eastern Netherlands, usually called in Latin *Devotio Moderna*, a term best translated as the New Devotion. The monastic movements in the Coptic, Greek, Syrian and Latin Christian worlds of the first millennium had urged withdrawal from a corrupting secular world; the mendicant friars of the early medieval Latin church—Carmelites, Franciscans, Dominicans and Augustinians, most prominently—sometimes engaged with the secular world but also withdrew from it into their convents from time to time. By the fourteenth century in the Netherlands some of these western monastic communities had become very wealthy and self-serving. All too many of the mendicants were perceived by the laity as money-hungry and corrupt.

The *Devotio Moderna* arose as a reaction to this situation, especially among literate lay people in the Netherlands hungry for more genuinely Christ-like living. The founder of this movement, a Dutch Catholic of Deventer named Geert Grote (in Latin, Gerardus Magnus), was born in 1340 and died during one of the many outbreaks of the bubonic plague in 1384. His death came less than two decades after he had first gathered like-minded ascetics in 1370, mainly lay people, into fellowships called the Sisters of the Common Life and the Brothers of the Common Life. Geert Grote had sought ordination as a deacon so that he could preach in the Diocese of Utrecht; but he did not seek the priesthood and the temptations such a role entailed for a well-educated cleric, especially ecclesiastical benefices—church offices with substantial guaranteed incomes attached to them. The Brothers of the Common Life and the Sisters of the
Common Life had no formal vows. The Brothers supported themselves by copying liturgical and other manuscripts while the Sisters engaged in making vestments and embroidering them. Although the movement originally thrived among lay men and women, it also attracted some members of the lower clergy—deacons and priests. Certain already established religious orders, most notably the Augustinian Canons Regular, were also deeply affected by the charism of Geert Grote.

In a statement of purpose which he called “Resolutions and Intentions, But Not Vows,” Geert Grote began with general principles: “I intend to order my life to the glory, honor, and service of God and to the salvation of my soul, to put no temporal good of body, position, fortune, or learning ahead of my soul’s salvation, and to pursue the imitation of God in every way consonant with learning and discernment and with my own body and estate, which predispose certain forms of imitation.” The combination of learning with simplicity of life was something very new in fourteenth-century Europe.

The most famous literary product of the Devotio Moderna was the handbook called The Imitation of Christ, written by Thomas à Kempis, an Augustinian Canon born in fifteenth-century Rhineland who died in the eastern Netherlands in 1471. Thomas à Kempis popularized the notion of imitating Christ, as is clearly stated in the first aphorism of his little book: “No follower of mine shall ever walk in darkness” (John 8:12). These words of our Lord counsel all to walk in His footsteps. If you want to see clearly and avoid blindness of heart, it is His virtues you must imitate. Make it your aim to meditate on the life of Jesus Christ.” More antagonistic to learning than Geert Grote and the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life, Kempis pithily summed up his piety: “To be learned and able to discuss the Trinity will get you nowhere if you do not have humility, and therefore displease the Holy Trinity. Lofty words neither save you nor
make you a Saint; only a virtuous life makes you dear to God. It is better to experience contrition than to be able to define it.\textsuperscript{13}

Ignatius Loyola, no enemy of learning after his lengthy pursuit of it as a mature student at the University of Paris, gathered around him a group of fellow students in the early sixteenth century. Despite his humanistic formation, Ignatius still found value in the piety of Thomas à Kempis, as many Jesuits my age still remember from having \textit{The Imitation of Christ} read to us from refectory pulpits at penitential Friday lunches six decades ago.\textsuperscript{14} In the \textit{Spiritual Exercises} of Ignatius the influence of the \textit{Devotio Moderna} is even more clearly evident, especially at high points like the colloquy at the end of the consideration on the call of Christ the King: “My resolute wish, and my considered determination—on the sole condition that this be for your greater service and praise—is to imitate you in enduring every outrage and all contempt, and utter poverty, both actual and spiritual, if your most holy Majesty wants to choose me and receive me into that life and state.”\textsuperscript{15} Ignatius, Geert Grote, and Thomas à Kempis followed in the footsteps of the first disciples of Jesus and the first disciples of Paul. From the Hellenistic intellectual tradition such discipleship was characterized as imitation of the Word made Flesh.

\textbf{IMITATION AS A RELIGIOUS DUTY
IN THE TRADITION OF ISLAM

It is usually said that Sunni Muslims follow the customary practice (\textit{sunna}) of Muhammad in making moral choices if the prescription or proscription of such choices is not clearly made in the Qur’an. The word \textit{sunna}, however, at least as it appears in the Qur’an, has much more to do with the customary practices handed down from ancestors or decreed by God for generations in the past. There are exactly sixteen times in eleven verses of the Qur’an in
which the word *sunna*, or its plural, *sunan* are used. They can be divided into two categories: (1) customary practices of ancient peoples, sometimes specified as having been enacted with God’s approval (Qur’an 3:137; 4:26; 8: 38; 15:13; 18:55); (2) God’s own customary practice or judgment: Qur’an 17:77 (twice); 33:38, 62 (twice); 35:43 (three times); 40:85; 48:23 (twice).

The word *sunna* is never used in the Qur’an to refer to the customary practice of the Prophet Muhammad, even though that is the usual understanding of the word *sunna* as it is used by Muslims today, and especially by Sunni Muslims, who revere the Sunna of Muhammad as the second foundation of Islam, along with but subordinate to the Qur’an. The basic connotation of the Arabic tri-consonantal root S-N-N points to the process of carving or molding or shaping something. The rather dated noun ‘wont,’ as in the English phrase, ‘as is their wont,’ can be used to translate the word *sunna* fairly accurately. In the century or two after Muhammad’s lifetime, *sunna* came to mean the good example set by previous generations, their ‘wont.’ Only gradually did the term *sunna* as the virtuous ‘wont’ of the ancients come to be fused with what early Muslims remembered as the ‘wont’ of Muhammad himself.

During Muhammad’s prophetic career (610-32 CE), some of his companions specialized as reciters (*qurra’*) of parts of the Qur’an, able to recite portions when called upon to do so. After Muhammad’s death, the work of compiling the Qur’an in a complete written form commenced; these reciters were often consulted for their recollections, recollections supplemented by fragments of the Qur’an written on bone, leather, and other make-shift objects.

This situation prevailed for more than two decades after Muhammad’s death, until the third caliph, ‘Uthman ibn ‘Affan, issued—not without controversy—a complete text of the Qur’an late in his caliphate (644-56). Concomitant with their work as reciters of the Qur’an, these *qurra’* of the first decades after Muhammad’s death would also be revered as experts on
the context of Quranic verses, the things said and done by or to the Prophet himself that elicited these divine locutions or responded to such locutions. With the publication of the Qur’an as a whole, those who had been revered as reciters could still serve as experts on the context of Quranic revelations, what Muhammad had done or said in those particular contexts of revelation. Thus began the career of muhaddithun, those who could give an account (hadith) of what Muhammad said or did (his sunna) in these circumstances. Such hadith (the plural of hadith) finally enshrine not only what the Prophet said or did in the context of particular revelations but also what he said or did in every other circumstance of his life. Thus traditions can be traced back to the Prophet on the use of the wooden tooth-pick or tooth-brush (siwak or miswak), especially as part of the regulations for ritual purity at the times of worship. In such detailed regulation of behavior, the imitation of the Prophet is carried to greater lengths than the imitation of Christ in Christianity; certain detailed rabbinic prescriptions for personal behavior in Orthodox Judaism have more in common in this instance with Muslim orthopraxy.

As the generation of Muhammad’s allied contemporaries (the ashab or companions) died off, others stepped in to supply what they had heard from the original companions. There also developed, possibly only after a century had passed from the lifetime of Muhammad, people whose memory of traditions about things the Prophet did and said were consulted by others looking for a norm of behavior (sunna) not provided by the Qur’an. These two sources of Islamic law, Qur’an and Sunna, gave Muslims patterns of approved behavior, based in the first instance on the command of God and based in the second instance on Muhammad’s personal example. From specialists on the Qur’an and Prophetic traditions gradually developed a whole learned class, usually called ‘ulama’, specialists in religious learning (‘ilm). Only after the eighth century did more secular learning—the philosophical sciences in the broadest sense—begin to attract
Muslim practitioners, inspired as they were by the study of these disciplines undertaken earlier in the Middle East by Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians and others living under caliphal rule.

While the text of the Qur’an was generally agreed upon, with few exceptions, hadith accounts of what Muhammad did and said in Mecca and Medina, his sunna, were generally adjudged true or untrue not so much on their internal consistency or historical likelihood as on the basis of the soundness of the chains of transmission (asanid, plural of isnad) attached to these traditions. If a hadith account of some sunna could be traced without interruption through witnesses who overlapped biographically right back to the era of the Prophet himself, it was more highly esteemed than one that could only be traced to a Muslim source of a later generation. Some Muslim scholars (‘ulama’) developed a specialization in the study of genealogical details in early Islamic history, thus enabling them to know whether a particular isnad was ‘sound’ (sahih) in its claimed origins or not. It has been suggested that much of what came to be thought of as Muhammad’s sunna may well have been the common sunna of the Muslim Arabs of Mecca and Medina as preserved by their descendants in Umayyad Damascus in the early eighth century. This is especially likely when the particular sunna concerns a less than central aspect of Islamic practice. The late Marshall Hodgson, once a scholar of Islam at the University of Chicago, summed up this development of what is today called Sunnism: “In recognition of the importance of this Muslim Arab homogeneity, the Piety-minded had established the principle of adherence to tradition (at first, to local tradition), which later finally crystallized as the doctrine of ijma’ [consensus], that whatever had been accepted generally by the community was to be regarded as sanctioned by God.”

The quintessence of bad behavior in such a cultural setting was characterized as bid’a, innovation deemed to be a deviation from past ways, especially when the ways prescribed in the Quran or the Prophet’s customary practice
were in question. Collections of accounts of what Muhammad said and did at various junctures in his prophetic career start to be written down in the late seventh and early eighth century, often arranged by topics, usually starting with the requirements of ritual purity for valid worship, the practice of the five-times-daily worship (salat) itself and other sacred duties. As Hodgson notes, “a unity of spirit was maintained through insisting on showing that the reporter’s central concern was with the life and ideals of Muhammad’s community—that, as it was put, the reporter was sound in faith and the report was consistent with the Qur’an. Forgery did little harm if the common spirit was adhered to, and might even foster homogeneity in points otherwise left in doubt.”

21 There are several words in the Qur’an that signify some sort of divinely approved path or way of proceeding; the word sabil, as in the phrase, “the path of God” (sabil Allah), occurs most frequently. Only once in the Qur’an does the word shari’a appear, a word today signifying the whole complex of systematized Islamic legal thought. Originally it simply meant a clear path, one which concretizes the fulfilment of God’s command: “We have put you on a clear path of God’s command. Follow it and do not follow the vagaries of those who know nothing” (Qur’an 45:18).

22 A verbal root originally meaning “going forth” (DH-H-B) supplies the tri-consonantal root for what is called a madhhab, a legal path or school pioneered by others that can be followed securely. This non-Quranic term eventually characterized schools of legal interpretation developed from the work of certain scholars who lived in the late eighth and early ninth centuries. There used to be many more schools of legal interpretation, but among Sunni Muslims today only four such legal paths (madhahib) survive: the Hanafi school, derived from an Iraqi setting, named after Abu Hanifah (d. 767); the Maliki school, popular in West Africa, with its
roots in Medina, named after Malik ibn Anas (d. 795); the Shafi‘i school, named after an itinerant scholar who finally settled in Egypt, al-Shafi‘i (d. 820), famous for the rigor of its pursuit of *ijma‘* or community consensus on the *sunna* of the Prophet, especially among those who were companions of the Prophet during his lifetime; and the Hanbali school, named after its Iraqi founder, Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855), a legal tradition much centered on Prophetic *hadith* and known for its distrust of analogical reasoning. The last-named school has been reinterpreted in Saudi Arabia since the eighteenth century in the narrowest possible manner and is usually referred to as Wahhabism.

“In principle,” Hodgson writes on the subject of legal consensus (*ijma‘*), “the Muslim community . . . meant the whole body of the faithful, or of the weighty among them; but for more technical purposes it eventually came to mean the ‘*ulama‘* as they expressed themselves in their recorded *fatwas*, that is, decisions in points of law or conscience.” A contemporary scholar of Islamic law in the Sunni tradition at the Law School of the University of California at Los Angeles, Professor Khaled Abou El Fadl, is also a leading critic of what has happened to Islamic law under the influence of what he calls the puritans of the Wahhabi school of legal thought exported from Saudi Arabia in recent decades. “Puritans treat the Qur’an and the Sunna as a panacea to all challenges that could confront them in life. Indeed, the Qur’an and Sunna can inspire creative solutions to most problems, but this is a far cry from assuming that they can automatically yield solutions to life’s challenges . . . This attitude induces puritans to treat the tradition as a vending machine of sorts.” The curious alliance of the present branch of the House of Sa‘ud in Saudi Arabia with the present branch of the House of Trump in the United States may be interpreted by some as a sign of significant change in Saudi Arabia, or simply as
political opportunism. Neither ruling family—major entrepreneurs though they be in many economic fields—may have long-term staying power.

Muslims have taken the *sunna* of the Prophet, his divinely-guided way of proceeding in every aspect of life, more seriously and more literally than have Christians; in this they more closely resemble Orthodox Jews. Following the path of God and the exemplarity of Muhammad has enabled Muslims to live lives of God-consciousness (*taqwa*) for more than fourteen

**CONCLUSION: WALKING WITH GOD**

Imitating virtuous forbears, walking in the footsteps of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim forerunners in our respective traditions of faith, in some sense continues an ancient mythic imagery of a discipleship, of an imitation even more exalted: walking with God. Adam and Eve had been accustomed, before they ate the forbidden fruit, to encounter the LORD God walking in Eden in the cool of the evening (Gen 3:8). A related motif appears in the pre-Abrahamic history of humankind, according to Genesis, especially in the brief story of Enoch, the son of Jared and the father of Methuselah and other children: “Enoch walked with God: then he was no more, because God took him” (Gen 5:24). The Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach, probably datable to the early second century BCE, sees in Enoch’s end a somewhat ambiguous sign: “Enoch pleased the Lord and was taken up, an example of repentance to all generations” (Sir 44:16). Some rabbis contributing to *Bereshit Rabbah* in the early centuries of the Common Era interpreted the disappearance of Enoch negatively, claiming that he stopped walking with God and thus “he was no more,” dying before he did worse. Other rabbis interpret the half verse more charitably, seeing in it only a way of saying that Enoch died.27
The Alexandrian Jewish Book of the Wisdom of Solomon takes a more positive if anonymous viewpoint on Enoch’s mortal end: “There were some who pleased God and were loved by him, and while living among sinners were taken up. They were caught up so that evil might not change their understanding or guile deceive their souls. For the fascination of wickedness obscures what is good, and roving desire perverts the innocent mind. Being perfected in a short time, they fulfilled long years; for their souls were pleasing to the Lord, therefore he took them quickly from the midst of wickedness” (Wis 4:10-14). Enoch has quite an exotic after-life in the Jewish tradition, sometimes fusing with Metatron in Kabbala, a heavenly mediator proximate to God, but I do not feel inclined or competent to pursue this subject. His walking with God is fascinating enough.

In the New Testament the brief Letter of Jude quotes Enoch as a prophet of judgment on false teachers who seem to have penetrated the early Christian community, and especially teachers who “pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (Jude 4). This may refer to people in the early Christian community who exaggerated Paul’s teaching on freedom from the Law in such a way as to promote antinomianism, refusal to walk according to the commandments, a possibility rejected by Paul himself in the Letter to the Romans, chapter 6. In Jude’s brief letter, the author quotes an apocryphal work attributed to Enoch: “It was also about these that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, ‘See, the Lord is coming with tens of thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgement on all, and to convict everyone of all the deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him’” (Jude 14-15). Jude’s Enoch sounds like Enoch in some versions of the Kabbala, a judicial plenipotentiary for God. Walking with God like
Enoch, imitating God who teaches us how to walk in his way, lies at the core of a balanced sense of moral behavior.

Enoch appears in the Qur’an under a different name, Idris, but the Qur’an commentaries assert identity between the two. The brief Quranic references, both dating from the era before Muhammad’s withdrawal from Mecca to Medina, suggest the virtue of Idris as the reason for his being taken up to heaven while still alive: “Make mention of Idris in the book. That one was a truth-teller, a prophet, and We raised him up to an exalted station” (Qur’an 19: 56-57). The other mention of Idris in the Qur’an links him with Job and then with Ishmael and another figure, Dhu’l-Kifl, a prophet of disputed identity. All three seem to be models of patience in adversity, not entirely unlike Job: “We heard [Job’s] prayer and we removed that suffering from him. We gave him back his family—or something like that—as a mercy from Us and as a reminder for those who serve [God]. [Mention also] Ishmael, Idris and Dhu’l-Kifl: each one of them was numbered among the longsuffering. We introduced them to Our mercy. They are indeed among the holy ones” (Qur’an 2: 84-86).

Imitation of God, walking in God’s path, the patient following of the prophets and saints who have gone before us: that is the pattern of virtuous life given to all of us, Jewish and Christian and Muslim. The prophet Micah sums it up in one pithy verse: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic 6:8).
NOTES

1 This hymn, written in the nineteenth century by the Anglican divine, Sabine Baring-Gould, was set to music by Sir Arthur S. Sullivan.

2 Ramban (Nachmanides), Commentary on the Torah: Genesis, tr. Charles B. Chavel (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1971), 168-69. I wish to thank my colleague at Fordham, Dr. Moshe Gold, for directing my attention to the work of RaMBaN. Heneforth this work will cited as Ramban with the page cited.

3 Ramban, 173.

4 Ramban, 394.


7 Ramban, 410.


9 On this term for six of the letters attributed to Paul but probably written by later disciples, see the opinion of the late New Testament scholar Raymond Brown, S.S.: “Modern scholarship has challenged Paul’s writing of six of these works, often arguing that they were Deutero-Pauline, penned by a disciple of Paul after his death . . . A majority [of modern scholars] hold that Eph[esians] is post-Pauline, since its author seems to adapt the themes of Col[ossians] and other epistles.” This 1989 judgment of Brown can be found in Raymond E. Brown, S.S. and Raymond


11 Van Engen, 65.


13 Ibid., 15-16 (Book 1, 3).


21 Hodgson, 1:325.

22 The related word *shir‘a*, with more or less the same meaning, also occurs once in a late revelation (*Qur’an* 5:48).

23 The three Quranic phrases that include related verbs or participles from the same root (SH-R-) suggest the decreeing of a religious command from God (*Qur’an* 42:13; 42:21; 7:163).

24 For a brief overview of the development of Muslim legal traditions, see See Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht, “Fikh,” *EI2*, 2:886a-91b.


27 *Midrash Rabbah*, 1:205.

