INTRODUCTION: WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

In 1951, a Hollywood film was released entitled *When Worlds Collide*. The film tells the story of heroic astronomers striving against great odds to inform the world’s major powers that a rogue star is heading towards Earth and will crash into our planet and destroy it within eight months. The scientists finally determine that they should build a rocket as a modern Noah’s ark to transport to a new planet a cross-section of Americans chosen by lottery; the scientists themselves, of course, have reserved seats. As doomsday approaches other nations also build rocket arks to preserve some of their citizens on the same new planet, promising that nothing geopolitical will change after relocation. Non-winners of the national lotteries riot, needless to say. The film won one Academy Award—for special effects, especially for a scene of midtown Manhattan awash in a tidal wave. In August of this year a pair of dead stars actually did collide, creating what is called a kilonova, but it happened in the southern constellation Hydra which is 130 million light-years away from Earth;¹ it didn’t cause a tidal wave in Manhattan.

Metaphorical worlds—great empires or great cultural matrices—have collided in the past, are colliding now and undoubtedly will continue to collide in the future. Great tectonic cultural shifts have menaced the survival of smaller nations and peoples, with dramatic, and sometimes tragic results. In this evening’s lecture, delivered as it is just after the fifth centenary of the
symbolic beginning of the Lutheran reformation, I wish to share with you a comparative view of reformations or reforms that have taken place in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions of faith. There are many causes for these reformations, but I wish to suggest this evening that clashes of empires, collisions of great cultural worlds, have preceded and enabled and sometimes even motivated moments of reformation. Sometimes reformation has happened in reaction against worlds colliding; at other times, the very collision of worlds has sparked reformation.

What precisely do I mean by the terms ‘reform’ and ‘reformation’? 2 The great historian of ideas, Gerhart B. Ladner, a professor here at Fordham in the 1950s and later at UCLA, maintained that “the idea of reform and of studying and describing it as a historical fact” is “a phenomenon essentially Christian in origin and early development.” I plan, however, to use these two terms analogically in my examination of moments of reform or reform movements that have played central roles not only in Christianity but also in Judaism and Islam. Ladner’s own attempt to define reform encourages me to do so: “the idea of reform may now be defined as the idea of a free, intentional and ever perfectible, multiple, prolonged and ever repeated efforts . . . to reassert and augment values pre-existent in the spiritual-material compound of the world.”3 Without a sense for analogy one cannot see the interconnectedness of any historical phenomena and we land up imprisoned in our own back yard.

REFORM IN THE TRADITION OF ISRAEL

A great reform of Israelite faith and practice began during the reign in Jerusalem of King Josiah (640-609 BCE), a time when Assyrian, Babylonian and Egyptian empires all threatened the independence of the Southern Kingdom, although Assyrian power was actually waning. What caused the need for Josiah’s reform, one that came so late in the history of the monarchy in the Southern Kingdom and a century after the collapse of monarchy in the Northern Kingdom?

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In some radical sense, it was precisely monarchy itself that was corrupting the faith of Israel, whether it was the monarchy united under David and Solomon or the divided monarchy afterwards. “Power tends to corrupt,” Lord Acton famously wrote to an Anglican bishop in the late nineteenth century, “and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.”

Warnings about the corrupting effects of monarchy had been issued in the era of the Judges, such as the fable about the trees that decided to “anoint a king over themselves” (Judg 9:8-15), although that fable may well be a literary product of the post-monarchical era. The judge and prophet Samuel is also said to have warned the Israelites not to ask for a king “so that we also may be like other nations” (1 Sam 8:20). With the creation of the monarchy, and especially during Solomon’s reign, Israel took its place as a small kingdom in the midst of the colossal empires that dominated the Middle East: Pharaonic Egypt to the southwest, Assyria to the north and, eventually, Babylon to the east. The author of the First Book of Kings claims that “Solomon was sovereign over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines, even to the border of Egypt; they brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life” (1 Kings 4:21). The imperial sovereignty ascribed to Solomon may actually refer to commercial relationships he established across the Fertile Crescent.

Solomon’s international business connections prompted him to outstrip his father in marital and extramarital adventures, and the religious results were not good. “[W]hen Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David” (1 Kings 11:4). Solomon’s reign not only introduced polytheism by marriage into Jerusalem but also a type of tyranny imitative of the imperial governments of neighboring empires. Such tyranny motivated the secession of the
Northern Kingdom from the rule of Jerusalem not long after Solomon’s death. Jeroboam I, the rebel Northern Kingdom monarch who reigned in the last two decades of the tenth century, stands accused by Southern Kingdom sources of having introduced polytheism into his domain. In Jeroboam’s defense it might be claimed that he was only reviving ancient shrines of the LORD known in the Northern Kingdom territory from the era of the patriarchs: Shechem, Penuel, Bethel and Dan (1 Kings 12:25-33). The First Book of Kings telescopes the whole history of the divided kingdoms by introducing into the reign of Jeroboam I a nameless “man of God” from the Southern Kingdom who prophesies against the altar at Bethel and foretells the royal reformation that will eventuate three centuries later. “O altar, altar, thus says the LORD: “A son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name; and he shall sacrifice on you the priests of the high places who offer incense on you, and human bones shall be burned on you”” (1 Kings 13:1-2).

Less than a century before the reformation begun in the seventh-century Southern Kingdom and parts of the Northern Kingdom by King Josiah of Jerusalem, his third predecessor, Hezekiah (r. 715-687), had campaigned to purify the religious practice of the Southern Kingdom: “[Hezekiah] removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan” (2 Kings 18:4). At the same time that he was pursuing this reform agenda, Hezekiah faced immense pressure from the Assyrian Empire that had already conquered the Northern Kingdom by 721, six years before Hezekiah’s accession to the throne in Jerusalem. The prophet Isaiah found it necessary to buck up the pusillanimous Hezekiah at such critical moments: “Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah: ‘Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the LORD, the God of your ancestor David: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the
hand of the king of Assyria, and defend this city’” (Isa 38:4-6). The reform agenda of Hezekiah was, however, reversed in the long reign of his son Manasseh (r. 687-642) and the short reign of his grandson Amon (r. 642-640).

Josiah, the son of Amon, succeeded to the throne at the age of 8; in his twenties he embarked upon a reform agenda similar to that of his great-grandfather. The reforms during the reign of Josiah are symbolically associated with the priests’ discovery during repairs to the Jerusalem Temple of a book of the Torah that had lain hidden in that structure from an earlier period, often said to be some form of the Book of Deuteronomy. A major achievement of Josiah was his restoration of the Jerusalem Temple to pure monotheism. Josiah also ordered the people of Judah to celebrate the Passover; both the author of 2 Kings and the Chronicler insist that “No such Passover had been kept since the days of the judges . . . even during all the days of the kings of Israel and of the kings of Judah” (2 Kings 23:22; see also 2 Chr 35:18). Does this suggest that even under David and Solomon no truly monotheistic Passover had been celebrated?

The prophetic role that Isaiah of Jerusalem had played for Hezekiah fell to Jeremiah of Anothoth late in the era of Josiah, but Jeremiah lived out most of his career under Josiah’s mediocre successors, especially Jehoiakim (r. 609-598), and Zedekiah (r. 597-587). While Isaiah assured Hezekiah that the LORD would defend Jerusalem and its Temple from the Assyrians, Jeremiah struck a more pessimistic note on the future of the Temple: “Thus says the LORD: Stand in the court of the LORD’s house, and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the LORD . . . You shall say to them: Thus says the LORD: If you will not listen to me, to walk in my law that I have set before you, and to heed the words of my servants the prophets whom I send to you urgently—though you have not heeded—then I will make this house like Shiloh, and I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth” (Jer 26: 2, 4-6). Jeremiah
was considered a traitor because he warned against resisting the Babylonian menace; on God’s behalf he had announced: “Now I have given all these lands into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him even the wild animals of the field to serve him” (Jer 27:6). After the Babylonian conquest Jeremiah urged the last citizens left in Jerusalem not to go down to Egypt, another imperial neighbor, but to remain quietly in Jerusalem (Jer 42:19). Eventually, however, even Jeremiah himself was forced against his will to take refuge in Egypt (Jer 43:6).

Many changes came into the faith tradition of Israel after the Babylonian Exile even though the Second Temple that replaced Solomon’s Temple was more or less completed in the fifth century and expanded under Herod the Great in the first century BCE. That Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. Even before that date Temple worship in Jerusalem had been complemented or in some cases even supplanted by study of Torah and eventually Talmud in a local synagogue. Not only in the Diaspora but also in Judea and Galilee learned rabbis, lay scholars of the Torah, gave the faith of Israel a new focus in these synagogues, especially after the destruction of the Second Temple. Those rabbis exercised a profession in some sense foreshadowed by Ezra and other Scribes in the fifth century BCE. Roman and Byzantine power dispersed the Jews from Judea to Galilee and eventually to places like Babylonia (present-day Iraq), Italy, France and Spain, and the synagogue changed the faith of Israel from a sacrificial cultus into a religion of the Book.

Most American synagogues today belong to the Reform tradition originating in nineteenth-century German-speaking parts of Europe, although many Reform synagogues are referred to as temples. What role have major empires played in the emergence of Reform Judaism? Is there any connection discernible between the German and eventually American
Reform traditions of Judaism and the great reforms instituted by Kings Hezekiah and Josiah and the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah?

The cultural empires that affected the development of Judaism in the 19th and 20th centuries were mainly, as already suggested, the German-speaking parts of Europe as well as English-speaking North America, mostly the United States. Jews who had undergone a secular intellectual formation in those areas often wished to see their restricted religious communities opened up to what the Jews of Europe called the Haskala, the Jewish Enlightenment. They wanted to worship in the vernacular, to sing hymns accompanied by the organ, to avoid some of the more restrictive elements of traditional Jewish life, especially the dietary laws. One of the most important historical figures involved in this development was Abraham Geiger (1810-74), by many accounted to be the founder of Reform Judaism. A scholar of Semitic and Classical languages, Geiger could not obtain a professorial position in Germany precisely because he was a Jew, but he did become a very learned congregational rabbi in several major cities, not without controversy. He made himself particularly famous for his study of what he considered the Jewish heritage of Islam; Geiger maintained that both Christianity and Islam had spread the message of Jewish monotheism to a wider world.9

Jews in post-Enlightenment Germanic Europe and the brave new world of North America responded enthusiastically to this liberalizing trend in Jewish tradition. The first American Jews in the thirteen colonies, although descended from Sephardic Jews coming from Brazil and the Netherlands, had little Jewish education to boast of by the early seventeenth-century. This deficiency exposed them to many dangers threatening their continuing adherence to the Jewish tradition. A vernacular Judaism in the Reform style, one not demanding ancient languages for worship, appealed to recently immigrant European Jews in the United States eager to become
integrated into their new English-speaking setting. It attracted longer-established American Jews of Sephardic origins who had lost touch with the practice of their faith.¹⁰

What would Hezekiah, Josiah, Isaiah and Jeremiah have made of Reform Judaism? Reform Judaism enabled many hitherto purely nominal Jews or immigrant Jews to understand two basic elements of the faith of Israel, the oneness of God and the call of the Chosen People to share the light of monotheistic faith. These Reform goals might have appealed to the kings and prophets just enumerated. A later, post-Exilic writer in the Isaiah tradition envisioned the LORD appointing the Persian emperor Cyrus II as God’s messiah (Isa 45:1) by whose instrumentality all peoples, from the rising of the sun to its setting, would get to know that “I am the LORD, and there is no other; besides me there is no god” (Isa 45:5). Not every development in Reform Judaism in the last few decades might meet with the approval of those ancient reforming kings and prophets, but I leave further discussion of that subject to Rabbi Polish.

REFORM IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

In early June 1999, at the conclusion of a year I spent teaching in Rome, I visited an African friend in Finland for a week. One day we traveled by train 150 km from Helsinki to Turku, where we explored the Turku Historical Museum. Various eras in Finnish history were depicted in room after room. The museum’s presentation of medieval Catholic Finland, immediately preceding the room depicting Reformation-era Finland, struck me as highly tendentious. Medieval Catholic Finland, according to the Turku museum curators, was depressing, priest-ridden, drowning in indulgences and other superstitions. The Finnish Reformation, on the other hand, spearheaded in the 1520s by a disciple of Martin Luther named Mikael Agricola,¹¹ was all sweetness and light.
In my treatment of reform in the Christian tradition, I hope to avoid either a triumphalist Catholic narrative or one of several triumphalist Protestant narratives. There are, in fact, several Protestant reformations, but the most important are the Lutheran Reformation dating from Germany in 1517, the Zwinglian Reformation in German-speaking Switzerland dating from about 1522, from which derived fairly soon various dissenting Anabaptist movements, and the Calvinist Reformation in French-speaking Switzerland and France dating from 1534. The English Reformation also dates from 1534, the year that Parliament declared Henry VIII Supreme Head of the Church in England, but the English Reformation straddles the Catholic-Protestant divide.12 Those four large European reform movements share some common elements, but many aspects of these Churches are unique to one or another Reformation tradition. In this forum I wish to emphasize that empires and cultures colliding exercised great influence on the three main Protestant Reformations, the Anglican Reformation as well as the Catholic Reformation.13

Christian reform, however, did not begin in 1517. In the eleventh century, Pope Gregory VII, also known as Hildebrand (r. 1073-1085), clashed repeatedly with the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV. Gregory VII was determined to reform and renew (reformare and renovare) the Church as a whole and its clergy in particular; part of that reform and renewal meant delivering the clergy from imperial domination, especially in the appointing of bishops.14 Henry IV strongly resisted the Pope and was, as a result, excommunicated three times. The reforms introduced by Pope Gregory VII have taken many centuries to gain the upper hand in Church-State relations; even today the Chinese Communist government and the papacy are engaged in long and difficult diplomatic bargaining precisely on who has the authority to appoint Catholic bishops in China.
To return to the collision of empires and cultures that accompanied the events of the Protestant and Catholic reформations in the sixteenth century, I am not only referring to the struggle between the Holy Roman Empire and those German princes who were restive under the hegemony of Charles V. Pope Paul III (Alessandro Farnese) issued in 1542 the Bull of the Convocation for the Council of Trent. Twenty-five years after Luther’s publication of his 95 theses, Pope Paul was hoping that through an ecumenical council he might be able to mend the tattered fabric of Catholic Christianity, so that there would be “one sheepfold and one shepherd for the Lord’s flock” where there were now “schisms, dissenting opinions and heresies.” The Pope also noted, quite realistically, that these inner-Christian problems of 1542 were complicated by the fact that the Ottoman Empire, then at its zenith, was making headway in the Christian Mediterranean and southeastern Europe: “Rhodes has been lost, Hungary disturbed and sea and land warfare are plotted and planned against Italy, against Austria, and against the Illyrian coast.”

In addition to the threat posed by the Ottomans, there were other cultural challenges as well as opportunities for all the sixteenth-century Christian churches, even though some of the more Eurocentric churches did not recognize the opportunities, at least at that time. Three worlds had opened up to Europe from the late fifteenth century, proof positive that Earth was round. Those three new worlds were the American double continent, the whole African continent and Asia. In 1492, Cristoforo Colombo, working for the Spanish monarchy, had sailed west to discover a new route to “the Indies,” the generic name at that time for the sources of spice and silk in South and Island Asia. Colombo stumbled instead on the West Indies, the islands that help to bridge the two halves of the American continent. Five years later, Vasco da Gama, working for the Portuguese monarchy, made two discoveries. He had also been seeking a route to “the
Indies,” which he actually found after rounding the Cape of Good Hope; but he came to realize, in the process, the immensity of the African continent.

To view those three new worlds opened up at the end of the fifteenth century through a purely Eurocentric lens is an enormous historical mistake, but a mistake that was made by all the European maritime nations. In the late fifteenth century Africa became, first for Portugal but later for other sea-going Europeans, most notably the Dutch and the British, a vast mine of opportunity to be exploited for its human treasure, the millions of human beings who were taken against their will from Africa to the Americas between the late fifteenth century and the late eighteenth century. African slaves had been known in the Roman world since antiquity as well as in the Islamic world by the late first millennium, but the vast numbers transported by Portugal, the Netherlands and Britain to the Americas from the late fifteenth century onward dwarfs all previous examples of human enslavement.

If you visit the originally Portuguese and eventually Dutch slave fortress at Elmina on the Atlantic coast of Ghana—a slave-trading ‘factory’ in operation for over three centuries—you can get some insight into Christian responses from the Reformation era, one Catholic and one Protestant, to the enormous cultural reality of Africa. Portuguese Catholics first and Dutch Calvinists afterwards kept the Lord’s Day in that monstrous edifice at Elmina for hundreds of years; you can still read some of the scriptural texts in Dutch painted on the walls of the chapel located right above the dungeons. British slave traders were doing the same thing 12 km east of Elmina at their slave fortress in Cape Coast. Those, alas, were the first Catholic and Protestant and Anglican reactions in the Reformation era to the immensity of Africa: enslavement of its people.
The second Catholic and Protestant and Anglican responses to the enormous reality of Africa began with the Papal condemnation of the African slave trade in 1686, one that little affected the Portuguese Padroado.\textsuperscript{17} The Portuguese had evangelized and baptized at least some local people in the Elmina area; the King of Portugal, João III, tried in 1554 to get Jesuits to replace the clergy originally sent there from Portugal, men who became more interested in the trade in gold. Saint Ignatius Loyola never responded to the King’s request, for reasons unknown; I, for one, am happy that \textit{Ad majorem Dei gloriæ} is not inscribed anywhere in Elmina.\textsuperscript{18}

Dutch Calvinists took over Elmina in 1637, suppressed or at least neglected local Catholicism and made no attempt to substitute Calvinist Christianity as a religious option for local people, apart from some mixed-race children. In 1602, Pieter de Marees, a Dutch trader at Fort Nassau at Moree on the coast of what is now Ghana, had noted that some of the local people from Elmina whom he had met seemed fairly well instructed in Catholicism: “From this, “ he wrote, “one can see that they are beginning to acquire some understanding of the Christian faith.” As a good Dutch Calvinist, however, he saw the impossibility of converting such people to Christianity, no matter what Portuguese Catholics had done. “It seems,” de Marees wrote, “that God has not seen fit to call them into our Christian faith; and we may thank God that he has given us the ability to understand his Divine Scriptures, which tend to the salvation of our souls.”\textsuperscript{19} During the Dutch period in Elmina, the Catholicism originally implanted by the Portuguese gradually transmuted into semi-traditional local cults, especially the still surviving veneration of Nana Ntona (Saint Anthony of Lisbon, known outside Portugal as Saint Anthony of Padua), a veneration more traditional than Christian in its inspiration.

In contrast to the Dutch Calvinists in seventeenth-century Elmina, the English Puritans who arrived in what became New England in the early seventeenth century did take an interest in
the evangelization of the Massachusetts people and other Native Americans. An Anglo-Catholic King, Charles I, had entrusted this missionary role to the Puritans. In Africa, however, the British only took an interest in local evangelization from the late eighteenth century on, and especially after Parliament abolished the slave trade on the high seas in 1807. In the early nineteenth century Protestant Pietists—European, American, Afro-European and Afro-African—began the Abolitionist movement. Anglicans, Methodists and other Protestants of this Pietist variety also commenced serious missionary outreach to indigenous Africans. New Anglican and Protestant missionary societies served as well to inspire the founding of new Catholic missionary congregations of women and men focused on Africa. The growth of Christianity in Africa south of the Sahara over the past two centuries constitutes the third Christian reaction to the enormous reality of Africa, but most of it has been the work not of European missionaries but of indigenous African Christians, especially since the end of the colonial era.

Too many estimates of the importance of what happened in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, forget the importance of what happened on the high seas twenty years or more earlier: the European discovery of a world that was much, much larger than Europe. The Catholic Reformation responded more vigorously than did the Protestant Reformations to these newly-discovered worlds of the Americas, Africa, and Asia, at least during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Saint Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621) listed among the signs of the truly Catholic Church its engagement in missions, something that was missing in the earliest Churches of the Protestant Reformation. It must be said, however, that pre-Abolition evangelization combined in Africa with the trade in slaves was a deeply flawed enterprise.
The Biblicist literalism of the Protestant Reformers provides us with one factor to explain their lack of missionary outreach to non-Christians in Asia and Africa until after 1700. Many Protestants understood a few verses in the first chapter of Saint Paul’s Letter to the Romans as a condemnation of pagans as people who had rejected the Gospel in the time of the Apostles. Speaking of the pagans of his own time in the Roman world, Paul had asserted that “they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God” (Rom 1:20-21). What was worse, at least for Paul, “they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles” (Rom 1: 23). The prejudice against the veneration of images in much of continental European Protestantism fixated on texts like this. Catholics or Hindus or Buddhists or traditional Africans and Asians were obviously “without excuse,” totally irredeemable.23 For nearly two centuries Protestants did not engage in missions to indigenous peoples in Asia, Africa or among the non-European populations of the Americas because they thought of them as idol-worshipers, the Puritans in New England, as already mentioned, being the major exception. It was King Frederik IV of Denmark—in defiance of the Lutheran State Church in Denmark—who first sent German Pietist Lutheran missionaries to Tranquebar (now Tharangambadi in India’s Tamil-Nadu State) in 1706.

There was, however, one mission to non-Christians that Luther was particularly anxious to pursue: the conversion of the Jews, and this leads us, alas, to a very dark side of the Reformation. Many reformers, Protestant and Catholic, were sure that the world as they knew it in the early sixteenth century would soon end.24 The Reformation historian Diairmaid MacCulloch sees this theme of the Last Days as a major reason why Luther’s preaching appealed to large numbers in Germany, why it was possible for Savonarola to seize Florence, and why thousands of radical Anabaptists flocked to Münster in 1535 to found a new Jerusalem.25
Convinced from the text of Saint Paul’s Letter to the Romans that the salvation of the Gentiles would precede the salvation of the Jews, an event that would transpire only in the Last Days, Martin Luther hoped to evangelize the Jews of Germany. In his early years as a reformer Luther had spoken positively of Jews and of the Jewishness of Jesus; in his late years, however, when his evangelical preaching to the Jews had come to naught, Luther penned a terrible book three years before his death entitled On the Jews and Their Lies (1543). This hateful document provided fuel for the flames of anti-Semitic rhetoric from Luther’s time right down to the Nazi era, and I do not want to quote it. The British-American poet, W. H. Auden, summed up in 1939 the long-term results of Luther’s anti-Semitism and its effect on a man born in 1889 at Linz in Austria, Adolf Hitler: “Accurate scholarship can/ Unearth the whole offence/ From Luther until now/ That has driven a culture mad. /Find out what occurred at Linz,/ What huge imago made/A psychopathic god:/I and the public know/ What all school children learn,/Those to whom evil is done/Do evil in return.” Luther, alas, was not the only anti-Semite in the sixteenth century. Pope Paul IV (Gian Pietro Carafa), the third successor of Pope Paul III, herded the Jews of Rome into the ghetto in 1555 and took every opportunity to humiliate and degrade them throughout his pontificate. Although Paul IV’s pontificate only lasted four years, the ghetto remained until the Kingdom of Italy abolished it in 1870.

“All of us who call ourselves Christian, heirs of one or another Reformation—Protestant, Anglican or Catholic—need to examine our past in such a way as to liberate ourselves and our world from imprisonment in history. Every anniversary is a time to think about that.

REFORM IN THE TRADITION OF ISLAM

In a very radical sense, the first Muslims in seventh-century Arabia envisioned their faith as a reform of what had come earlier in the Jewish and Christian traditions of faith. In what is
probably a passage revealed to Muhammad shortly before his migration from Mecca to Medina, the Prophet is instructed by God to say: “I am not something new among [God’s] messengers; I do not know what will be done with me or [what will be done] with you. I just follow what has been intimated to me [by God]: I am nothing more than a clear Warner. . . Before it [the Qur’an] there was the Book of Moses, [a source of] guidance and mercy; this [the Qur’an] is a book in the Arabic language reconfirming the [previous] warnings given to sinners and [reconfirming] the good news given to those who live virtuously” (Qur’an 46: 9,12).31

The immediate context of Muhammad’s prophetic career, his reform and renewal of the Jewish and Christian messages after the year 610 CE, was the Arabian Peninsula, a largely arid crossroads of three ancient empires, one relatively small and two rather large. (1) The small empire—but one that was religiously important for Muhammad and his contemporaries—was the Christian empire based at Axum in what is now Ethiopia (Abyssinia) on the Horn of Africa. This small empire had exercised considerable political and religious influence in Yemen, the southernmost part of the Arabian Peninsula, at least in the late sixth century.32 (2) The second empire was the officially Greek Orthodox Eastern Roman Empire based in Constantinople (New Rome), but locally represented by colonial administrations at Alexandria, Jerusalem and Damascus, administrations often hostile to varieties of Christianity not in conformity with the orthodoxy of Constantinople.33 (3) The third empire was that of the Sasanian Persians, predominantly Zoroastrian and monotheistic in their religious orientation but often fairly tolerant of Jewish and non-Orthodox Christian minorities living in Sasanian lands. The Sasanians, although their heartland was in Iran, were politically and militarily based at their frontier capital, Ctesiphon on the east bank of the Tigris, not far from modern Baghdad.34
The Eastern Roman and the Sasanian Persian Empires had engaged in a mutually destructive war between the years 602 and 628. Both imperial governments and their military forces, weakened by this lengthy conflict, left a political vacuum in the lands between the Oxus and the Nile that facilitated the emergence of the Arabs as a military, political and religious force during the last half of the seventh century. Arab border tribes had previously fought on behalf of each of the two competing empires, the Banu Ghassan for the Byzantines and the Banu Lakhm for the Sasanians, and in the process learned a great deal about those empires.35

What role did the smaller empire, that of Ethiopia or Abyssinia, play in the rise of Islam? In what may have been the year of Muhammad’s birth, 570 CE, the Ethiopians based in Yemen had attempted to subjugate Mecca. The Qur’an recalls the attack and its repulsion in the Sura of the Elephant, an early revelation so named because of the Ethiopian attempt to deploy an elephant in their campaign against Mecca: “Have you not seen how your Lord acted with the owners of the elephant? Did [your Lord] not make their plot go astray? [God] sent against them swarm after swarm of birds bombarding them with pellets of clay. [God] reduced them to [the condition of] mere husks that remain when crops have been destroyed” (Qur’an 105:1-5). Whatever may have been the causes motivating the Ethiopian attack on Mecca in the year 570, it is interesting to observe that Muhammad in the year 615 sent some of his persecuted followers from Mecca to the Ethiopian Christian court of the Negus, where the Prophet rightly felt they would be protected by their fellow monotheists. While the Byzantines and Persians were exhausting each other in a world war, a relatively weak Christian empire in the Horn of Africa and Yemen succored the fledgling Muslim community in its hour of need.
Muhammad and the earliest Muslims in Mecca seem to have felt a connatural sympathy with the Christians of New Rome (Constantinople) in the Persian-Byzantine struggle. In the Sura of (New) Rome Muhammad received words from God assuring him that the recent Byzantine Christian reversals in Damascus (613) and Jerusalem (614) would not be God’s ultimate design for them: “[New] Rome has been overcome in a nearby country. But after their defeat they will gain victory within a few years. To God belongs the command, both before and after. On that day the faithful will rejoice in God’s triumph. [God] makes triumphant whomsoever [God] wishes: [God] is mighty, [God] is merciful’ (Qur’an 30:2-5).

There is only one mention in the Qur’an, in the Sura of the Pilgrimage, of the dominant Zoroastrian religious tradition in the Persian empire, called in Arabic *Majusiyya*, a word usually translated as ‘Magianism.’ 36 “As for those who keep faith [Muslims] and those who practice Judaism and the Sabaeans and the Christians and the Magians and those who associate [other gods with God]: God will divide them [from each other] on the day of the resurrection. In every matter God is the One who witnesses” (Qur’an 22:17). As a result of their classification in this passage with other religiously tolerated or protected populations, most Muslims consider Zoroastrians a monotheistic and scriptural faith community, although that has been controversial among some Muslims, Shi’i and Sunni, in recent decades. The spread of Islam into what is now Iran and Persian-influenced territories in Central Asia expanded the scope of the Muslim *umma* in a way unimaginable within the limited confines of the Arabian Peninsula or Mesopotamia, but it did not completely Arabize those areas converted to Islam.
Muhammad’s prophetic vocation made him, in the Islamic theology of history, the last of a series of great prophets and especially of those prophets who are characterized in Islamic tradition by the term *rasul*, messenger. The reformed monotheism Muhammad preached provided a model for other moments of reform as the later history of Islam unfolded. No further prophet or messenger was to be expected, but there have arisen, over the past fourteen centuries, many reformers of Islam who have been characterized by the term *mujaddid*, a renewer of the faith tradition. The word *mujaddid* does not occur in the Qur’an but a related word *jadid* (new) is used eight times to refer to new creation (*halqun jadidun*), the ultimate setting of life after death. Many renewers of the faith tradition of Islam have thought of themselves as agents of a new creation, people whose reform agenda calls otherwise insouciant Muslims and uncaring humanity to prepare for Judgment Day.

The late fifteenth- century and early sixteenth-century Egyptian Muslim polymath Jalal al-din al-Suyuti (1445-1505) established a reputation for himself within his lifetime for vast Islamic erudition; he is said to be the single most prolific Muslim writer of all times. His training in Islamic disciplines within the Shafi‘i juristic tradition was accomplished under many eminent teachers in Cairo, including women specialized in prophetic tradition (*hadith*). Egypt at the time of al-Suyuti was ruled by Mamluks, a dynasty of self-recruiting slaves of non-Muslim origin from the Caucasus. Like all Mamluks, they had been forced into conversion as child captives and they were not averse to exerting the same pressure on their subjects in Egypt, which probably became majority Muslim only under their governance. Al-Suyuti despised the Mamluks and insisted on his own preeminence for his age as an innovative scholar of Islamic law in the
Shafi‘i legal tradition (*mujtahid mutlaq mutanasib*). As such al-Suyuti developed a reputation for learning not only in Egypt but even as far away as Takrur, the area of modern Senegal and Mali, from which scholarly inquiries came to him.\(^{39}\)

In his retirement after the age of 40, al-Suyuti went so far as to declare himself the renewer or *mujaddid* of the ninth Muslim century, a century that ended in the Gregorian calendar year 1494. It was not uncommon to think at that time that the Islamic era would last only 1000 lunar years before the coming of the Mahdi, the divinely-guided ruler preparing humanity for the Last Days. When the end of time did not eventuate a lunar century after al-Suyuti’s career, Muslim scholars revised their calendars and allowed for more renewers of the Islamic faith tradition. Around the end of the twelfth Muslim century (in the Gregorian year 1785), a legal scholar and Sufi *shaykh* of Fulbe (Fulani) ethnic background in what is now the northwest of Nigeria, Usumanu dan Fodio, came to think of himself as yet another such *mujaddid* of Islam.\(^{40}\) As the thirteenth Muslim century was ending, in the year 1881 of the Gregorian calendar, Muhammad Ahmad declared himself the Mahdi in Sudan, but he died a few years later and the British eventually overcame his successor.\(^{41}\)

On November 20, 1979, as the first day of the Muslim year 1400 was dawning, a would-be Mahdi, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Qahtani, along with his principal spokesman, Juhayman ibn ‘Abd Allah al-‘Utaybi, backed by several hundred followers, took control of the Great Mosque in Mecca and held it for two weeks before the House of Sa‘ud, with a little help from French military advisers and a lot from Pakistani paratroopers, ousted them from the sacred premises. The would-be Mahdi and his main supporters were executed early in 1980. The Mahdi’s main qualification seem to have
been his having, like the Mahdi of Sudan, the same name as the Prophet, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd Allah.

These movements of renewal in Islam and their charismatic leaders have responded to perceived threats to the Islamic tradition by great empires or by repressive regimes: the Caucasian Mamluks who ruled Egypt in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; the semi-Muslim Hausa kings in the late eighteenth century who had dominated what is now northern Nigeria until the Fulbe revolt; the Ottoman and eventually Anglo-Egyptian administrators of Sudan in the late nineteenth century, the House of Sa’ud in Arabia and its American and European allies in the late twentieth century.

Was the insurgency that took over much of Syria and Iraq after 2014, which led to the creation of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an attempt by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, its self-proclaimed caliph, to be a mujaddid, a reformer or renewer of Islam nearly four decades into the fifteenth Islamic century? Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, whose real name is Ibrahim Awad al-Badri,42 was once a detainee in the notorious American prison camp at Abu Ghraib. Internal communications of ISIS have proven less religious in their ideology than some external journalists have supposed.43 ISIS seems to be failing, as we speak, especially with the retaking of both Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria, although it still has enough Internet presence as a virtual caliphate to inspire lone-wolf terrorists, as we know in New York City.

That the partisans of ISIS first chose to create their ideal state across the borders of Iraq and Syria demonstrates how much ISIS is a delayed response to and reaction against the European colonial parceling out of the central Arab world in the aftermath of
World War I. Those lines drawn by the European imperialists in the years after 1918 created new minorities and majorities out of the carcass of the Ottoman Empire, where Sunni Muslims based in Istanbul ruled but many religious and ethnic minorities coexisted, not always peacefully but always under the supervision and moderation of the Sultan-Caliph in Istanbul and his deputies in the Ottoman governorates. Iraq after 1918 was centered on the ancient capital of the Sunni caliphate, Baghdad, but the majority of its population was and is today Shi‘i. Syria, as it was finally constituted by its French colonial overlords, subjected its large Sunni majority to the domination of a minority subsect of the Shi‘a, the Nusayris or Alawis. This sect, centered on Latakia, provided a disproportionate number of the officer corps in the Syrian army, and, especially since 1971, the Assads, père et fils. Even if the British and French empires have been dissolved since World War II, their memory lingers on, often as a nightmare.

The apparent defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, not yet complete, must be counterbalanced with what seems to be its franchising elsewhere in the world, especially in Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa. The black flag of ISIS has in recent years shown up in northeastern Nigeria and nearby nations afflicted by the group the Nigerian media originally called ‘Boko Haram.’ ‘Boko Haram’ (literally, in a mixture of Hausa and Arabic, ‘book-education is forbidden’) call themselves in Arabic Jama‘at ahl as-sunna li-d-da‘wa wa-l-jihad; translated that means ‘The Community of Sunni People for Propagation [of Islam] and Struggle [for the Faith].’ Although they define themselves as Sunni Muslims, I would suggest that these militants participate more fully in a history of extremist Muslim militancy that goes well beyond most forms of Sunni Islam. They represent instead the Khariji fanaticism that Sunni and Shi‘i Muslims rejected in the late seventh century.44 Despite some of these outbreaks of extremism in recent years, the task of
reform and renewal (tajdid) in Islam is happening today, and nowhere more dramatically than on the outer boundaries of the worldwide Muslim umma, especially among Muslims living in Europe, Asia and the Americas. Professor Lamptey can enlighten us more.

CONCLUSION

Tectonic shifts of empires and cultures have spelled crisis and opportunity for every major monotheistic tradition. On this 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation, I want to conclude with some reflections written in the year 1541 by a man whom Pope Francis canonized a few years ago without the usual bureaucratic process, Peter Faber—a fellow Jesuit of mine and of Pope Francis. Faber kept a spiritual diary as he traveled around Europe on various reforming missions. On November 19, 1541, for instance, Faber made this entry in his spiritual diary:

On the day of St Elizabeth, queen of Hungary, I felt great fervor as eight persons became present to me along with the desire to remember them vividly in order to pray for them without taking notice of their faults. They were the sovereign pontiff, the emperor, the king of France, the king of England, Luther, the Grand Turk, Bucer and Melanchthon. That came about through experiencing in my soul how severely these men are judged by many; as a result I felt for them a certain kind of holy compassion accompanied by a good spirit.45

There are many extraordinary elements in this short quotation from Faber. Faber lumped together in one sentence eight contemporaries who were very different from Faber and very different from each other.

First among them he named the current Pope, Paul III (Alessandro Farnese), who had just approved the establishment of the Society of Jesus a year earlier. Generally accounted a reform-minded Pope, Paul III began his ecclesiastical career in a less than reformed manner. Farnese
was named a cardinal at the age of 25 by Pope Alexander VI (Rodrigo Borgia), whose mistress was the sister of Alessandro Farnese. Cardinal Farnese sought ordination to the priesthood only 26 years later, when he started to turn pious. Grateful as Faber and the first Jesuits were for the Pope’s approval of the foundation of the Society of Jesus in 1540, Faber in 1541 entertained no illusions about Pope Paul III. He knew that he needed prayers.

Right after the Pope Faber mentioned the Emperor, that is, the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. For all his Catholic identity and struggle against the Lutherans in Germany, Charles V in 1527 had directed his armies against Rome when he was in political controversy with Pope Clement VII. The King of France for whom Faber was praying was François Ier, the mortal enemy of Charles V, but also, and at the same time, Charles’ brother-in-law. François had in his battles with Charles V allied himself with the Ottoman Sultan. Faber also committed himself to pray for the then King of England, Henry VIII, who had taken England out of unity with the Catholic Church seven years earlier and executed Thomas More and John Fisher in 1535. By November 1541 Henry was married to the fifth of his six wives, Kathryn Howard, but she was to be beheaded the following year.

Then, amidst his prayerful thoughts about three of the leading Protestant theologians of the sixteenth century—Martin Luther, Martin Bucer and Philip Melanchthon—Faber casually included in his prayers the person he simply refers to as “the Grand Turk.” He himself was called by his subjects in the Ottoman Empire the Shadow of God on Earth, the Sultan-Caliph Sulayman I. At the time Faber was praying for him, Sulayman the Magnificent was plotting and planning to conquer Catholic Hungary and include it in his expanding empire. Note that Faber was a Catholic controversialist and had even argued in public with people like Bucer. The sixteenth century was not generally an era of ecumenical or inter-religious good will. But Faber was still
able to rise above the controversies in which he had engaged and to see the humanity of the Protestant reformers and their spiritual needs. He could even see the humanity of “the Grand Turk.” Faber felt the needs of all those mentioned for sympathetic prayer.

Not a bad idea for all of us on these momentous anniversaries.
NOTES


2 I make no distinction between these terms, although some might like to do so.


5 The ritual reforms of Josiah spread as well into some parts of the former Northern Kingdom territory that had been liberated from the Assyrians as their imperial power waned and Babylonian power waxed. See Moshe Weinfeld and S. David Sperling, “Josiah,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA/ Keter Publishing House Ltd., 2007), 11:457-59. Henceforth this reference work will be cited as *EJ 2* with the volume and pages specified.

6 It is also possible that this new book of the Torah had been created by the priest Hilkiah and his reform-minded associates to advance the reforms begun under Josiah. Interesting to note is the fact that Edward VI, the boy king of England and only son of Henry VIII, who ruled from the age of 9 in 1547 until his death at 16 in 1553, was described from his coronation as a new Josiah. His Hilkiah and the creator of this royal myth was Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of

7 In my treatment of Josiah and Jeremiah I am much indebted to the work of Mark Leuchtner, *Josiah’s Reform and Jeremiah’s Scroll* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), esp. 60-66.

8 See Dana Evan Kaplan, “Reform Judaism,” *EJ* 2, 17:165-83.


12 The Anglican Communion today embraces members from the most Evangelical Protestant in their convictions to the most Anglo-Catholic. The Roman Catholic Church today, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, distinguishes other Christian churches and ecclesial bodies from one another, and especially Byzantine Orthodox Churches, Ancient Churches of the East (non-Byzantine), Anglicans and Protestants.

See Ladner, 3-4 and n. 8.


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Massachusetts Bay Colony issued under the seal of King Charles I (1629) it was specified that the colonists should by their good life “wynn and incite the Natives of Country to the Knowldeg and Obedience of the onlie true God and Savior of Mankinde, and the Christian Fayth, which is our Royall Intencon, and the Adventurers free Profession, is the principall Ende of this Plantacion.” See “The Charter of Massachusetts Bay: 1629,” in The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy at Yale Law School, Lillian Goldman Law Library, available online at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/mass03.asp


23 The real Paul of the Letter to the Romans takes a very different attitude towards Greco-Roman paganism than Luke’s version of a somewhat more irenic Paul preaching in front of the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:16-31).

24 Thus MacCulloch (Reformation, 550) writes that “large numbers of Europeans were convinced in various ways and with varying degrees of fervour that the momentous events through which they were living signified that the visible world was about to end. If so, it was vitally important for the world’s condition at its end to correspond as closely as possible to what God wanted.”

25 Ibid., 551.
Saint Paul, late in the sixth decade of the first century, had written “a hardening has come upon part of Israel until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:25-26).


W. H. Auden, “September 1, 1939.”


All quotations from the Qur’an are my own.


On Iran and the Sasanian Empire there and the influence exerted on early Islam, a very brief but insightful account can be found the account of the “the confessional empires,” in Marshall G. S. Hodgson, The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1:137-45.

Ibid., 1: 153-4.
36 On Zoroastrians and Islam, see M. Morony, “MADJUS,” EI 2, 5:1110a-1118a.


39 See Ignaz Goldziher, “Ignaz Goldziher on al-Suyuti,” trans. Michael Barry, ed. with additional notes by J. O. Hunwick, The Muslim World 68, no. 2 (April 1978), 7m9-99. The late John Owen Hunwick, later a professor at Northwestern University, first introduced me to the work of al-Suyuti when we were colleagues at the University of Ghana.


42 See the Open Letter, dated September 19, 2014, addressed to him by 126 prominent Muslim scholars throughout the world, rebuking him and his fellow agents of ISIS for their pretensions to a scholarly reason for what they were doing. Available online at http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com


45 Pierre Favre, The Spiritual Writings of Pierre Favre, tr. Edmond C. Murphy (St. Louis, MO: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 79.