The Christian New Testament and the Islamic Qur'an: a comparison

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I. Introduction (see paper pages 1-9)

There is a lot more to Christianity than can be found in the Christian New Testament, and there is a lot more to Islam than can be found in the Qur'an – the values of tradition, culture, community and family.

When Islam expanded beyond Arabia, need for direction led to the growth of the Sunna: traditions about Muhammad's teachings and actions, including other sayings, hundreds of thousands of them, attributed to Muhammad that are not found in the Qur'an (the Hadith).

I have chosen to focus on the Christian New Testament because of its special place in Christianity and on the Qur'an because of its special place in Islam.

The Study Quran: a new translation and commentary, Editor-in-chief Seyyed Hossein Nasr, HarperCollins 2015 (1996 pages).

Because on the level of human interaction Muslims and Christians can share many values, my intention has been to study the New Testament and the Qur'an with a view to writing something that, in however small a way, might help Christians and Muslims appreciate each other's religious heritage. The world, our common home, needs us to share our insights, to help one another correct what may be wrong in our thinking (including what we think about each other), to rejoice in what we share, and to respect one another in our differences.

There are a number of religious communities that look to the Christian New Testament for inspiration. I am a Catholic Christian, but I hope that all Christians will be at home with what I have to say about the New Testament. Likewise there are a number of religious communities that look to the Qur'an for inspiration. My desire is to reach out to them all.

A major problem for both Christians and Muslims is that Islam has in recent times been hijacked by Salafi and Wahhabi sects that have taken control of Arabia, the birthplace of Islam. They make up only about 5% of Islam but their determination to wipe out non-Muslims and to force their violent interpretation of the Qur'an on other Muslims has coloured everyone's view of Islam. One danger is that this can easily encourage the impression that there is no common ground and no hope of productive dialogue. The only solution, according to some, is to meet violence with greater violence.

Just as it is necessary for followers of Jesus to be critical of those who in the name of Christianity reject non-Christians and other Christians who do not agree with their narrow-minded, bigoted views, so it is important that the Muslim community distance itself from those who, in the name of Islam, attack non-Muslims and Muslims who do not agree with their determination, in the name of Islam, to wipe out all who disagree with them.

Ed Husain in his book '*The House of Islam: a Global History*' (Bloomsbury Publishing 2018) defines jihadis as those who are committed to purify the majority of Muslims who they claim have drifted from the true faith. They see themselves as being loyal to Islam by opposing infidels. Being on friendly terms with non-Muslims is prohibited. Instead of following the traditional understanding in Islam that behaviour is permitted unless explicitly prohibited, they teach that everything is prohibited unless explicitly permitted. They go so far as to declare Muslims who do not agree with them to be unbelievers, who are to be killed. It is not enough for them to leave judgment to God in the next life. They are committed to create God's government here on earth according to their understanding of sharia ('the way to the water').

Husain writes: “We cannot reverse the rising tide of jihadism unless we uproot its theology and ideology … As long as the House of Islam provides shelter for Salafi jihadis the rest of the world will attack Islam and Muslims … As long as Muslims tolerate their presence, we will give licence even to the ideologues in both the East and West to conflate Islam with Salafi-jihadism. More Muslims will turn to jihadism, and another generation will be lost. We need to cleanse our mosques, publishing houses, schools, websites, satellite TV stations, madrases and ministries of Salafi-jihadi influences. Unless we do Islamophobia will continue to rise, and we cannot complain when the West repeatedly suggests that Muslims are suspect. Unless we do, no matter how much Muslims protest, they will continue to share the opprobrium heaped on those who claim to represent us. Unless we do, we cannot credibly claim that ‘they have nothing to do with us’. Sadly, they do come from within us” (page 280).

Husain also writes: 'The attraction of Islam lies in the simplicity of its message of worship of one God, a preserved Quran, an honoured Prophet, a celebrated family life, and emphasis on the soul's journey to a next life' (page 249). He goes on to state: 'The centrality of God, the vibrancy of the Quran, the preservation of the rights of the sacred, the institutions of the family and the firm public belief in the afterlife all provide an unshakable bedrock for the Muslim believer from generation to generation' (page 265).

Just as there have always been, and still are, extraordinarily holy people in all branches of Christianity, so it is for Islam. I would like to begin by offering hope by recalling one among a number of movements within Islam that have been more open to Christianity and more committed to peace. Personally I have found special inspiration in the writings of the followers of the Muslim Sufi way. They focus especially on the spiritual, mystic dimension of the Islamic faith.

Prayer of the Heart in Christian and Sufi Mysticism, Llewellan Vaughan-Lee (2012). Introduction by Cynthia Bourgeault

'Sufism arose in the cradle of Islam to receive and nurture those teachings of the heart that had first been planted in those Near-Eastern lands directly from the living heart of Jesus. Sufism and Christianity are joined at the heart ... They are kindred pathways of transfiguration through love. Both traditions picture the spiritual journey with the same core metaphor: as a cosmic love song that begins in exile and ends in divine intimacy.'

The Knowing Heart: a Sufi Path of Transformation (1999),
Kabir Helminski

'The lives and teachings of Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad have influenced and transformed so many billions of people because they are essentially teachings of love' (page 40).

Especially inspiring is the love poetry of the Sufi saint Jelal al-Din al-Rumi (1207-1273). In his 492 page book: *Rumi, the Big Red Book: the great masterpiece celebrating mystical love and friendship* (HarperOne 2010), Coleman Barks tells why he was drawn to the Sufis:

'I have been drawn to the Sufis for their emphasis on the numinous as it transpires through beauty and harmony, and love. I find that when I am around them (and around Taoist and Zen masters too) the possessiveness of the ego lessens and I feel joy overflowing through the createdness. And that feels like the soul's truth' (page 325).

Barks also describes what Rumi's son, Sultan Velad, felt when Shams, Rumi's spiritual teacher and intimate friend, spoke the Qur'an and the sayings of Muhammad to him:

'He sowed new love in my soul. He revealed secrets. He made me fly without wings and reach the ocean with no boundaries where I found peace and, like a bird freed from a trap, felt safe from all dangers' (Veladnama, quoted Barks, page 324).

How many Muslims over the centuries have been similarly moved by listening to the Qur'an!

Rumi is beautifully respectful of Jesus and of the Christian New Testament:

'The miracle of Jesus is himself' (quoted Barks page 335).

'Inside the friend, where rose and thorn blend,
to one opening point, the Qur'an,
the New Testament and the Old,
flow together to become one text' (quoted Barks page 426).

Rumi's key insight is perhaps best expressed when he writes:

'Is there love, a drawing together of any kind, that is not sacred' (quoted Barks, page 16).

Husain writes of Muhyiddin ibn Arabi, a contemporary of Rumi:

'He had, like many Sufis, a special inclination toward the spiritual Jesus: "Jesus was my first master on the way; it was in his hands that I was converted. He watches over me at all hours, not leaving me for a second ... I often met him in my visions; it was with him that I repented: he commanded me to practise asceticism and renunciation' (al-Futuhatal-Makkiya (The Meccan Revelations, quoted page 241). "He whom I [God] love, I am the eye with which he sees, the ears with which he listens' (quoted page 243).

“Ibn Arabi is remembered to this day across the Muslim world for these verses that he wrote in Mecca – for, like Rumi, Ibn Arabi found God in love:

‘My heart has become capable of all forms:
a prairie for gazelles, a convent for monks,
a temple of idols, a Ka’bah for the pilgrim,
the tablets of the Torah, the Book of the Quran.
I profess the religion of Love, and,
regardless of which direction its steed may lead,
Love is my religion and my faith’ (quoted Husain page 243).

I am not claiming that Rumi and Arabi are typical of Sufis. They do remind us that it is possible for Christians to influence Moslems.

This cannot happen without respect, without love. Love is not naïve. There are dangerous people around who identify as Christians. We need to protect the community from them. The same can be said of people who claim to be Muslims.

It is still the case that the world needs Christians who are faithful to the mission given us by Jesus: a mission of love.

When it comes to community we have a lot to learn from our Muslim brothers and sisters. Increasingly in the 'Christian West' religion is being swept, if not under the carpet, then to the periphery of public life. There is immense pressure to identify religion as an individual affair.

The human hunger for personal, and therefore communal, identity is expressed in the song 'I am, you are, we are, Australian'. The sporting stadiums witness to this.

An argument can be made to connect the individualizing of religion and the modern epidemic of loneliness and anxiety. Muslims see this for what it is: a profound cultural weakness. They have a lot to teach us here.

The Second Vatican Council reminds us:

'Whatever good is found sown in people's minds and hearts or in the rites and customs of peoples, these are not only preserved from destruction, but are purified, elevated and perfected for the glory of God' (*Lumen Gentium*, 1964, n. 17).

Pope Paul VI expresses current Christian understanding when he writes that ‘people can gain salvation also in other ways, by God's mercy, even though we do not preach the Gospel to them’ (*Evangelisation in the Modern World*, 1975, n.80).

Our privilege as Jesus' disciples is to continue his mission, telling others of him and drawing them into the embrace of his love. While we are faithful to the mission given us, we know that his love is not limited to our efforts.

In the same letter Pope Paul VI writes:

'The Church respects and esteems these non-Christian religions
because they are the living expression
of the soul of vast groups of people.
They carry within them the echo of thousands of years
of searching for God, a quest which is incomplete
but often made with great sincerity and righteousness of heart.
They possess an impressive patrimony of deeply religious texts.
They have taught generations of people how to pray.
They are all impregnated with innumerable 'seeds of the Word'
and can constitute a true 'preparation for the Gospel' (n.53).

Pope John-Paul II

‘The Second Vatican Council recalls that the Spirit is at work in the heart of every person, through the “seeds of the Word”, to be found in human initiatives – including religious ones – and in the human effort to attain truth, goodness and God himself ... The Spirit is at the very source of people's existential and religious questioning, a questioning which is occasioned not only by contingent situations but by the very structure of what it is to be human ... The Spirit is not only instilling a desire for the world to come but also thereby animating, purifying and reinforcing the noble aspirations which drive the human family to make its life one that is more human and to direct the whole earth to this end. It is the Spirit who sows the 'seeds of the Word' present in various customs and cultures’ (*Mission of the Redeemer*, 1990, n. 28).

John-Paul II, Mission of the Redeemer n.29

‘We must have respect for human beings in their quest for answers to the deepest questions of life, and respect for the action of the Holy Spirit in people … Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit who is mysteriously present in every human heart.’

‘God does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression, even when they contain gaps, insufficiencies and errors … Dialogue with those of other religions is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills’ (John-Paul II, *Mission of the Redeemer*, 1990, n. 55-56).

Just as it is necessary for followers of Jesus to be critical of those who in the name of Christianity reject non-Christians and other Christians who do not agree with their narrow-minded, bigoted views, so it is important that the Muslim community distance itself from those who, in the name of Islam, attack non-Muslims and Muslims who do not agree with their determination, in the name of Islam, to wipe out all who disagree with them.

II. Muhammad and the Qur'an

Muhammad was born in Mecca, Arabia, in 570AD. His father 'Abdullah died before his birth, and his mother Aminah died when he was six years old. He was cared for first by his grandfather and then by his uncle. In 595AD he married Khadija bint Khuwaylid. They had two sons, who died as children, and four daughters. After the death of Khadija in 619 Muhammad had many wives.

Even before his first 'vision' in 610AD, aged forty, Muhammad used to retire to a cave on Mount Hira (see Sûrah 96 and the account of his first vision as described in *The Study Quran* pages 1535-1536). For the next twenty-three years till his death aged sixty-three, he saw himself, and his disciples saw him, as a man inspired (Sûrah 6:50, 6:107; 18:111; 35:19; 46:9). He aspired to follow the religion of Abraham (Sûrah 16:123), as revealed by earlier prophets, especially Moses and Jesus, whom he accepted as vehicles of God's revelation (see Sûrah 4:150).

Muhammad saw his role as converting Arabian pagan tribes, who were polytheists, to faith in the One God, and as God's chosen instrument in cleansing Judaism and Christianity of what he judged to be accretions that had brought about division (see Sûrah 5:14), and what he judged to be distortion of the revelations made through Moses and Jesus (see Sûrah 3:55).

From 610 to 623 Muhammad lived in Mecca. Typically, the revelations from that period tend to be more respectful of the Jews and Christians. Sûrah 16:125 is one among many examples: *'Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation. And dispute with them in the most virtuous manner. Surely your Lord is He who knows best those who stray from His way, and knows best the rightly guided'*. He saw God as inspiring him to win them over to submit to the One God and to himself as God's Messenger.

Muhammad saw himself as being in the line of the prophets, sent to warn the people and to condemn the pagan Arabs, Jews and Christians who refused to accept the warning given to them by God through him (Sûrah 35:42), by refusing to join the believers (al-mu'minun), who surrendered to God (muslimun).

Those who rejected Muhammad considered him 'possessed' (Sûrahs 68:2, 51; 81:22). They mocked him (Sûrah 15:11), and made a jest of what he claimed to be his revelations (Sûrah 18:107), which required of them that they reject their traditional gods.

In 623 Muhammad left Mecca and fled to Yathrib, a journey of 300km. This 'flight' (Hijrah) marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar. Yathrib came to be called 'Medinah' ('The City'). It was his base for the last ten years of his life, during which he was the head of a growing, social, political and religious community. From 623-627 he was involved in a fight to the death with his own tribe, the Quraysh of Mecca, from which he and his Muslim followers emerged victorious. Muhammad himself took part in twenty-seven military campaigns between his arrival at Medina and his death in 632AD.

Muhammad was a warlord. Abbé Guy Pagès in his *Interroger l'Islam* (DMM 2013) quotes Muslim historians' accounts of the violence, typical of his day, that he used against his enemies. On page 171 he writes: 'We read in the biography of Muhammad by Ibn Hisham [Sira II, ch. 240-241] that, after digging a pit in the square at Medina. Muhammad participated in the decapitation of 600 to 700 males of the Jewish tribe of Banu Quraydha.' None of this is surprising when we consider the violent times in which Muhammad lived. Problems arise when we are asked to believe that he behaved in this way in response to God's instructions.

The revelations from the Medinah period tend to have a harsher feel about them when we compare them with the revelations of the Mecca period.. Sûrah 9:5 is an example: *'When the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wheresoever you find them, capture them, besiege them, and lie in wait for them in every place of ambush'* .

The authors of *The Study Quran* admit that it is not always possible to be certain what parts of a sûrah come from Mecca and what parts come from Medina. Because the timing of the revelations is not without significance, when Muslim commentators are confident in attributing parts to Mecca and parts to Medina, I will indicate this. When they are undecided I will indicate this by a "?".

The Rasidun Khalifate of Medina

After Muhammad's death Abu Bakr was the first Khalif (632-634).

He was succeeded by 'Umar ibn al-Khattâb (634-644; see Sûrah 20),

and then by 'Uthman ibn 'Affâ (644-656). It was 'Uthman who gathered the seven most famous memorisers of the 'revelations'. From them and from the many documentary remains and memories 'Uthman created the official edition of the Qur'an. Because the text was a consonantal text, lacking vowels, there are many words that are capable of more than one meaning. We will see examples of this when we examine the sûrahs.

(Very different process from the way the Christian canon was established)

'Uthman was succeeded by 'Ali (656-661), the husband of Muhammad's daughter, Fatima.

'Ali was assassinated in 661. His son, with seventy-two companions, was killed at Karbala (in today's Iraq). This led to the Sunni-Shi'a schism: the Shi'a look to 'Ali.

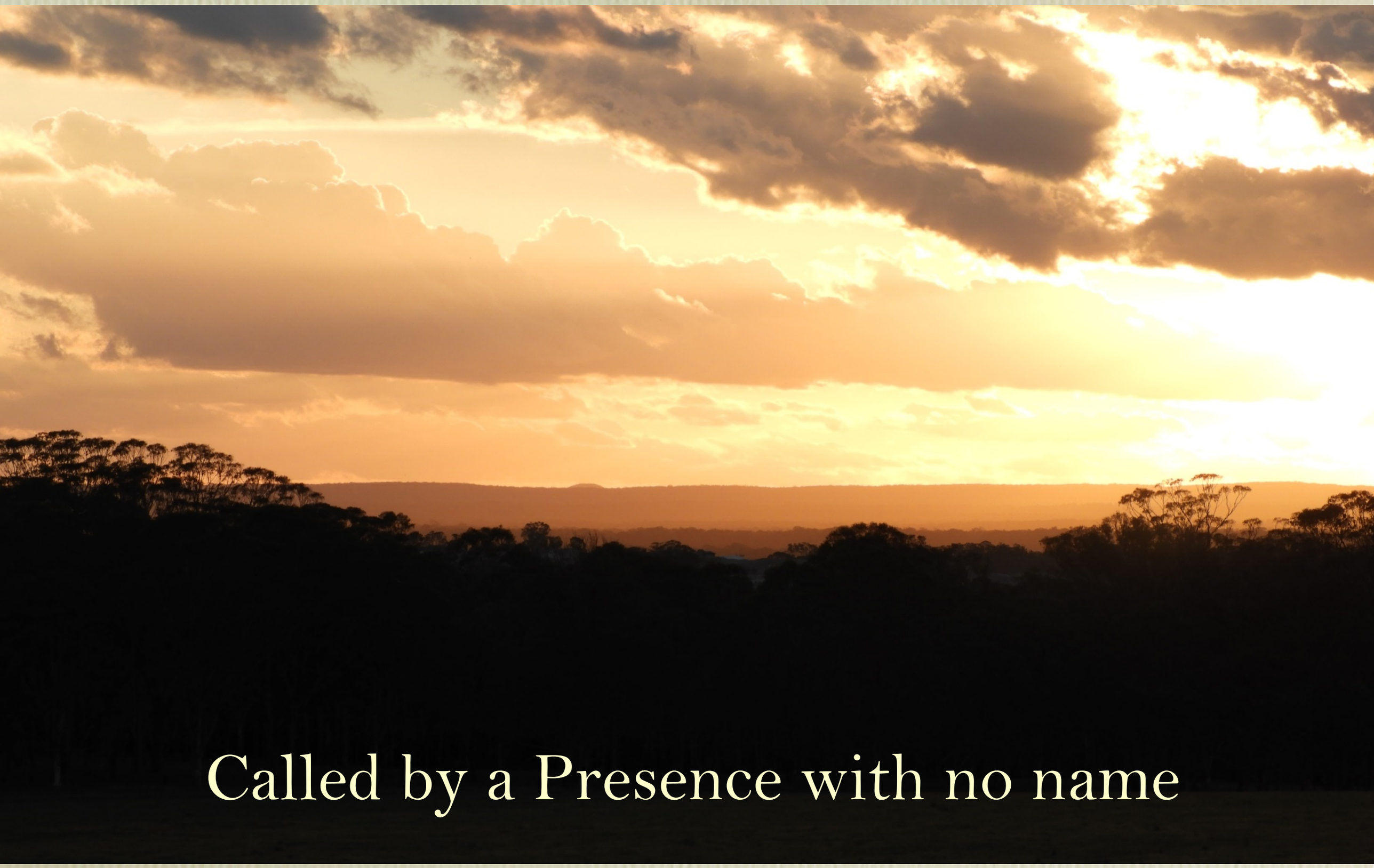
The Rasidun Khalifate of Medina was succeeded by the Umayyad Khalifate of Damascus (661-750).

The Quran is divided into 114 sûrahs perhaps best translated as ‘sections’. As we shall see when examining the sûrahs, many of them move through a number of themes, and contain material from different periods. For the most part the sûrahs are arranged according to length. Sûrah 1 has a special place. It is followed by the longest sûrah (Sûrah 2). The last surah (Sûrah 114) is the shortest.

Arabia

Called by a Presence

Called by a Presence



Called by a Presence with no name

Called to walk an unknown road

Called to say “Yes” to the emptiness

And to leave all behind

Called by a Presence with no name.


Called by a Presence with no name

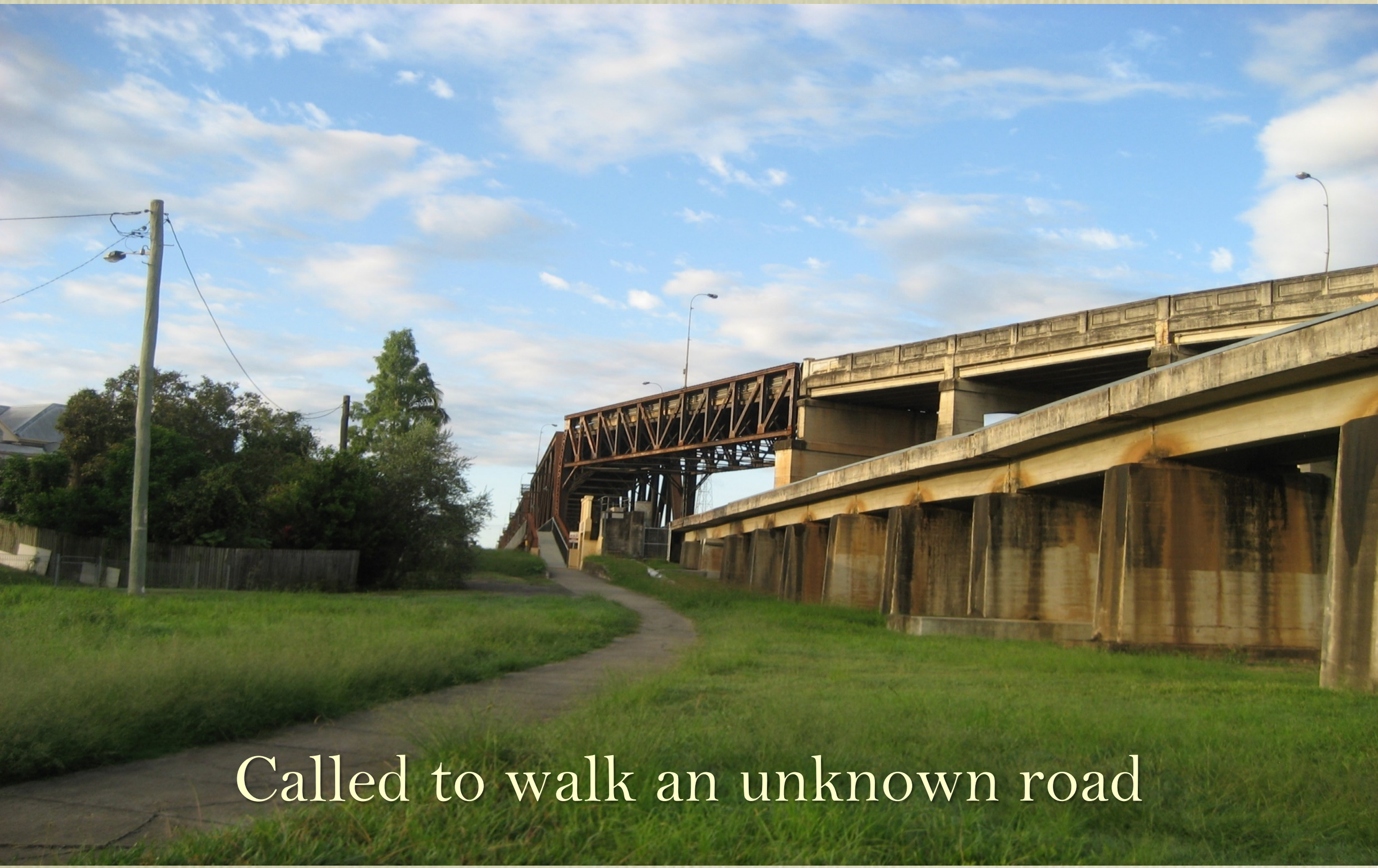

Called to walk an unknown road


Called to say “Yes” to the emptiness


And to leave all behind

Called by a Presence with no name.

Called by a Presence with no name



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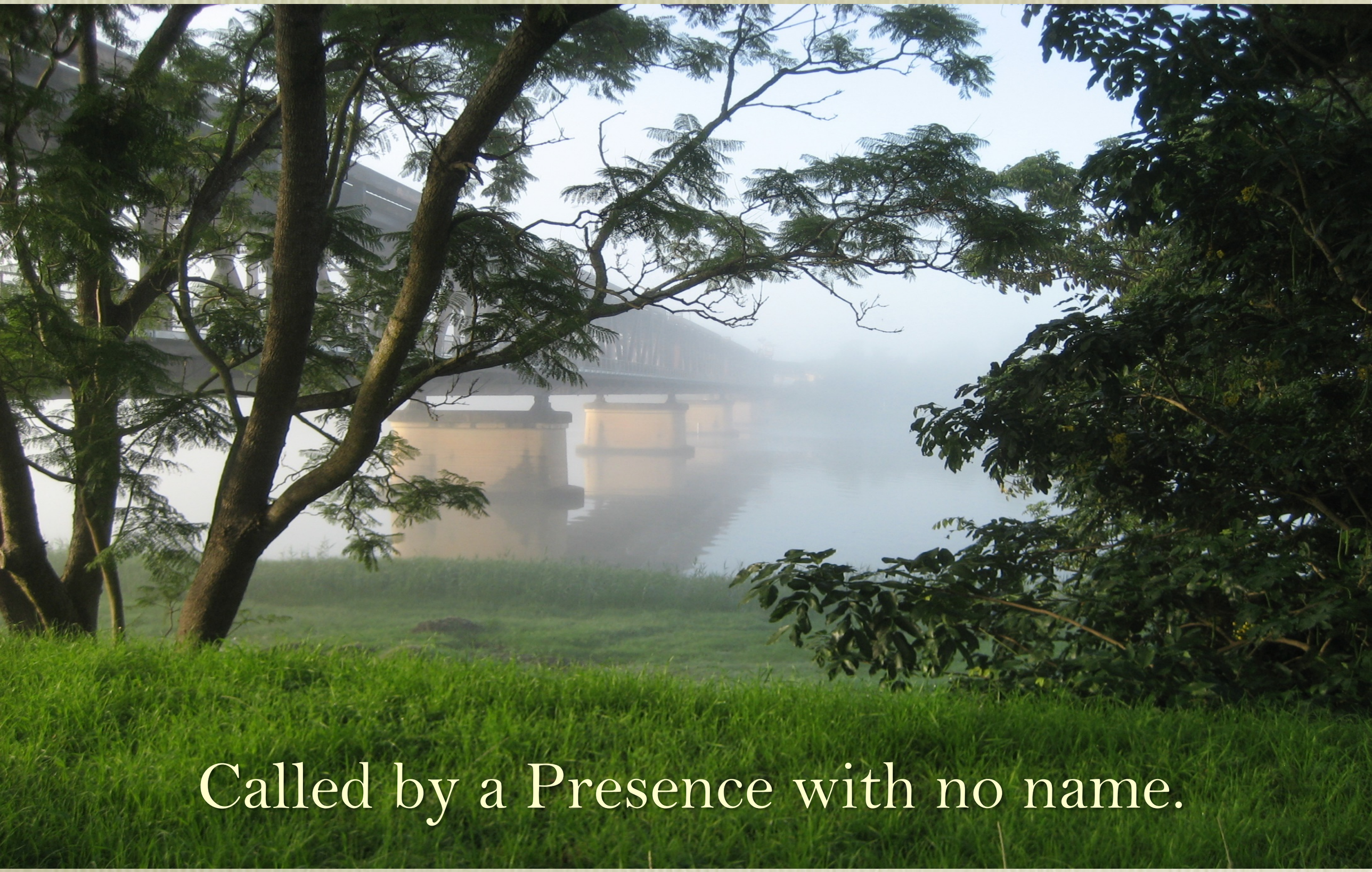
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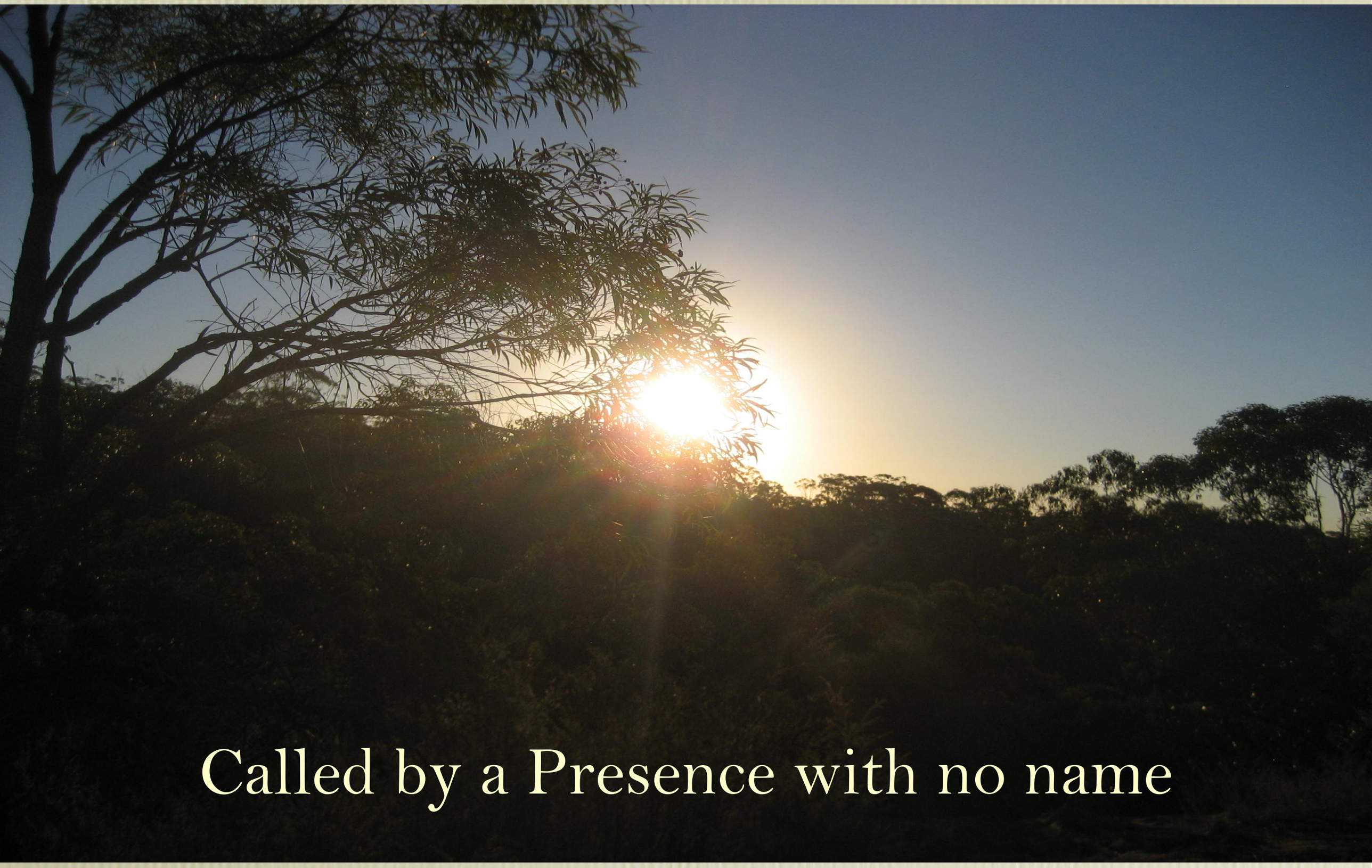

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