Yazid Said[[1]](#footnote-1)

Jerusalem between Politics and Mysticism

Abstract: Religious memories of Jerusalem have repeatedly overflowed into and influenced the conduct of political affairs in mixed ways, reflecting the devotion as well as the hatred the city has engendered. This essay contextualises the claims of Islam and Christianity to Jerusalem between history, scriptures and mystical texts. The method of engaging with history opens a challenging interfaith debate that has implications for both faith and politics today. The essay aims to ask how the corporate celebration of Jerusalem, tied to both Biblical and Qurʾānic texts, functions critically in the concrete teachings and actions of the spiritual dimension of both Islam and some of the Church Fathers. It proposes a critical engagement between the Christian theological imagination and Islamic claims as a means of discovering the ‘sacramental’ value of Jerusalem beyond the tribalism of what Rowan Williams called “an ersatz universality”.

‘Jerusalem’ perhaps is harder to appreciate the more we isolate it as a place of unique holiness for this or that religious tradition. Scholars writing about the spiritual importance of Jerusalem for Muslims, Christians or Jews can often produce something that sounds arbitrary or abstract; or in terms of popular devotion to Jerusalem, some might come to show the way Jerusalem demonstrates God’s power, over against others in or around the city. How remarkable and unheard of that God deigns to be present in the Temple, driving out other nations, with achieved Zionism as a concretion of Jewish existence. How remarkable that the resurrection of Christ should be vindicated with the rise of Constantine. Or how unheard of that Muhammad should journey there in one night and ascend into heaven, sealing the gates of prophethood of all the prophets before him with political successes.[[2]](#footnote-2) The universal claims associated with these religious memories have repeatedly overflowed into, and influenced, the conduct of political affairs in mixed ways, reflecting the devotion as well as the hatred the city has engendered.

The argument in this essay is that we are badly in need of re-examining how these universal claims about Jerusalem work in light of history, scripture and the mystical traditions of both Islam and Christianity considered together. Christians remember Jerusalem as the place of human *theosis* through the free act of God in the particular history of Jesus of Nazareth. Muslims refer to Jerusalem as the gateway for human ascent into the realms of the divine following the example of the Prophet Muhammad. In both cases, Jerusalem is a sort of gateway. As the Jerusalemite geographer al-Maqdisi noted, “Jerusalem is where the world to come and this world come together. They who belong to this world and aspire to the world to come would be inclined to Jerusalem”.[[3]](#footnote-3)

However, our varied claims to universal finality in the past and the present have had detrimental political consequences. Rowan Williams warns of a type of “ersatz universality” that Christianity can be tempted to achieve, which is ultimately a form of “large-scale tribalism with Christ as source and guarantor of the authoritative and comprehensive system of meaning purveyed by the Church.”[[4]](#footnote-4) – an idolatrous sort that we saw embodied in the history of the Crusades. Islam’s pure monotheism and its concern to push God beyond the realms of history can also fall into that same tribalism where God is the arbitrary dispenser of power. Pushing God away does not make God more transcendent.

With the rise of Hamas, we saw an original Charter that clearly states, for instance, that not only Jerusalem but the whole of Palestine is considered as *waqf* (religious charitable endowment) and therefore should remain under Muslim rule,[[5]](#footnote-5) a claim that is problematic in relationship to both Islamic history and legal perceptions of the purpose and meaning of *waqf*.[[6]](#footnote-6) But what Hamas said and did in recent history is paradoxically the mirror image of earlier actions by the Irgun and the Lehi and Stern gangs, dubbed by the British as Zionist terrorists in the late 1940s.[[7]](#footnote-7) Standards have slipped. We have seen rapid development of religious types of Israeli governments who like to repeat “ye shall destroy them” (Deuteronomy 7:24) referring to the Biblical text as justifying current policies.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Indeed, the history narrated in the manifold books available on the incomparably rich variety of Christian, Muslim and Jewish rites, confessions and communities that have existed in the city across the centuries reflects both positive and negative aspects of human nature: positive to the extent that Jerusalem constitutes something of an exception to the assumptions of a monochrome culture, as it is the only place where so many of these traditions are to be found in an authentically ‘home context’; negative, inasmuch as this same pluriformity came with religious and political misfortunes.[[9]](#footnote-9) Among medieval Christians, we have William of Tyre who noted in the eighties of the twelfth century:

With the frequent shifting of events, it [the Holy City] often changed masters, and, according to the character of each prince, it experienced both bright and cloudy intervals. Its condition, like that of a sick man, grew better or worse in accordance with the exigencies of the times, yet full recovery was impossible. . .[[10]](#footnote-10)

Later, the Islamic historian of Jerusalem, Muǧīr al-Dīn al-ʿUlaymī al-Ḥanbalī (d. 1522) attributes the lack of useful Islamic historical writing about Jerusalem before his time (apart from the *faḍā’il* literature on the virtues of Jerusalem, and the stories of Umar’s conquest of Jerusalem) precisely to the effusion of political conflict with the rise of the Crusades and the interruption of Islamic creativity in the city.[[11]](#footnote-11) A hardening of Muslim attitudes in light of the Crusades also saw increasing conversions to Islam in the general population and dwindling of Christian numbers.[[12]](#footnote-12)

These historical references suggest that we cannot afford to romanticise much of the past in idealistic terms. The simple undialectical affirmation of one religious identity in Jerusalem with a cosmic significance will not serve us well. Therefore, engaging with scriptures, history and mystical texts, the essay asks two main questions: What is Jerusalem *for*? And what are we called to do in light of its history today? This is not so much a concern for reworking the doctrines of Jerusalem in Islam and Christianity in order to eliminate what has been morally and spiritually damaging for both the realms of faith and of politics in Jerusalem, but more the retrieval of the radical implications of Christian claims about Jerusalem in conversation with Islamic claims to discover a fresh take on dialogue that might have positive political meaning. To that end, it is the claim of this essay that universal claims cannot be truly universal unless they are accountable to their particular origins in Jerusalem – in that place and context; this is an important corrective to both Islam’s and Christianity’s corporate religious language about Jerusalem.

This dialectical relationship on Jerusalem can transform the habit of old controversies into an open new realism and a new engagement: God’s transcendence and immanence, human custody, ownership, and responsibility are all part of the present climax and crisis of Jerusalem, let alone the theological dilemmas of ‘education’ versus ‘redemption’, and the role and significance of Jesus and Muhammad in Jerusalem. Our purpose here is to try to link this general Muslim-Christian engagement in dialogue with the particular Jerusalem scene and setting, looking at how certain texts will shed light on what is religiously at stake in this specific location.

Dialogue on Jerusalem: between religion and politics

In the extant extracts of his *riḥla* text, his travel journal to Jerusalem, the Andalusian scholar, Abū Bakr Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1148, not to be confused with the great Sufi Muḥyī al-dīn ibn ‘Arabī (d.1240)), we get a glimpse of some of the distinctive features of educational and social life in Jerusalem on the eve of the Crusader invasion. Among other things, he speaks of the interreligious dialogue held in the city in which Muslim, Christian and Jewish scholars participated to discuss varied topics.[[13]](#footnote-13) Today, circumstances have stretched the possibilities of Jerusalem as an intellectual centre for open debates to a challenging level. Jerusalem has always been and remains a beloved location for liturgical celebrations and liturgical continuities. The ancient liturgies of the East may still be experienced and savoured by those who are local and those who come from afar. The question is whether Jerusalem can be rescued for a properly mediating tripartite engagement. This is the yearning of this article. Present political events should be contemplated by the criterion of their spiritual content, not simply of narrow theological geography. As we noted earlier, the question that is asked here is: ‘In the light of history, what are we called to do?’ not simply ‘Where are we called to do it?’

In order to avoid the risks of an emphasis on what sounds like arbitrary divine power, we will explore how the spiritual heritage about Jerusalem in both Islam and Christianity is related to the Biblical and the Quranic narratives; in this way, we will note important differences in the attitude of both traditions to history. At the same time, what makes Jerusalem distinct for both traditions is what it is *for*, the activity in which it is caught, in calling people to holiness. In order to grasp fully what is implied in this, we need to bear in mind some basic elements about Jerusalem in the Christian imagination, which point us to the method of dialogue in this context. It is a matter of brute fact that being Christian in Jerusalem is irreducibly bound up with introducing an interreligious catalyst from Hebrew times to Islamic times. In the most basic historical sense, the so-called ‘ancient’ churches, the episcopally-governed churches that originate from the Christian East, trace their presence backwards to the first Hebrew Christian communities in Jerusalem, and forwards to the masses of communities that eventually converted to Islam. As a historical tradition, therefore, Christianity opens up a challenging dialogue which can draw the other two traditions into a self-critical mode in their aspiration for action and self-understanding.

However, in recent years, among Jerusalem’s contemporary Christians, there has been an understandable concentration of attention on the struggles of the Christian community to maintain integrity and authenticity as external events clash against it; on the other hand, the alleged clash over the city might be taken to imply, as some Israeli scholars of the last century argued, that the Islamic interest in Jerusalem is simply focused on wanting what others have managed to possess, a sort of competitive jealousy to enhance political gains.[[14]](#footnote-14) After all, some have noted, the *faḍā’il* literature about Jerusalem only appeared in the fifth century of the *hiǧra*, which suggests that the doctrinal significance of Jerusalem is more disposed to emphasise contingent, non-theological factors in the praise of Jerusalem.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Often these debates focus much on developments within one community’s frame of reference, remaining therefore mutually incomprehensible, without paying much attention to the wider religious and historical horizons. Indeed, it would be insensitive to deny the long history of Islamic associations with Jerusalem, especially among the early *zuhhād* (ascetics), as acknowledged by other Israeli scholars,[[16]](#footnote-16) and an Islamic commitment to Abraham, as well as to Jesus, David and Solomon, in and around the first *qibla* of Islam.[[17]](#footnote-17) The fact that in the tenth century, as the Jerusalem geographer al-Maqdisi noted, Jerusalem still had only a few Islamic scholars, but many Christians (*qalīlat al-‘ulamā’ kaṯīrat al-naṣārā*[[18]](#footnote-18)) could provide a simple historical reason for the late appearance of *faḍā’il* literature.

Although the history and evolution of abundant traditions associated with Jerusalem’s special status reflected a contested domain among hadith scholars,[[19]](#footnote-19) the traditions around al-Quds and al-Masǧid al-Aqṣā come in the form of a corporate language and action that naturally evolved over time, confirming Islam’s own conviction as the final revelation.[[20]](#footnote-20) The question is not whether Jerusalem’s importance is contested in Islam. Rather, our question here is: How does this corporate celebration of Jerusalem tied to Quranic claims, function critically in the concrete teachings and actions of the spiritual dimension of Islam for today? And does a critical engagement between the Christian theological imagination and Islamic claims play a role in the critical implications of that history for today? These are the focal questions of dialogue here, which require a little clarification about the purpose of dialogue.

Those engaged in dialogue in certain Western contexts have often argued that polemics are to be abjured. They encourage dialogue as a means of seeing from within the perspective of the other.[[21]](#footnote-21) In terms of history and culture, however, the burden of Jerusalem’s Crusader, Ottoman and Western past inevitably persists. One began to witness a sharp asperity of Muslim resentment of Christian and Jewish reflections on and belonging in Jerusalem in light of twentieth century political developments.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Whilst this article is interested in how history has implications for the living present, the direction is to go beyond a static and belligerent doctrine of Jerusalem towards a dialogue that is more answerable and responsive both to history and to the ‘other’. The themes of this type of dialogue emerge, therefore, within the sharp dilemmas of politics, history and theology. Some might be tempted to stress practical issues to the point of excluding what they perceive to be ‘abstract’ theology, whether Islamic or Christian. Difficult as theology may be for some, it would be stifling to the integrity and clarity of both traditions to confine this exercise to means of social cooperation and mutual support alone. For such discussions will inevitably carry us back, sooner or later, to the significance of our entire religious language, as it engages with human response to human conditions in relationship to the mystery of life. It is the total openness to faith, as each believer might hold it, that can enable us to make an impact, which is what dialogue seeks to do, creating an openness for greater discovery which might affect our participation in the truth of the other and shape our engagement with it.[[23]](#footnote-23)

**History, scriptures and dialogue**

The ‘Jerusalem’ dialogue, then, is about the implications of history for the importance of location. The underlying justification for this approach to dialogue begins with the understanding that the Christian significance of Jerusalem as a location is historical, but as historical, it is also instrumental in the sacramentalisation of everywhere as ‘Jerusalem’. Unlike the Quran (Q 5:2)[[24]](#footnote-24), the New Testament does not refer to ‘the Holy Land’, but it does refer to “the holy city” (Matthew 4:5; Revelation 21:2-23) as a focal location of its own narrative. There is an ambivalence about Jerusalem in the New Testament, which reflects Old Testament tropes. On the one hand, Jerusalem is “the joy of all the earth” (Psalm 48:3), where God’s presence is revered and celebrated in the Temple, but also the place that receives God’s wrath and judgment for its faithlessness.[[25]](#footnote-25) Jesus too mourns over the city for its refusal of him and his warnings, and he foretells its destruction (Luke 19:41-44). However, after the events of Christ’s death and resurrection, there is a shift of power from Jerusalem. Commenting on Luke’s narrative about Jerusalem, Rowan Williams argues that

Luke has begun firmly in Jerusalem: the risen Jesus appears only in Jerusalem and its environs, and the disciples are enjoined to ‘stay in the city’ until the gift of the Spirit comes. But ‘beginning from Jerusalem’ the witness gradually spreads. Wherever Jesus is to be found among his disciples and wherever he is oppressed and persecuted in his disciples becomes a ‘Jerusalem’, the city of rejection, the court of judgment. ((…)) Acts Q ((…)) represents the decisive turning-point in the universalising of mission. ((…)) it is a gospel for all.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Williams’ method of reading the text here carries with it a warning against distorting biblical passages by lifting material from the original context to serve a generalised discussion of isolated themes about Jerusalem. This warning could apply to Paul’s own story and writings; reflecting on these events and his own story within them, Paul turns his attention to the universal Church in diaspora, an emphasis that is present also in John’s gospel (John 1:12). The condition and theme of diaspora is notable in Paul’s story. Paul shows interest in Jerusalem, not simply in terms of its shrines, but in terms of its own people (his own victims) and their poverty – the poor saints in his letter to the Romans (15:26), dependent on the gentile offering. This was a central theme of Paul’s career and of his witness.[[27]](#footnote-27) But in thinking about this theme it would be a mistake to erode the concreteness of that heritage, beginning “from Jerusalem”. Paul believes that the saints of Jerusalem and their wellbeing matter, precisely because of his own accountability before the death and resurrection of Christ in Jerusalem. He contributed to the death of Christ, as it were, in persecuting Christ’s body, and now he finds his hope in facing Jesus his victim.[[28]](#footnote-28) If one refuses to acknowledge a material locale that occasioned Paul’s story and theology, we will then condemn it to become an abstract generality far from the actual mode in which his writings took shape.

The same would apply to the notion of the ‘new Jerusalem’. As Christ reminds Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world but is the truth (John 18:28-40, 14:6), which cannot be relativised in a defensive military way, Christ’s followers looked for that heavenly city, a new Jerusalem (Revelation 21) whose king, like God’s reality, is indestructible. The promise and praises directed to Jerusalem are no longer applied simply to the destroyed city. Christian hopes become fixed on Jerusalem as a spiritual reality, a metaphor for the ultimate truth that cannot simply be defended by human force or violence – or else it becomes a relative truth.[[29]](#footnote-29) The Biblical texts that refer to Jerusalem became, therefore, fuel for allegorical imagination. But again, it would be a mistake to think of this universalism of Jerusalem without engaging with the particularity of the narrative *in* Jerusalem first; the location will remain important for generations of pilgrims in successive centuries.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Broadly speaking, Western scholars of the Quran writing on the relationship between the Quranic text and Jerusalem have similarly proposed that the Islamic scriptures far from being a clear and readily definable territory, are also an historical world in which meanings are discovered and recovered in the actions of Muslim devotions and rituals. Whilst the Islamic stake in Jerusalem can be viewed as historical inasmuch as the Prophet’s mission is seen to be the climax of the history of previous prophets, it is only so in light of the central Islamic convictions about the nature of the Quran and its content. Central to this is the reference in the Quran to the ‘Night Journey’ of Muhammad and of the *Mi‘rāǧ* or ‘Ascension’ (Q 17:1). Of that context, some scholars argued that Jerusalem, the location associated with the night journey, and as a ‘holy land’ (Q 5:20), enters into a close relationship with the Quran and its historical development and the nature of early Muslim identity.[[31]](#footnote-31) Angelika Neuwirth suggests that, “the community’s realization of Jerusalem as the centre of the imaginary space of salvation history may duly be considered a crucial stage in the development of the Islamic concept of Scripture”.[[32]](#footnote-32)

This specific grounding of the Islamic scripture in relationship to stories about Jerusalem enables the study of the Quran in a particular social and historical way, which fits with the method of reading the New Testament that we started with above. As such, the Quran appears neither as a supernatural guide in abstraction, nor a piece of detached text that refers to some historical names. If this approach is taken seriously, then to challenge the Muslim community today to immerse itself in its scripture means encouraging Muslims to engage with a history of such developing actions and devotions. In the era of modern political Islam, where the unitary approach of certain readings of the Quran are defended in a territorial framing of scriptures, within whose borders, things and people are inserted,[[33]](#footnote-33) it is no harm to be reminded that both scriptural and historical imagination sit less easily with simple ‘traditionist’, ‘progressive’, ‘reformist’ or ‘fundamentalist’ strands of a tradition that is committed to a highly refined scriptural culture within its own domain.

Indeed, it would do no harm to acknowledge that good critical scholarship of the Quran’s story can also be an underappreciated gift of intellectual modernity; but to make the Quranic text face this dialectical relationship with methods of reading that are from beyond the frontiers of Islam (Western scholarship) allows not just for queries about the text but clarifies affirmations about the tradition itself. There is a clear historical connection here with why Jerusalem *is* significant for Islam. Whilst there is no consensus about the duration of the first *qibla* towards Jerusalem,[[34]](#footnote-34) the change of *qibla* from Jerusalem to Mecca becomes part of that early development of the Muslim community, distinguishing itself more sharply from both Judaism and Christianity.[[35]](#footnote-35) This development could suggest that the erection of the finest of Islamic mosques, the *Qubbat al-Sakhra*, or Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, was intended by its founder, the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705), as an eloquent assertion for all time of the replacement of the Church of the Resurrection. It stands physically and symbolically between Gethsemane and the Cross. Its exquisite calligraphy around the exterior parts is indeed devoted to the Quranic account of Jesus and so affirms that Islamic alternative version of the Christian understanding of Jesus.[[36]](#footnote-36) The various discussions about the purpose for building the Dome of the Rock have ultimately to give way to a mainly religious explanation;[[37]](#footnote-37) indeed, one needs to note the various aspects that became part of a structure that confirms the ‘success’ of Islam.[[38]](#footnote-38)

This issue of course will always underlie Christian-Muslim interaction and debates. It is faced here within its present relevance to the contemporary scene, not simply in the abstract of partisan controversy. We have already noted that Muslim involvement with Jerusalem is a powerful concern for history and for due attention to all its religious meaning. Currently, it appears to be even more for the physical conditions of its Muslim population, and what is seen as an important cause of restitution and justice. Because of the location, the issues have been sharpened with emotion. But how to engage with the history in light of a spiritual dimension remains the dominant factor here.

As the Islamic tradition is committed to interpreting the world and its history in terms of its own foundational scripture, our explorations above suggest that the very act of interpreting will affect the narratives as well as the world around us. This is not restricted to what we usually think of as mainstream. Something happens to the story when given into the hands of varied philosophical, Sufi, or contemporary commentators,[[39]](#footnote-39) or contemporary feminist Muslim scholars,[[40]](#footnote-40) or those who want to stress the Quran’s alleged agreement with modern science.[[41]](#footnote-41) Similarly, Jerusalem in the Quran may have assumed varied faces in the history of the different princes that ruled the city, as well as those who travelled and passed through it, eager to share their own reflections about the city. The same applies to Christian involvement with both the biblical text and the city.

Therefore, to confront the world of injustice in Jerusalem with our various formative religious scriptures (Muslim or Christian) in order to show a critical truth, we are in fact facing our need of self-criticism ourselves. Unlike contemporary zealots for ‘the faith’, we are at least not supposed simply to insert persons into a clear scriptural world in order to judge them. We are rather called to remember how we are accountable before the historical events in the locale that we call Jerusalem that shaped these religious traditions into specific communities. Can ‘Jerusalem’ then transform our apparent deep human fears into the kind of life that can go beyond these fears?

**What is Jerusalem *for*?**

For a number of Church Fathers, there is an organic tie with the matrix and development of the Christian imagination when it comes to Jerusalem. The new Jerusalem is the locale of our peaceful, healthy, properly restored human perception of reality; Jerusalem is, according to St Neilos the Ascetic of Ankara (d. 430), “the soul that is at peace”.[[42]](#footnote-42) St Philotheus of Sinai, whose dates are unknown, writes of the door leading to the “mental Jerusalem” – the attention of the mind.[[43]](#footnote-43) The mind, the heart and soul often become interchangeable in these texts, though reflecting different gradations of restored perception. Similarly, St. Maximus the Confessor (d. 662), describes the soul that has been delivered from the “passions” as “Jerusalem”.[[44]](#footnote-44) “Passions” refers to uneducated instincts that hold us back within self-serving interests and agendas.[[45]](#footnote-45) Disciplining our souls will help us in detaching our intelligence from the passions, and to work against self-serving habits, so that our true nature – in Jerusalem – may be revealed:

every intellect crowned with virtue and spiritual knowledge is appointed like the great Hezekiah to rule over Jerusalem (2 Kings 18:1-2) – that is over the state in which one beholds only peace, and which is free from all passions. For Jerusalem means ‘visions of peace’. Through the forms which fill creation, such an intellect has the whole of creation under its sovereignty.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Maximus here mirrors his friend, St Thalassios the Lybian, when he said: “Jerusalem is the celestial knowledge of immaterial beings; within it the vision of peace can be contemplated.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Jerusalem becomes both the means as well as the locale of our true nature, which again cannot be claimed as one’s own achievement or simple possession:

The intellect of every true philosopher and gnostic possesses both Judah and Jerusalem; Judah is practical philosophy and Jerusalem is contemplative initiation. Whenever by the grace of God such an intellect repels the powers of evil with virtue and spiritual knowledge, and wins a complete victory over them, yet does not thank God, the true author of this victory, but boasts that the achievement is its own, it brings down the wrath of God’s abandonment not only on itself but also on Judah and Jerusalem (2 Chr. 32:25) that is on both its practice of the virtues and its contemplative life.[[48]](#footnote-48)

This vision of Jerusalem is not achieved by the spiritually mature for their own boasting, but so that they can become more aware of their own debt to God’s grace, to the working of the Spirit and the “Christ-reflecting potential”.[[49]](#footnote-49) A story of the fourth century St Makarios of Egypt (d. 391) tells about a monk who saw the heavenly Jerusalem: “While this monk was praying with some of the brethren, his intellect was ravished in ecstasy, but he perished because he thought that he had achieved something by his own efforts and did not realize that he had become an even greater debtor.”[[50]](#footnote-50) St Makarios puts this in context: “No one becomes perfect in this present age; for if they did, then what is given here would not be simply a pledge of the blessings held in store but their full realization.”[[51]](#footnote-51)

The early Church Fathers provided a standard example for centuries of exegetes, in both the East and the West, of the importance of allegorical interpretation of the scriptures. For example, the French poet and theologian, Fr Jean Gerson (d. 1429), allegorises a dramatization of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem with similar evocations. He says in one of his sermons: “As Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem, so much more ought we to weep over the destruction of our spiritual city, which is our soul. For Jerusalem is temporal, and our soul is eternal as [St John] Chrysostom says.”[[52]](#footnote-52) In the Christian East, earlier contemporaries of Jean Gerson, the monk patriarch Callistus of Constantinople and his fellow worker Ignatius of Xanthopoulos of the fourteenth century, comment on Jerusalem as “the Kingdom of God concealed within us according to the word of the Lord” (Luke 17. 21).[[53]](#footnote-53)

Apart from the obvious internalisation here of some classical Greek teachings on the soul and the intellect, showing a correlation between cosmic order and moral righteousness,[[54]](#footnote-54) the foundation of the teachings of the Church Fathers is reflected in a deep suspicion of any alliance between faith and power structures, personal or political, that claim political finality in this world.[[55]](#footnote-55) In other words, Greek thought here is made accountable before the Gospel, the Christian formative narrative that celebrates the resurrection of a man condemned by those who claimed religious and political power. Whilst the Fathers produced a schema about universal human spirituality around the meaning of Jerusalem, the same schema takes root in a particular process of communal learning in light of particular events in Palestine two thousand years ago.

This is the foundation that allows contemporary Christian theologians like Rowan Williams to argue that

the connection of Christians now with those specific events these two thousand years ago is a vital part of Christian faith […] It’s a kind of Gnosticism […] a kind of cutting loose from history, if we say that the presence of Christians in the land of Jesus does not matter to us.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Pope Benedict XVI’s Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* confirms the same teaching.[[57]](#footnote-57) Christian universalism works only if it is answerable to the particularity of certain events, which is why Christianity cannot be whatever Christians want it to be. One of the most difficult challenges which this essay has to address is of course the Crusades and their mixing of religious faith with geopolitics. Yet, for all the mixed motives of the various Crusades around the Holy Land, they too provided a witness to the importance of the concrete human story of Jesus in history and a willingness to die for it.[[58]](#footnote-58) Their willingness to inflict suffering on others, however, and their call for a military offensive on behalf of Christ are questionable in light of the example of the monks of the Christian East referred to above and the New Testament narrative.

An offensive crusader war cannot be the response to the prophet Jeremiah’s question “Who will take pity on you, Jerusalem, who will offer you consolation? Who will turn aside and ask about your wellbeing?” (Jeremiah 15:5); the Christian conception of the economy of salvation sketched above appears to be mediated not through Crusader power of control, not through custom and law, but through ‘signs and symbols’ or ‘sacraments’. The land itself thus becomes a kind of sacrament, a “fifth gospel”.[[59]](#footnote-59) As such, to think of Jerusalem as a sacrament becomes at odds with describing it as having straightforward functions that allow God to be on Jerusalem’s side through its own achievement. On the other hand, the reality of Jerusalem as a place of different power struggles reminds us that it is not a neutral space, but a space of tragedy and loss. If there is an action needed to transform this reality into holiness, it will be to dispossess it of this power of control; for the sake of its own conversion, Jerusalem needs to face its victim(s), just as Paul did. This is not simply about the victim being vindicated. It is rather about the victim himself being the source of grace– a concept that is neither Hebrew nor Greek, but distinctive to the New Testament narrative itself.[[60]](#footnote-60) Jerusalem is holy only because “here can be seen the victory of God’s vulnerable faithfulness over the atrocities that power and religious arrogance inflict on him and his children and servants”.[[61]](#footnote-61)

So, when reading Q 5:20 (“O, my people, enter the Holy Land, which God has prescribed for you”), we are bound to ask: ‘What is that holiness which is prescribed by divine criteria? How is that land made holy? The Quranic commentator Abu Ja’far al-Tabari suggests various possible meanings of “the Holy Land”: it could be a reference to the city of Jerusalem itself, and it could be a reference to the whole land associated with Abraham’s journey, *al-Sham*.[[62]](#footnote-62) Perhaps one could suggest therefore that holiness here is associated with the Abrahamic call as perceived by the Islamic revelation: a protest against idolatry and against those lazy habits that suggest that you can after all assume that God is on your side simply by your custom, tradition or ethnicity.[[63]](#footnote-63) But if there is a newness to Jerusalem here given by God, it does not require of us to make a choice about where to stand in relationship to the judgment of Christ before Pilate. Instead, the universal holiness is simply mediated in the Quranic word, as the site of the “farthest mosque” (Q 17:1) and as such, a confirmation of the finality of Muhammad’s prophethood.

Whilst Muhammad’s Night Journey and *Mi’raj*, or ascension, are central to scholarship on the Quran, this episode became also the centre of Sufi devotion to the person of the Prophet and his ascension came to be seen as the signal dimension of his ascent to the closeness of God.[[64]](#footnote-64) Thus, the seventeenth century Ottoman traveller, Evliya Celebi (d. 1682), noted in his *Book of Travels* when referring to his visit to Jerusalem, that “the ancient *qibla* was Jerusalem and it is said to be the *qibla* of the poor (or of the dervishes)”.[[65]](#footnote-65) The implication of the story is often celebrated with Sufi texts that call for some comparison with the Church Fathers’ allegorizing of Jerusalem as the *theosis* of the human person.

The definition of Jerusalem as the soul that is at peace, depicted above by St Neillos the Ascetic, is a good point to start with; for there is of course a reference to *al-nafs al-mutma’inna*, “the soul at peace”, in the Quran, although not in connection with Jerusalem (Q 89:27). The great Muslim theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) crystallises a coherent Islamic understanding of the transformation of the soul by referring to the Quranic text but also internalising the Platonic idea of the perfectibility of the human being; he points to the Names of God as the means for that growth. The verbal connection provided by the Names is a way to bring God to ourselves and, at the same time, to help us ascend to God’s likeness. It is a process that Ghazali calls *ta’alluh*, literally *theosis*.[[66]](#footnote-66) Ghazali, however, does not see the need to reference *Jerusalem* as the means and the end of our aspiration. The Platonic principle does not answer to ‘Jesus before Pilate’ here; instead, Greek thought seems to win the argument through Islamic forms and finality.

This exercise of ascent is given a rather definitive mystical description in relationship to the story associated with Jerusalem in Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi’s (d. 1240) short treatise *The Cosmic Tree* or *The Tree of Being* (*Shajarat al-Kawn*). In it he provides insight into Muhammad’s mystical journey and its implications for Muslim mystics. The tree functions as an axis, rooted in the heavens and growing downward into the material world. Ibn Arabi describes the Prophet’s passage through four stations (*maqamat*). First, Muhammad enters existence and responds to God’s command to arise and warn humankind. In the ‘praised station’ the Prophet receives the office of intercessor for humankind at Judgment Day. The third station is Muhammad’s eternal dwelling in Paradise and his visit to each abode therein. And finally, the Prophet reaches the station in which he is but “two bows’ length” from God (Q 53:9). In this way, Muhammad becomes the Perfect Man and ultimate fruit of the cosmic tree.[[67]](#footnote-67)

There are a couple of observations to make about this celebration of ascent. First, it means that the connection to the physical space of Jerusalem has not been consistent among some Sufis. While some attribute the building of Jerusalem to Jesus and Moses, mirroring the idea of Mecca being built by Abraham,[[68]](#footnote-68) the true seat of the divine spirit for some Sufis transcends both Mecca and Jerusalem; it is the Ka’ba of the heart: “When you seek God, seek Him in your heart – He is not in Jerusalem, nor in Mecca nor in the hajj”, says Yunus Emre (d. 1320), voicing the conviction of many of his contemporaries and followers.[[69]](#footnote-69) Similarly, Sharafuddin Maneri (d. 1381), an Indian Sufi of the fourteenth century, argues that the true direction of prayer is neither to Mecca nor to “the Rock of Jerusalem” but to the

One without beginning! In place of sacred enclosures and places established by men, the direction of those who long for the Friend has become what it was in the beginning. In this tavern of self-forgetfulness and abode of affliction, the Rock of Jerusalem or the Kaaba has been demarcated to console the hearts of seekers and travellers.[[70]](#footnote-70)

The celebrated poet and Sufi Jalal al-Din al-Rumi (d. 1273) remembers “the far Mosque” that “Solomon made” as “not built of earth and water and stone, but of intention and wisdom and mystical conversation and compassionate action”.[[71]](#footnote-71) One could get from this verse the feeling that the material of the building of “the Far Mosque” stands for tools of instruction and teaching, beyond idolatry and limitations.

This brings us to the second implication of Ibn Arabi’s celebration of the Prophet’s ascent, namely that Muhammad came close to ‘seeing’ God. Sufi texts reflecting on the ascension of Muhammad have shown a strong need for vision, and the ‘witnessing of God’, even though much of their practice is based on aural recitations and *dhikr*, remembrance.[[72]](#footnote-72) How is this vision to be achieved? In the prologue to Ghazali’s *Book of Love*, he notes different gradations for the “unveiling” (*mukashafah*) of God to happen, with the possibility of seeing being the highest. But seeing here for Ghazali seems to make sense only in terms of the inner eye, *basira*, whilst at the same time, he is very keen to stress the total otherness of God. He says: “God has purified the hearts of the saints and purified their inmost beings, revealed to them the splendours of his face until they burned in the fire of His love”, but, he adds, God has also “concealed from them the essence of His majesty so that they wandered astray in the desert of His glory and His might”. The saints at some point give up in despair, until they suddenly hear a voice from the “pavilion of beauty” saying: “Patience! O you who despair of gaining the truth because of your ignorance and your haste!”[[73]](#footnote-73) God reveals and hides at the same time, keeping them in tension. The response of human beings is to receive what is given and to be patient.

It appears that Ghazali is pointing to the type of insight that cannot be used to ground any claims about the real vision of God. The inner vision spoken of here is a very careful tool for the disempowering of any claim to know God. This tension is reflected in his attitude to the physical places of pilgrimage too. Ghazali argues that though people make pilgrimage to God’s house in Mecca, “everyone knows that no house can contain the transcendent God, nor can any city harbour Him”,[[74]](#footnote-74) mirroring Jewish and Christian scriptures (Isaiah 66:1 and Acts 17:24). It seems that the earlier Sufi examples of gnostic-like flight from a physical direction of prayer would also be the wrong type of insight for Ghazali. He is not calling for the disregard of actual physical places of pilgrimage. Such a cutting loose from the physical space does not necessarily stand against real idolatry for him; rather, it can be deployed to establish pseudo-claims about identity and good intentions – i.e. they can be hypocritical. Indeed, he defines hypocrisy, *riya’* in Arabic, to stem from the same root of ‘vision’, *ru’ya*.[[75]](#footnote-75)

For Ghazali, then, the discussion about vision is tied up with whether our interior disciplining of the soul can allow us to make claims of finding perfect vision within ourselves. Can the truth be excavated within ourselves so clearly? He does acknowledge that there are a select few saints who are able to achieve that kind of unveiling. However, he recognised by the manner of his life and action that the rhetoric of holiness that is puffed up to make others inferior did not only shape some philosophical arguments around him but had corrupting consequences producing areas of hypocritical non-hallowed existence,[[76]](#footnote-76) a matter that called him to travel to Jerusalem as well as Mecca and to desert Baghdad. He is not the only one for whom Jerusalem remained a corner stone of Islamic devotion. The seventeenth century Sufi ‘Abd al-Ġanī al-Nābulsī confirms through the medium of various traditions the importance of the location of Jerusalem as the ‘ladder’ between heaven and earth, beloved of God.[[77]](#footnote-77) Whilst Ghazali does favour the idea of an inner truth, he is careful not to deploy it to win a claim about holiness that allows him to be puffed up. He also sees value in the physical locations and material as pointers for divine revelation, mediated through the Quranic text and the example of the Prophet; his discussion about the virtues of Mecca is quite clear about that.[[78]](#footnote-78)

As such, he comes very close to the strategy deployed by the Church Fathers; they too argue that all we know about God is what God can never be.[[79]](#footnote-79) So the contingency of our knowing does not negate the otherness of the known subject, in this case God. However, for the Church Fathers the untruthfulness around us, as experienced by Ghazali and others, suggests that it is an illusion simply to think that we can find our perfection in some individual inner primordial purified self that needs to be excavated and thereby ascend into the likeness of God. It would be a fallacy for them to think that knowledge is the key to virtue, assuming that once we know what to do, then we can do it. The Church Fathers were more interested in restored perception (proper vision), not simply knowledge, but at the same time they took the reality of human sin very seriously;[[80]](#footnote-80) for them, “there is no health in us”[[81]](#footnote-81) and it does not make a difference if God can forgive by a simple word. God can certainly do that, but we will continue to be prevented by the complexity of human history and engagement from reflecting back to God that glory which God deserves. Idolatry is indeed grievous wrong (Q 31:13). Yet idolatry happens.

Therefore, when reading the earlier Sufi texts about the *qibla* of the heart with disregard to the physical space of either Jerusalem or Mecca, some might be tempted to see similarities to the allegorical reflections on Jerusalem that we noted earlier among the Church Fathers. However, it will be a mistake to assume that we have here a neutral position about the spiritual importance of Jerusalem in both Islam and Christianity, which we somehow need to rediscover if only we can unlearn complex historical developments and doctrines. Though Ghazali’s balanced position comes close to the Church Fathers, we are back to our earlier point, namely that if Jerusalem is an important allegory and space for the Christian, it is so precisely because of *history*, because God acted in it and “we have beheld his glory” (John 1:14), not because of a human success story or a simple scriptural reminder.

This distinction between an optimistic Sufi view of the possibility of human individual interior perfection and the Church Fathers’ scepticism about the polishing of human hearts without the grace of God in Christ is tied up with how they understand transcendence. For the Church Fathers, God did not compromise transcendence in acting in time; rather, he has, to use Ghazali’s word above, ‘hidden’ his reality even more by showing that he is able to engage with history without ceasing to be God. If God is God, then God cannot just be limited to the realms of the transcendent. As Rowan Williams puts it, “to know God, we must follow the course of the incarnate Word, not look for timeless penetration of the mind”.[[82]](#footnote-82) As such, Christ before Pilate has not only shown this deadly human untruthfulness that is unable to face the truth, but in light of his God-sized resurrection has sealed the sacramental value of the world *in Jerusalem*; in other words, Jerusalem is the means of coming to know a reality that is beyond our own ego; this reality can only be reflected in signs and symbols, not in systems of control fighting for space. This is why Jerusalem cannot and should not be a tool of power, because it is a sign of the renunciation of control and, through that renunciation, opening up the possibility of communion with God and others around; the recognition of shared need and hope can thus be made possible if we are able to face our victim(s). This is a call to Christians and a judgment on them before it is on anyone else.

**Conclusion**

What do we expect Jerusalem to be about? This question is connected with our intended discussion here about what Jerusalem is *for*. When we speak of the universal value of Jerusalem, what are we taking for granted between the history and the religious language that shaped the meaning of the city for both Muslims and Christians? Our task here has not been simply to construct a metatheory about Jerusalem, but to explore how the identity of Jerusalem can in practice open and sustain conversation with various interlocutors when they are faced with the formative narrative of Jerusalem in the Quran and New Testament as well as some mystical texts in both traditions.

Muslim and Christian thinking about Jerusalem is caught in a sharply tragic form of experience today; this only makes the question of the holiness of Jerusalem all the more agonizing as the mystique of divine authorization has been generated in varied forms. Our engagement with the locale is compelled by the essentials and current history back to the question of how we make a place holy. Is there rightly a divine arbitrariness transcending what we might think of as divine justice? A great deal of what we find in the Bible and the Quran would answer the question positively. Whether yes or no, how are the wrongs to be repaired? Where does one find holiness in a context of land grab, identity struggles and political power conflict? What are we to understand by *kataba lakum* (Q 5:20): “O, my people, enter the Holy Land, which *God has prescribed for you*”.

If Christianity is a historical tradition, then it has opened up a challenging interfaith question on the issue. Christians and Muslims share a history; however, there are different nuances in how Jerusalem has worked in the two traditions for their approach to history is not entirely identical. The universal significance of Jerusalem in Christian thought can only work if it is accountable before the condemnation of Jesus by religious and political powers. As such, Jesus does not have to mean everything; his ‘universal significance’ is a universally crucial question rather than a comprehensive ontological schema.”[[83]](#footnote-83) The judgment of Christ mirrors the untruthfulness of our hearts and systems, in that they tend to habitually reject the truth.

Islam seems at least on the surface of the Quranic text to question the history and the meaning of the central event in the Christian story – the crucifixion of Christ; but the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was executed under the Romans is not something that scholars and historians have any reason to doubt, given the external sources available as well as the dating of the New Testament books. The possible origins of the Quranic view of Jesus’ story in docetic and gnostic sources have been recorded, through the study of what Sidney Griffith calls “Arabophone Christian theologians” of the seventh and eighth centuries.[[84]](#footnote-84) There are clear differences of approach to history which have implications for how both traditions relate to ‘knowledge’ and ‘perception’.

Muhammad’s ascension story is associated with a location that is far from the context around Mecca and Medina of his *sira* (biography). There is an equivalent universalising of the event here beyond the local space, which meant that the space was disregarded in the spiritual practice of some Sufis. However, the examples of Ghazali and al-Nabulsi suggest that the prototype of the locations (both Mecca and Jerusalem) in history are still needed in order to universalise the story. As such, Jerusalem is celebrated as the ‘mother’ of all shrines associated not just with previous prophets, but also with Mary. The Islamic tradition remembers Mary to be a Jerusalemite identified with the Temple itself (Q 3:35-43).

Islam’s powerful witness to our helplessness in apprehending God often carried positive political implications for non-Muslims in Jerusalem; Christians can learn from that in discovering how the commitment to the story of Jesus in Jerusalem can be intelligible beyond the Christian institution; but it would be a mistake to argue that the history of Islamic Jerusalem was an innocent one – no history is. An uncompromising account of the transcendence of God can be thematically and ontologically problematic in relationship to the other. The Ottoman Evliya Çelebi (not exactly a modern fundamentalist), after touring the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and performing two prostrations in a corner, prayed that it would one day become a Muslim place of worship.[[85]](#footnote-85)

Christian reflections too have largely been imbalanced and confused – at times alarmingly – in relation to non-Christian religious societies in and around the city and the land today; the dialectical relationship proposed in this essay with Islam and (and by implication with Judaism) remains an important method for that positive engagement today, partly because it puts the various universal claims in perspective. Islam may find Christian particularity in Jerusalem limiting to God’s transcendence. The Christian tradition’s universalism as based upon the *theosis* of the human person would also find the Quranic particularity to be limiting to God’s action. The difficulties go both ways. It is no use to deny them. But if both Muslims and Christians (and Jews) engage with Jerusalem as a sacramental sign, the material signs in Jerusalem would appear as mediators of gift, not simply control, possessiveness and power over against the other.[[86]](#footnote-86) That kind of engagement with Jerusalem requires facing rather than unlearning history. Both Islam and Christianity have been harmed by a universalising account of their meaning and purpose without being answerable to history and what one learns through history.

Today the city remains at the centre of the world’s attention when the undercurrents of religious sensitivities have far from negligible roles to play in the conflict over the city’s ownership. For the contemporary city, holy to three faiths, and disputed capital of a secular Jewish state, the difficulty of living out the clash between the mundane reality of urban life and the conflicting ideals of a whole variety of religious systems is still unresolved. What Jerusalem needs is an environment where the different kinds of imaginative wisdom can meet, can challenge and question, but without the struggle and anxiety that have poisoned her history. This will require first a radical acknowledgment of tragedy, an end to assumed innocence or purity of one side over the other, and the healing of enmity – with all sides facing each other’s victims.

We are back then with the question with which we started of what we do in the light of the history rather than the location of our action. Our doing is only made good spiritually if forgiveness is sought and given, knowing the other’s hurt and one’s own evil. When all of this is said and done, the essential issues in Jerusalem will belong with what Muslims, Christians and Jews need to say to one another, a word that derives from “the goodness of my Lord” (Q 27:40), showing their sanctuaries to be that sacramental space responsible to no less a measure for what sanctuaries ought to be pointing to. The issue is not whether these sanctuaries ought to exist but rather what are they there for?

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17. The most eloquent expression of this devotion to the various prophets revered in the Islamic tradition and associated with Jerusalem can be found in al-Nabulsi’s poetic celebration of his visit to Jerusalem; see ‘Abd al-Ġanī al-Ḥanafī al-Nābulsī in his *Al-ḥaḍra al-unsiyya fī al-riḥla al-qudsiyya*, Akram Hasan al-‘Ulabi (ed.), al-Maṣādir, Bayrūt 1990. See also, A. Duri, “Jerusalem in the Early Islamic Period”, in K. J. Asali (ed.), *Jerusalem in History*, Olive Branch Press, New York 1999, 105-129. On the *qibla*, see Q 2:142-144. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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