

CRITICAL EXEGESIS AND THE CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM ENCOUNTER

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Islam, Christianity and Judaism pose intellectual challenges to each other. Each of the three great Middle Eastern religions has a specific tenet that it considers non-negotiable, while the other two consider it unacceptable. For Judaism, this is the unique, chosen status of Israel as God's people (with its promised homeland); for Christianity, the doctrine of Christ as the Son of God and the second person of the Trinity; and for Islam, the Qur'an as the eternal Word of God. A theological dialogue with respect to these points is an extremely difficult matter, but, for precisely this reason, it has to be entered; in fact, it is overdue.¹

In the present world situation an encounter on the intellectual level may not seem to be one of the most urgent tasks. Peace, reduction of violence, and social responsibility are essential issues when we ask, whether it is still possible to avoid a collision of cultures. But precisely in connection with questions like world peace, the issue of a theological-intellectual encounter may prove to be significant, perhaps more so in the long run than one might believe at the moment.

One focal point of Judaism – the Land – is a very topical theme today. Suffice it to say that even some Jewish thinkers have questioned the idea of election. The so-called Reconstructionist movement rejects the idea altogether, but even an occasional conservative rabbi can state that it has to be radically reinterpreted in a universalistic sense: every person and every people should feel elected in the sense of being called to live a holy life and to develop one's potentials for the well-being of humankind.² Although this is a very important topic, on this occasion I must limit myself to the mutual intellectual challenge which Christianity

¹ Hans Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions*, London 1987, p. 36, referring to the Muslim theologian Riffat Hassan.

² Cf. e.g., Svante Lundgren, "Från mångfald till sönderfall? Judisk teologi i dagens USA," *Teologinen Aikakauskirja* 103, 1998, p. 521.

and Islam present.³ My perspective is that of an exegete engaged in critical study of both the New Testament and, to a lesser degree, the Qur'an.⁴

THE CHRISTIAN CHALLENGE TO ISLAM: CRITICAL STUDY OF ONE'S OWN SCRIPTURE

One thing that a modern Christian may find missing in Islam is the notion of the indebtedness of every scripture to its historical context. Islam has produced no counterpart to the historical-critical study of one's own scripture that has been developed by Christians (and Jews) and that has, at least to a degree, gained ground in mainstream churches. In general, Muslims regard the Qur'an as the direct word of God which existed in heaven even before the creation; its parts were sent down piecemeal to Muhammad. A strict doctrine of verbal inspiration is the rule. Hans Küng, the famous, if controversial, Catholic theologian, now deeply engaged in interfaith dialogue, was therefore led to ask the "awkward but unavoidable" question: Can revelation fall directly from heaven, dictated word for word by God? Why could one not perceive the Qur'an as a great prophetic witness to the one God? For today it is important that the Qur'an as the word of God be regarded at the same time as the word of the human prophet.⁵

Küng took up this issue in a dialogue arranged at Harvard University in 1987 to which I shall return later. He was bold enough to ask: "If we have historical criticism of the Bible (for the benefit of contemporary faith) why not then also have historical criticism of the Qur'an, and this *for the benefit of a Muslim faith* appropriate to modern times?"⁶

Is one entitled to ask a foreign tradition questions like this? The answer must begin: yes; but only on the condition that one is prepared to present questions equally critical of one's *own* tradition. This is what I hope to do in this article. And the answer continues: questions may be asked, but one cannot *demand* that

³ A very brief, early version of this article was presented at an Arabic-Scandinavian conference in Paris in which both Tapani Harviainen and I participated; Tapani read a paper on Judaism's adaptation to a minority position in the diaspora, intending to stimulate the thought of Muslims who live in a diaspora today. Both papers were published in Tuomo Melasuo (ed.), *Dialogue Arabo-Scandinave*, Tampere 1993. A Swedish version of my article, entitled "Vad kristendom och islam kunde lära sig av varandra," appeared in *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 78, 2002, pp. 154–163.

⁴ In retrospect, my reflections – with which Tapani will, I guess, partly disagree – may be regarded as fruits from discussions and debates in the exegetical "shadow seminar" in which we, together with a number of other eager beginners in theology and related fields, were engaged since the late 1960s and early 70s.

⁵ Hans Küng, "Christianity and world religions: The dialogue with Islam as one model," *Muslim World* 77, 1987, pp. 86–87.

⁶ *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

the foreign tradition wrestle with them. Such demands cannot be imposed from outside, least of all in the present atmosphere of our world which is hardly favourable to self-critical exercises. But, in fact, related questions, though in more cautious formulations, have now and then been put forward even within Islam.⁷ Questions from without converge with some existing strands of thought within the religion, as individual Muslim scholars admit that:

- the Qur'an makes use of extant stories (Jewish, Christian and Arabic), and reinterprets them and adapts them to its own message;
- the Qur'an addresses in a special way the auditors of Muhammad's message in a particular place at a given time which has a bearing on the question of its applicability in altered circumstances (something which classical Muslim scholars were well aware of, as the discussions of the *asbab al-nuzul* show, though critical conclusions were not drawn), and
- the contents of the Qur'an are intimately related to the personality of the Prophet.

Let us take a closer look at these assertions. Some, mainly Egyptian, interpreters have claimed that the Qur'an has to be studied with similar methods as applied to any other literary work. Amin al-Khuli, a leading Egyptian 20th century exegete, considered it essential that one first establish the exact literal meaning of the Qur'an "as it was understood in the days of its revelation".⁸ In the 1940s he supervised a thesis of Muhammad Khalafallah which aroused great attention, as Khalafallah asserted that the Qur'an uses legends and fables and puts them into the service of its message.⁹ Many stories of the earlier prophets in the Qur'an need not be historically true.¹⁰ The stories contain religious truths, and their intention is to influence people's will and actions.

According to this interpreter, God took into account the people in Muhammad's audience and their ability to understand. He employed expressions and stories familiar to them. The Qur'an is "human with reference to expression and style". Part of it is addressed – by God – to Muhammad to comfort him. Here a

⁷ Cf. Heikki Räisänen, *Marcion, Muhammad and the Mahatma*, London 1997, pp. 118–136, 260–268.

⁸ J. J. G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt*, Leiden 1980, p. 33; cf. op.cit. pp. 65–69 on al-Khuli's method.

⁹ On Khalafallah whose views were debated even in the Egyptian Parliament see Rotraud Wielandt, *Offenbarung und Geschichte im Denken moderner Muslime*, Wiesbaden 1971, pp. 134–152, and "Wurzeln der Schwierigkeit innerislamischen Gesprächs über neue hermeneutische Zugänge zum Korantext," in Stefan Wild (ed.), *The Qur'an as Text*, Leiden 1996, pp. 263–264.

¹⁰ In fact the Qur'an does not deny the claim of unbelievers that it includes histories of the old (25:5).

problem arises which Khalafallah evades: how does this correlation with Muhammad's situation fit with the assumed pre-existence of the Qur'an before the creation? Still, this author's view is comparable to the standard Christian notion that biblical revelation in the early stories of Genesis employs older oriental tales.

The reaction to these reflections was not encouraging. Khalafallah was dismissed from his university post. Critics claimed that he did not really believe in the divine origin of the Qur'an. This was not the case, though one may ask whether it was *consistent* to hold fast to the full divinity of the book, when so much was conceded in terms of human expression.

A member of the same school of thought is Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who has recently been involved in vast difficulties because of his exegetical views.¹¹ An Egyptian court sentenced him as an apostate from Islam to divorce (which neither he nor his wife wanted). Instead of an appropriate debate, the absurd assertion was made that Abu Zayd wanted to free Muslims from the Qur'an.¹² The couple now lives in exile in the Netherlands. Abu Zayd has connected al-Khuli's view of the Qur'an as a literary work with a communication-theoretical model of the event of revelation: the Qur'an is concerned with the ability of Muhammad and his audience to understand its message. The existence of this "human side" means that one cannot identify the statements of the Qur'an directly with God's eternal truth. Revelation is only accessible in a form which has already been interpreted by its human recipients. Nevertheless, Abu Zayd insists that the "divine pre-history of the text defies human scholarship. The human mind cannot and should not try to penetrate what is in every respect beyond human reason".¹³ This reservation reminds one of standard Christian attitudes to rational discussions concerning the Trinity.

Here one may also mention Mohammed Arkoun, an Algerian who teaches at the Sorbonne. He takes a subtle but critical approach in the framework of a linguistic-semiotic analysis; such a programme allows him to evade the hottest issues. But the text of the Qur'an has to be treated like any other text; thereby, individual critical points are made almost in passing. Thus, Arkoun admits the existence of legends in the Qur'an, the language of which is mythical and symbolical. He states that it was inevitable that Western scholars would take up the question of textual criticism of the Qur'an, although Muslim orthodoxy has made a tabu of the issue, and he even concedes the possibility that there may be later textual corrections in the Qur'an.¹⁴

¹¹ See Wielandt, "Wurzeln," pp. 260–261.

¹² Wielandt, "Wurzeln," p. 262 with n. 14.

¹³ Stefan Wild, "We have sent down to thee the Book with the Truth ...," in Wild (ed.), *The Qur'an as Text*, p. 145.

¹⁴ Mohammed Arkoun, *Lectures du Coran*, Paris 1982; see Räisänen, *Marcion*, pp. 129–130.

Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988) was a Pakistani scholar who taught for some twenty years in the USA.¹⁵ He made a programmatic distinction between the Qur'an, on one hand, and the later exegetical and legal tradition on the other – a distinction which recalls the *sola scriptura* of the Protestant Reformation. The legal experts of Islam, the *ulama*, tend to equate the *sharia* with the Qur'an so that in fact their own decisions gain a more or less divine authority. By contrast, Rahman claimed that the *sharia* is to be reassessed in the light of the Qur'an; moreover, the Qur'an is to be read in chronological order, for it is the oldest Meccan revelations that show the “basic impulse” of Islam which differs from later institutions. One would also have to distinguish between the legal statements of the Qur'an and their intention, the *ratio legis*. In searching for the intention one would have to pay close attention to the social context of the revelation. Rahman even states that the Qur'an tackles legal problems experimentally (!) as they arise, as, for example, its different standpoints on the use of alcohol show. The Qur'anic legislation “had partly to accept the then existing society as a term of reference”; therefore the Qur'an could not possibly intend its laws to be “literally eternal”. One must go beyond the actual legislation to reach the real intention of each law.¹⁶

Rahman wrote that “the Qur'an is entirely the Word of God and, in an ordinary sense, also entirely the word of Muhammad”. The Qur'an is “purely divine,” for there were moments when “Muhammad's moral intuitive perception rose to the highest point and became identified with the moral law itself.” Undoubtedly it is a question of inspiration, but not verbal inspiration. The Qur'an is “pure Divine Word,” Rahman states, “but of course¹⁷ it is equally intimately related to the inmost personality of the Prophet Muhammad whose relationship to it cannot be mechanically conceived like that of a record. The Divine Word flowed through the Prophet's heart”.¹⁸ Rahman claimed that he held fast to the full divinity of the Qur'an, yet one wonders whether his position does not logically imply a more critical or ambiguous attitude.

At the above-mentioned dialogue in Harvard in 1987, Hans Küng could indeed refer to Rahman in voicing the proposal that Muslims could understand the Qur'an as Muhammad's inspired testimony or as a revelation influenced by the personality of the Prophet.¹⁹ His proposal was, however, categorically rejected by the invited dialogue partner, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, another leading Muslim

¹⁵ On Rahman cf. Frederick M. Denny, “The legacy of Fazlur Rahman,” in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (ed.), *The Muslims of America*, New York 1991, pp. 96–108.

¹⁶ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, New York 1968, pp. 25–38.

¹⁷ This “of course” speaks volumes to me.

¹⁸ Rahman, *Islam*, pp. 27–29.

¹⁹ Küng, “Christianity and world religions,” p. 87.

scholar, an Iranian emigrant and a staunch defender of Muslim orthodoxy.²⁰ For him, Kūng's suggestion was absolutely unacceptable. An orthodox Muslim could never accept any other view than that the Prophet received the Qur'an from heaven, word for word. It is the Word of God, not the word of the Prophet. Accordingly, it is, in Muslim eyes, an act of the greatest blasphemy to even say that the Prophet may have learnt his view on salvation history or christology from Jewish and Christian sources, as Kūng had indicated. With regard to Kūng's appeal to Rahman, Nasr stated that it is sad to refer to such an "anomaly" or "an isolated case, even if it be an eminent scholar, and overlook the beliefs of a billion Muslims". Such a manouvre "destroys from the very beginning the possibility of understanding and creating peace".²¹ Yet one may regard this statement as an exaggerated, if not desperate, defensive move, for even if Rahman was controversial, he was both a respected Islamic activist and an academic teacher who exerted a fundamental influence on a remarkable number of disciples.²²

One of those who have learnt from Rahman is Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, an active fighter for human rights, once Professor of Law in Sudan now living in exile in the USA. Drawing practical conclusions from Rahman's thought, he wants to reform the *sharia* in the spirit of human rights and modern democracy, yet on an Islamic basis. The Islamic law must be criticised in light of the Qur'an. Here the principle of abrogation, well known from classical Islamic interpretation, proves vital.²³

An-Na'im claims that it is harmful to implement the *sharia* today, for it does not correspond to the principles of modern constitutionalism. Its application would humiliate both non-Muslims and Muslim women in a "morally repugnant" way, and even undermine the freedom of belief, expression and assembly of Muslim men. In international relations the *sharia* would justify the use of violence. One has to free oneself from the *sharia* and go back to the Qur'an (the principle of *sola scriptura* again!). The problem is that the Qur'an itself offers different startingpoints for legislation, for example with regard to the proper Muslim attitude to non-Muslims. The early Meccan suras urged peaceful persuasion only. By contrast, violence is justified in revelations from the later Medinan period. To

²⁰ On him see Jane I. Smith, "Seyyed Hossein Nasr: Defender of the sacred and Islamic traditionalism," in Haddad (ed.), *The Muslims of America*, pp. 80–95.

²¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Response to Hans Kūng's paper on Christian-Muslim dialogue," *Muslim World* 77, 1987, pp. 98–99.

²² Denny, "Legacy," p. 105: it is too early to predict what his long-term influence will be. "But it is safe to predict that there will be such influence and it will be significant..."

²³ Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation*. Syracuse, NY, 1990. An-Na'im continues a line of interpretation first put forward by Muhammad Mahmud Taha (*The Second Message of Islam*, Syracuse 1987), a freedom fighter who was executed in old age in the last days of the Numeiri regime.

reconcile such contradictions, Muslim lawyers resorted to the theory of abrogation (*naskh*): later revelation has cancelled the earlier one. The classical *sharia* is mainly based on the later Medinan revelation.

An-Na'im, however, sets forth a stunning reversal of *naskh*, and turns the theory upside down. It is the later Medinan verses that are to be cancelled in light of the earlier ones! A new *sharia* is to be built solely on the Meccan revelation, which An-Na'im takes to have been egalitarian, humanitarian and universalist. Later revelations were adapted to the conditions of Medinan society; they were, therefore, meant to be of a temporary nature, to be replaced in due time by the older Meccan verses. An-Na'im may be too optimistic concerning the degree of egalitarianism of the Meccan suras, but as regards the verses that deal with violence his theory seems to work pretty well.

An-Na'im himself clings steadfastly to the verbal inspiration of the Qur'an: "To doubt the direct and totally divine nature of any part of the text of the Qur'an is to cease to be a Muslim".²⁴ Through critical eyes, though, his view raises a far-reaching theological question: why would God have given, in Medina, a revelation that was inferior to the one he had already given in Mecca?

A generation earlier the Indian lawyer and diplomat, Asaf A. A. Fyzee, had taken an unusually long step in the direction of an historical understanding of the Qur'an: even more sharply than Rahman he distinguished between God's word and Muhammad's testimony. The Qur'an is a message from God, that is, God's voice as heard by Muhammad: "God spoke to him and he spoke to us". In the Qur'an God does not speak directly, but Muhammad speaks with divine authorisation. The Qur'an "is a testimony of his faith in God". Nevertheless, Muhammad's words and God's Word are one in a mysterious way.²⁵ This revolutionary view comes close to the standard ecclesiastical view of the Bible, according to which the Bible is wholly God's Word and also wholly written by humans.

According to Fyzee, reinterpreting the Qur'an is a moral obligation; its concrete legislation is not to be regarded as binding. The Qur'an has to be expounded in its historical context. This means, among other things, that "the better we get acquainted with the contributions of Judaism and Christianity, the fuller insight we will gain into the message and doctrines of the prophet"²⁶ – a statement regarded as blasphemous by Nasr a generation later.

Yet one has to go even further back in time to discover what is not only possible in principle, but what has even been done in the framework of Islamic interpretation of the Qur'an. Another Indian lawyer, Justice Sayyed Amir Ali

²⁴ An-Na'im, *Reformation*, 196 n. 29.

²⁵ Asaf A. A. Fyzee, *A Modern Approach to Islam*, Bombay 1963, esp. pp. 109–110.

²⁶ This statement by Fyzee in an Arabic journal from 1959 is quoted by J. M. S. Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation*, Leiden 1968, p. 68 n. 2.

(1849–1928), made a grand attempt to conquer the West with its own weapons in a peaceful debate. His book, *The Spirit of Islam*,²⁷ is highly regarded. A. S. Ahmed called it “one of the most influential and popular books written on Islam,”²⁸ and Alfred Guillaume pronounced it “one of the most widely read works in many Muslim countries”.²⁹

Amir Ali too demands that the Qur’an shall be read without the interpretations put upon it by the *ulama*, the traditional guardians of the Islamic legal tradition. *The Spirit of Islam* is an apologetic work that praises Islam not least as a religion of free thinking and attempts to show its superiority over Christianity, even though the two religions are, at bottom, identical (except for the Christians’ christology). But Amir Ali makes it clear that in his view the Qur’an consists of Muhammad’s teachings – noble teachings, full of love, of an inspired preacher.³⁰ The Qur’an also gives expression to Muhammad’s feelings, such as zeal.³¹ Muhammad had to formulate his message for all of his very different listeners.³² Furthermore, he himself also went through a religious evolution. This is reflected in the Qur’an: “A careful study of the Koran makes it evident that the mind of Mohammed went through the same process of development which marked the religious consciousness of Jesus”. Traditions which Muhammad had inherited from his environment yielded, when time passed, to a more spiritual understanding. This is the case with his eschatology. The Qur’an contains “realistic” descriptions of heaven and hell in those parts which stem from the early period “before the mind of the teacher had attained the full development of religious consciousness.” These concrete-materialistic descriptions were borrowed from Zoroastrian and Jewish “fancies,” being necessary when the message had to be conveyed “to the common folk of the desert”. They had to yield, however, to the “real essence – the adoration of God in humility and love”. Amir Ali asserts that paradise with its lovely virgins (the *hooris*) is of Zoroastrian origin, whereas the harsh punishments of hell can be traced back to the Talmud.³³ He does not intend to criticise the Qur’an; on the contrary, his “history-of-religions” approach serves apologetic

²⁷ First edition in 1873; I am in possession of a pocket edition of 1965, and even it is not the most recent one.

²⁸ A. S. Ahmed, *Discovering Islam*. London 1988, p. 127. “At least two generations of Muslims, in the first half of the century, would be influenced by *The Spirit of Islam*. Thinking and behaving like English gentlemen they would nonetheless be proud of their Islamic identity.” *Op.cit.*, p. 128.

²⁹ Alfred Guillaume, *Islam*. Harmondsworth 1968, p. 159.

³⁰ Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam*, London, 1965, e.g., p. 152.

³¹ Ali, *Spirit*, pp. 150–151.

³² Ali, *Spirit*, p. 198.

³³ Ali, *Spirit*, p. 197.

ends. As regards eschatology, Amir Ali wants to refute the standard view that the Arabian prophet promised a sensual paradise to his followers.³⁴

Amir Ali went much further than any of his followers have been prepared to go in that he regarded Muhammad as the author of the Qur'an and also stated this clearly. Guillaume says that he does not know of any modern Muslim writer who has taken the same view, but he adds that "many Muslims hold the belief, and openly say so in conversation". Guillaume goes on to point out that: "there is no historical reason why they should not, because the doctrine that the Qur'an is "uncreate", i.e. literally the word of God, was not finally established until the third (Islamic) century ..."³⁵

It seems, then, that the challenge from the Christian side as presented by writers such as Hans Küng – or should we say the challenge of academic enquiry that has, to some degree, penetrated even the great Christian churches – converges with critical attempts that already exist in the Islamic world. It is true that these attempts have been (partly, at least) stimulated by Western influences; Fyzee explicitly compares his program with that of Martin Luther.³⁶ But Christian biblical criticism, too, was initially largely kindled by external impulses (e.g. astronomical observations and the "voyages of discovery"). If an open approach to the Qur'an provokes vehement opposition from the *ulama*, one should remember that Christians have also had – and many still have – great difficulties with the study of the Bible. Even today many people do not see any "benefit for faith" in critical study of the Bible.

What benefit for their faith could Muslims, then, get from critical study of the Qur'an? Surely it might lead to greater openness and flexibility in dealing with the tradition, although criticism of the *sharia* is, in principle, on a level different from criticism of the Qur'an.

But is it altogether correct or meaningful to compare criticism of the Qur'an with criticism of the Bible? It has often been pointed out that the position of the Qur'an in Islam is not the same as the position of the Bible in Christianity. The position of the Qur'an in Islam corresponds rather to that of Jesus Christ in Christianity. Typically, Muslim theologians have pondered with regard to the Qur'an the same kinds of questions Christian theologians have considered with regard to Christ: for example, is the Qur'an created or not? Historical criticism of the Qur'an would thus involve much more for a Muslim than historical criticism of the Bible does for a Christian. As an emotional analogy on the Christian side one

³⁴ Reflecting on the consequences of some paradise fantasies today one cannot help but wish that Amir Ali's demythologising had had more success.

³⁵ Guillaume, *Islam*, p. 160.

³⁶ Fyzee, *Modern Approach*, p. 107.

has proposed psychoanalysis of Jesus;³⁷ probably a thorough demythologisation of christology would qualify as well. And yet one should not exaggerate the difference, for the Bible did not always have a secondary position in Christianity. It has been pointed out that many patristic texts look rather “Islamic” as regards the view of verbal inspiration;³⁸ even a radically independent thinker like Origen held fast to verbal inspiration and acknowledged no contradictions in the Bible.³⁹ The Bible had a very central place in post-Reformation Protestantism; one has with justice spoken of a “biblical culture” especially in Britain. According to the German orthodoxy in the 17th century even the vowels of Old Testament Hebrew were directly revealed by God. Islamic interpreters have never gone so far: it is thought that only the consonant text of the Qur’an has been sent down by God.⁴⁰ The gradual breakdown of the 17th-century view has been a painful process which is not yet fully over; fundamentalism is a significant power in the Protestant world, especially in the United States.

As regards the proposed analogies, neither a psychoanalytical interpretation of Jesus nor a thorough demythologisation of christology are unheard-of phenomena among Christians. If a historical approach to the Bible is applied consistently, the doctrine of Christ will be affected; historical criticism touches even the kernel of Christian dogmatics. If one wishes that Muslims adopt historical criticism of the Qur’an, one should not shrink from drawing christological conclusions from biblical criticism. This brings me to the second part of my reflections: the challenge of Islam to Christianity.

THE MUSLIM CHALLENGE TO CHRISTIANITY: CRITICISM OF THE DOCTRINES OF TRINITY AND CHRISTOLOGY

In her youth British author Ruqayya Maqsood, formerly Rosalyn Kendrick, studied Christian theology at university. She reports that she became impatient with “the intricate maze of doctrinal axioms” she was supposed to accept by faith in order to grasp the meaning of the Holy Trinity. In fact, she discovered that the doctrine of the Trinity was not found anywhere in the Bible, and was not formally accepted by the church until the fourth century. She had other problems, too, with the way God was portrayed. Decades later something important happened. In her

³⁷ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History*, New York 1957, p. 25 n. 13.

³⁸ Josef van Ess, “Verbal inspiration? Language and revelation in classical Islamic theology,” in Wild (ed.) *The Qur’an as Text*, p. 194.

³⁹ That the allegorical method provided a means to explain away contradictions – a well-known phenomenon even in the history of Qur’anic interpretation – is a different matter.

⁴⁰ van Ess, “Verbal Inspiration?,” p. 180.

own words, "I think it was when I finally admitted to myself that God did not need any 'sacrifice' to make him more merciful than he already is, that I realised that I had become a Muslim."⁴¹

According to Ruqayya Maqsood, Christian converts to Islam often feel that they are "coming home". They do not regard themselves as renegades turning their backs on all Christian values, "nor do they feel that they are forsaking the love of their first religion for the enticements of a new one. On the contrary, most of what was incomprehensible in Christianity falls neatly into place, and there is often a 'flash of light' experience ... that can be compared to any Christian 'born again' experience".⁴²

If converts can thus feel at home in Islam, this may be so because Islam, in the words of Hans Küng, "poses a challenge to Christians ... as a reminder of their own past".⁴³ The roots of Islam lie deep in the Jewish-Christian soil. Contacts with Jews and Christians had a great significance for Muhammad's religious development. Through them biblical material as well as post-biblical popular traditions, Jewish and Christian, flowed into the Qur'an. Consequently even Jesus has a place in the Qur'an. His portrait as the last prophet before Muhammad is painted in sympathetic colours.⁴⁴

Jesus' virginal birth was a sign of God's creative power, and the same is true of the miracles which he carried out "by the leave of God". He was of exemplary piety, "high honoured in this world and the next," one of those "near to the Lord". But the Qur'an firmly refutes the claim that Jesus was "God's son," let alone a god. In Muhammad's mind the designation "God's son" apparently connoted that Jesus was the son of God and Mary. The Qur'an likewise denies that God could consist of three persons (though the assumption seems to be that the three persons of the Christian Trinity were God, Jesus and *Mary*). The Christians are thought to have falsified Jesus' pure monotheism even against Jesus' explicit prohibition.

Probably most Christian theologians regard the doctrine of the Trinity as a non-negotiable foundation of their religion, and yet the Qur'anic criticism comes close to some currents within Christianity. Usually one has emphasised the differences between the Qur'anic picture of Jesus and Christian christology, and obviously there is a significant difference between the Qur'anic view and *that* christology which was formulated in the fourth- and fifth-century councils. There Jesus is seen as "true God and true man," and one speaks of his two "natures," divine and human, attempting to define their mutual relationship. Certainly these

⁴¹ Ruqayyah Maqsood, *The Separated Ones*. London 1991, pp. ix, xi.

⁴² Maqsood, *Separated Ones*, p. 176.

⁴³ Küng, *Christianity*, p. 123.

⁴⁴ See e.g., Heikki Räisänen, *Das koranische Jesusbild*. Helsinki 1971; *id.*, *Marcion*, pp. 81-97, 254-258.

articles of faith are directly opposed to the Qur'anic picture in which Jesus is a creature and servant of God.

What has been less clear in this connection is the fact that there are also remarkable differences between the christological definitions of the councils and most New Testament portraits of Christ; it is hardly an exaggeration to speak of a direct *contradiction* between some christological layers in the New Testament and the formulations of the councils. In *Das koranische Jesusbild* (1971) I tried to pave the way for a more balanced view by emphasising certain *similarities* between the Qur'anic portrait of Jesus and these early stages in the formation of christology.⁴⁵ Since then these considerations have been taken up by others, including Hans Küng who has utilised them in the interfaith dialogue.⁴⁶

Ruqayya Maqsood is right: the doctrine of the Trinity is missing in the Bible. Nowhere in the New Testament is Jesus fully identified with God. The Son is always subjected to the Father. The Gospel of John goes farthest in the direction of an identification in that it has Jesus state: "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30); Jesus is presented as a pre-existent heavenly being, but he is still clearly different from the Father whose envoy he is. Even so it is clear to modern researchers that the fourth Gospel has moved far beyond older christological interpretations. In many other layers of the New Testament Jesus is portrayed as a man chosen and employed by God for a certain purpose, and finally elevated by God to a new position. This view finds its clearest expression in the speeches attributed to Peter and Paul in Acts. The present wording of the speeches goes back to the final author, Luke, but he may well have used older traditions. He probably had connections to conservative Jewish Christians of his own time (the end of the first or the beginning of the second century CE).

In these sermons in Acts it is stated that Jesus was "*his* (God's) Messiah," "whom he had appointed" (Acts 3:18,20), "his Anointed" (4:26), God's "servant" (3:13) or "holy servant" (4:27), "the Holy and Righteous One" (3:14) raised up by God (3:26). The terms God's "Son" and "Messiah" are both defined in Luke's Gospel with the aid of the expression "the chosen one" (Luke 9:35, 23:35). Jesus of Nazareth was, according to Luke's Peter, "a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders and *signs* that God did through him" (Acts 2:22); he was "anointed by God with the Holy Spirit and power" and "went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for *God was with him*" (10:38). Such theocentric sentences remind one of the Qur'anic statement that Jesus worked his *signs* (a key term in the Qur'an) "by the leave of God".

⁴⁵ Räisänen, *Jesusbild*, pp. 90–100.

⁴⁶ Küng, *Christianity*, p. 122.

The Book of Acts emphasizes that Jesus died according to God's plan. It was God who raised him and *made* him "Lord and Messiah" (2:36) Thereby God also *made* Jesus his "son": "what God promised to our ancestors, he has fulfilled ... by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm, *You are my Son, today I have begotten you*" (13:32–33). The exegetes widely agree that "the Lukan Jesus is very much subordinate to God," being "supremely a *man* chosen by God to do God's will".⁴⁷

Those Christians whose voice is heard in these Lukan formulations would have agreed with Muhammad that Jesus was a man, not God, even though they held that he had a unique task and afterwards a unique position in heaven, a view that the Qur'an does not accept. The designation "God's Son" involves no metaphysical, let alone physical, relationship with God, but can best be understood in "adoptionist" terms: God made Jesus to be his (metaphorical) "son". The designation "God's Son" had of old been applied to kings who were thought to have a God-given task. It is no coincidence that the second psalm quoted by Luke originally echoes an enthronement ceremony at the Jerusalem court.

Long before the time of Acts, Paul already cited an old formula according to which Jesus "was declared (or appointed) to be Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead" (Rom 1:4). According to Paul, Jesus will carry out his actual task as "God's Son" in the (near) future: Christians "wait for God's Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus who rescues us from the wrath that is coming" (1 Thess 1:9–10). After having conquered the inimical spirit powers which now reign in the world, Christ will surrender his reign and be subjected to God "so that God may be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28). It is hardly possible to express a relationship of subordination in clearer terms than this.

In accordance with the first Christians' views, Jesus' mission and work is here placed into a theocentric eschatological perspective. Jesus had a role to play in God's plan for the future of the world; he carried out his God-given task as the chosen one. But the original eschatological expectation could not be upheld in generation after generation. The interpretation of Jesus' mission came to be separated from the eschatological framework; typically, concrete futurist eschatology plays precisely in the Gospel of John hardly any role at all. There the emphasis lies wholly on reflections concerning the person of Jesus; steps are taken by the author of this gospel on the road that will lead "from Jewish Prophet to Gentile God".⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Christopher Tuckett, *Christology and the New Testament*. Edinburgh 2001, pp. 143–144 (emphasis original).

⁴⁸ Maurice Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God*. Cambridge 1991.

It is this process of deification (which continued during the following centuries) that is opposed by the Qur'an. As the church has thrust aside the Qur'anic portrait of Jesus, it has also repressed an aspect of its own history, and thus of itself. The Qur'an's monotheistic picture of Jesus reminds one of the early stage when the "Jesus movement" was still a Jewish movement with a clearly monotheistic theology and a more or less adoptionist christology.

There have been historical links between an archaic stage of Christianity and Islam. One thinks here of that branch of Jewish Christianity which, after the two defeated rebellions against Rome (66–70 and 132–135 CE), was more or less isolated from the development of mainstream Christianity. These old-fashioned Christians honoured Jesus as God's servant, the last prophet and the authoritative interpreter of the law; they held fast to the law (or most of it) and engaged in polemics against Paul. Their christology reminds one of the Qur'an. Such Jewish Christian groups could have provided Muhammad with a consistent "low" christology, i.e., a ready-made blueprint for the portrait of Jesus found in the Qur'an. Yet we do not know for sure whether such groups existed in Muhammad's time in areas geographically close to him. But in whatever way the historical development may have taken place, the theological parallels between the Qur'an and the old christology are unmistakable. It was with good reason that Küng maintained that Islam poses a challenge to Christians as a reminder of their own past.

Küng emphasises that he himself can fully understand and accept "the Hellenistic development of Christology".⁴⁹ He does not mean that Christians ought to start from scratch, to become Jewish Christians again, as it were. Nevertheless, he asks whether a Christian should really require that a Muslim (or a Jew) should accept the decisions of the Hellenistic councils. "What would the Jew Jesus of Nazareth have done?" Would he have understood the christology of the councils? The question is not trivial, for it is relevant to the self-understanding of non-European Christians in Asia and Africa.⁵⁰ Is one forced to accept that Platonic philosophy (which undoubtedly provided the conceptual framework for the doctrine of Trinity) is an indispensable part of Christianity at all times and everywhere? Or would it be possible to regard the theology of the old councils as a situation-bound contextualisation of the Christian message which at another time in another situation can be replaced with other interpretative models?

In fact there are Christian theologians who have drawn more radical conclusions than Küng. John Hick takes up the early adoptionist christology and suggests that later incarnational theology should be understood as a myth in the sense of poetical truth. The talk of incarnation can be understood as a poetical

⁴⁹ Küng, *Christianity*, p. 127.

⁵⁰ Küng, *op.cit.* p. 129.

way of underlining the significance of the man Jesus.⁵¹ If Christians seized on the adoptianist component of their christological heritage, new possibilities might arise for the interfaith dialogue. In fact, the collection of articles called *The Myth of God Incarnate*, which Hick edited in the seventies, has caught the attention of Muslims. At least some of them appreciate this christological approach highly. The Muslim participants in a Christian-Muslim dialogue group stated some years ago that Islam could tolerate any *metaphorical* interpretation of the title "Son of God,"⁵² but the Christian members would not accept a metaphorical understanding.⁵³

The wish to bring about a dialogue is, of course, in itself no reason to revise one's doctrines, but the situation is different, if a revision has already begun for internal reasons. In *The Myth of God Incarnate*, Maurice Wiles, a leading patristic scholar, presented the well-founded view that the Christian church has never managed to put forward a consistent or convincing picture of Jesus as *both* fully human *and* fully divine; usually the humanity of Christ has suffered.⁵⁴ Thus, even in this case, the criticism from outside converges with problems which have been noticed within.

Both Christians and Muslims have had a keen sense of the weaknesses in the other's position: the Islamic view of the Qur'an has been aptly criticised by Christians, and the Christian christology by Muslims. The question is whether one is able to take seriously the other's criticism – and thereby also those dissenters within one's own tradition who have already put forward self-critical questions. A dialogue on such a basis would mean a certain relativisation of the highest claims of both religions – not for the sake of the dialogue, but simply because a somewhat more modest position seems to fit the historical evidence better. This would be a dialogue between minorities which some might call "elitist," but it might be the beginning of something radically new.

51 John Hick, "Jesus and the world religions," in John Hick (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate*, London 1977, pp. 177–179.

52 Muslim-Christian Research Group, *The Challenge of the Scriptures: The Bible and the Qur'an*, Maryknoll 1989, p. 80.

53 Muslim-Christian Research Group, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

54 Maurice Wiles, "Christianity without incarnation?," in Hick (ed.), *Myth*, pp. 4–5.

