

# Jesus in Islam

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## Introduction

As a religion, a faith, a culture, and a political system, Islam presents a number of challenges to the world. Of all these, the most important to the Christian community (and perhaps to the world in general) may be the spiritual one. At any rate, none is more *fundamental*. To face it successfully, we need, as Christians, to be involved in prayer and witness, evangelism and mission; we need also serious theological reflection and understanding of Muslim faith and practices. It is vital that we develop creative ways to make known our faith and to communicate genuine concerns to Muslims. Within such a program, a careful consideration of Jesus in Islam may help us to better understand Islam and Muslims; it may also act as a catalyst for renewing our own thinking about some of the issues relating to Jesus in Christianity and in the world. One thinks, of course, of the plethora of contemporary images of Jesus (from the sweet Saviour to the superstar, from Jesus “down in my heart” to that of the famous “Jesus Seminar”). For a number of reasons, the topic “Jesus in Islam” repays serious study:

(1) Jesus, in his person and ministry, is central to Christian faith and life; foundation for the first, source for the second.

(2) To a large extent, Jesus is looked upon favorably even in a society that disdains the Church. His figure commands respect among non-believers; some of his teachings are valued by non-Christians and others are part of general culture, albeit at a superficial level.

(3) The topic has a strategic importance for evangelism. Muslims claim to respect Jesus and to receive him

as a powerful prophet from God. Frequently, they voice a reproach, that appears to be quite valid from their perspective, to Christians: “Why don’t you give any hearing or consideration to our prophet Muhammed, when *we* accept the status and teachings of Jesus?”<sup>1</sup> Hence, serious consideration of Jesus in Islam could at least open the possibility of a dialogue with a religion that otherwise is reputed to harbor conceptions of God and faith that are diametrically opposed to the Christian ones.

(4) Christians need to be acquainted with the Muslim Jesus (or *’Issa* as he is respectfully called in the Qur’an and Muslim tradition) because of the very respect shown to him in this religion. Some may find it thought provoking that the Quranic understanding of Jesus is closer to classical Christianity than many teachings on him in contemporary university religious studies departments and seminaries across North America and Europe.<sup>2</sup>

(5) A Christian principle is at stake here: “Do unto others...” If Christians wish that Muslims avail themselves of the opportunity to ponder over the biblical portrait of Christ, they may find it very difficult not to take the first step. Dialogues are notoriously difficult and delicate, they may err on both extremes and degenerate either into empty polite exercises or into practices of deception; however, reciprocity is the name of the game. Genuine dialogue and debates are possible, and they should be welcomed and encouraged. Sincerity and respect in these endeavours may not exclude conversion itself; why should it?<sup>3</sup>

(6) The last 30 years or so witnessed a renewed interest in the life, ministry and teaching of the historical Jesus, at a level perhaps never reached before (with the possible exception of the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century). The “Third Quest of the

Historical Jesus," after the timid and insufficient renewal encouraged by Bultmann's disciples in the mid-fifties, seems to open new possibilities of truly understanding Jesus in his historical context. Yet the results are mitigated: some are insightful and may prove to be lasting (see the writings of J. D. G. Dunn, N. T. Wright, and B. Witherington on the topic); others will probably be short lived (most of the Jesus Seminar's conclusions). There are clear parallels between some of these and Muslim conceptions of Jesus' identity and ministry, suggesting that a comparative study may be useful. For example, the conclusions of the Jesus Seminar, well known by now, are strangely reminiscent of Islamic convictions. According to both, Jesus was truly human, but not divine; he was a teacher not a Messiah; he did not die an atoning death (I will suggest below that in the Islamic denial of Jesus' death on the cross the expiatory dimension is mostly at stake); his teaching was useful for his time and may have contemporary applications.

The present article aspires only to contribute some basic elements to the discussion. In this undertaking, I suggest to focus first on understanding and explanation, before turning to comparison, confrontation, and criticism.<sup>4</sup> So I propose an exercise in understanding; although, such requires proper criticism.

### **The Muslim Conception of the Qur'an**

In order to understand the Islamic conception of Jesus adequately, one must begin with the Muslim's conception of the Qur'an. The vast majority of Muslims conceive of the Qur'an as the uncreated and eternal Word of God. As such, it reveals the Truth and all truths. Historically, it "descended" to Muhammed in the form of revelations, within a period of some 23 years (ca. 610-632), before being written

down and later compiled into a book, under Abu Bakr, the first khalif (632-34). During the reign of the third khalif, 'Uthman (644-56), and due to the existence of several different recitations, a single version was made, and an order was given to destroy all other copies.<sup>5</sup> Muhammed, the final messenger and prophet of God, is in fact the seal of prophethood. Through his mediation, the Qur'an, God's final revelation and manifestation of truth, has been given to Muslims and through them to all mankind.

As God's ultimate revelation, the Qur'an completes, corrects, and thus supersedes all previous revelation, including the particular revelations granted by God through Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. Quranic correction is deemed necessary because, according to Muslim understanding and apologetics, previous Scriptures had been misunderstood, abrogated, and/or falsified by Jews and Christians. This belief, though difficult to substantiate historically or critically, plays an important role in Islamic conceptions relating to the Bible and its portrait of Christ and his ministry; it also has bearing on the place of Jesus (or the lack thereof) in Muslim piety, devotion, and spirituality. For in all vital issues and areas of contention between Islam and other faiths, Muslims turn to the Qur'an as the final authority. Christians are sometimes disconcerted to find that the same applies to Jesus' person, status, and ministry. For Muslims, the only adequate and authoritative presentation of Jesus is the one given in the Qur'an (to which they may add clarifications gathered from the *Hadith* and the *Sunna*, the authoritative traditions). The status of the Qur'an is reason enough not to turn to the Bible except when the latter justifies or corroborates the Quranic pre-

sentation.<sup>6</sup>

Though space precludes adequately developing this question here, the charge should not go unchallenged.<sup>7</sup> Christians should not let Muslim apologetics (especially at the scholarly level) get away with the accusation that our Scriptures (Old and New Testament) had been changed prior to the appearing of the Qur'an. Historical and textual studies prove beyond reasonable doubt that they have not been "corrupted" as Muslims so easily charge.<sup>8</sup> Aside from historical and critical studies, one is reminded of an argument from sheer logic, pointed out by Augustine and Pascal. They remarked that in the Old Testament Scriptures, Jews had preserved testimony *against themselves*. For, though they did not welcome the Messiah, they did faithfully transmit God's logia entrusted to them including the prophetic predictions that announce the Messiah's coming and the manner of his coming. The very proof of their disobedience is the evidence for the veracity of the testimony they transmitted.<sup>9</sup> The argument can be expanded and applied to the Christian books. If Christians falsified their Scriptures, they did a very poor job, for they left intact the most damaging parts, the parts that condemn with the sharpest severity sinful behaviour and disobedience.

There is, however, another answer that is perhaps better still. The Qur'an itself may have never intended to affirm *textual* corruptions or falsifications of previous Scripture. The relevant passages in the Qur'an (the number of clear instances is surprisingly limited [Surah 2:75-81; 4:46-47; 5:12-15; 5:41-47], and they are aimed mostly at the Jews, having been written during Muhammed's ministry in Medina<sup>10</sup>) may imply a distortion in *interpretation*, not textual alterations. In other words, in these

verses, Muhammed accuses the people of the previous books of voluntarily misrepresenting the meaning of their Scriptures: "They have changed words from their contexts, and they have forgotten what was revealed," (or "part of what was revealed") (5:13; see 4:46; 5:14). In another context, Jews are accused of listening to the Word without integrity—without the intention of obeying it (5:41). Two main points seem to be at issue: (1) The denial that Muhammed was a prophet (whereas, according to the Qur'an, both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures predicted his coming) and (2) certain ethical issues. On the first matter, Muhammed believed that both Jews and Christians wrongly interpreted their Scriptures. On the second matter, the Jews were accused of misrepresenting ethical issues, such as the question of whether the Torah demands stoning for adultery. The Hadith charges that the Jews attempted to deceive Muhammed with respect to the adequate punishment for the sin of adultery.<sup>11</sup> Muhammed's trust in the previous Scriptures is evidenced in the encouragement he receives from the Qur'an to find confirmation of his own mission in these same Scriptures ("If you are in doubt concerning what we have revealed to you, ask those who have read the Book before you," 10:94).

The Muslim accusation, then, that Christians have corrupted their Scriptures does not seem to have a Quranic warrant. Aside from apologetic purposes, it may depend rather on the Muslim concept of revelation transposed from the Qur'an and applied to the biblical text (more on this below). Hermeneutical problems are at stake, and they should be dealt with as such. Muslims should thus be invited to study the Jewish and Christian Scriptures which they claim to accept as coming from God and

to dialogue with Christians on their proper interpretation, “in the best possible way,” as the Qur’an suggests (29:46). This would be similar to common studies of the Hebrew Bible by Jews and Christians.<sup>12</sup> Christians may encourage Muslims to study the New Testament in particular and be challenged by its own formulations and structure. One does not encounter Truth without consequences!

There is a second foundational point. The Qur’an’s (and Muslims’) conception of revelation and inspiration (held as a basic presupposition) is so foreign to biblical practice and sensitivity that “attempt must be made to clarify the confusions and surmount the contradictions.”<sup>13</sup> Important questions of revelation and inspiration, of God’s authority and man’s instrumentality under God, must be explored from a Christian perspective for the benefit of Muslims, if we wish to convince them to give a fair hearing to the biblical message and to listen to narratives that are no less divine because the human so permeates them. Only then can Jesus’ proclamation of salvation and God’s rule reach them without the strangeness they experience so often when they read portions of the Bible for the first time (We need some sort of New Testament introduction for Muslims, as Cragg suggests).<sup>14</sup> Muslims are convinced that the Qur’an is God’s *literal revelation*; inspiration is *tanzil*, the descending of God’s Word from heaven to earth. In concrete terms, it is a dictation, given through angelic mediation in explicit Arabic to Muhammed, who ensures its “protection from even slips of the tongue,” by rehearsing it anew and having it recorded and memorized by his followers.<sup>15</sup> For orthodox Islam, this is the only miracle God performed through Muhammed. It is the more extraordinary that

Muslim tradition holds the prophet to have been an *‘ummî*, unlettered, who could neither read nor write.<sup>16</sup> He could not have produced something with the majestic poetry, the literary and religious qualities of the inimitable Qur’an. This conception verifies a Muslim axiom that needs to be scrutinized and criticized as it applies to inspiration, the person of Christ, and the doctrine of God. The axiom could be thus expressed: *Less to man, more to God, or the more an activity is divine, the less it is human.*<sup>17</sup> This is a paradox in Islam. For the Qur’an to be the Word of God, it must have nothing human in it. Clearly, serious consequences ensue from such a position. Among them, God reveals only his will; he does not reveal himself. This may be the cause for which *shirk*, associationism, is considered the most heinous sin: God and man may have nothing in common.<sup>18</sup>

The Bible does not sanction this perspective. We might actually turn the axiom on its head. The more an act is divine, the more it is human, because it is less affected by sin and disobedience. The reality of man’s creation in God’s image suggests that “God’s employment of human agency ...enhance[s], harness[es] and fulfil[s] the human potential;”<sup>19</sup> it does not diminish or hinder it. To reveal his will and himself, God does not need to limit, less still to negate, man’s participation in the process. The presence of man’s personal marks in Holy Writ is an indication of God’s power and intimate knowledge of the human agents he uses, as B. B. Warfield points out.<sup>20</sup> Divine revelation is what humans (the inspired prophets and apostles) do best, as human beings. Think of the boldness of the apostle Paul citing God’s Holy Word and writing, “Isaiah is bold to say...” (Rom 10:20)!<sup>21</sup>

There is a sign here. In spite of its strong

emphasis on God's sovereignty, Islam displays a strange unwillingness to let God freely interact with man. If Muhammed receives the Word of God, he must be completely passive; his intelligence, will, and personality do not consciously participate in the process (hence the Muslim understanding of *'ummî*, as applied to him, an illiterate who can neither read nor write; see 7:157-8). From a Christian point of view, man is not a foreign or threatening principle to God, for he is God's own creation, made in the image of the Creator. When God acts on and in his creation, his condescension contributes to his glory; it does not diminish it. He is, therefore, able to use all human resources (with the exception of sin) to reveal his will and manifest himself. Ultimately the incarnation of the eternal Logos hinges on this capacity. The sign leads to a question (that cannot be satisfactorily answered here). Could the basic difference between Islam and Christianity be that the former sees God and man as rivals? Hence the extreme difficulty (perhaps impossibility) to maintain strict monotheism and genuine interaction between God and his creation.

At any rate, Christian and Muslim conceptions of inspiration and revelation are quite different.<sup>22</sup> If we keep this fact in mind, we may understand, without accepting, the following reaction of a Muslim scholar at the reading of the Bible: "From the point of view of Islam, although western Christianity is based on revelation, it is not a revealed religion in the sense that Islam is," because there is no "revealed Law (*Shari'ah*) in the teachings, sayings and model actions (i.e. *Sunnah*) of Jesus" as recorded in the New Testament writings.<sup>23</sup> When Muslims are presented with a copy of the New Testament, containing four Gospels (not one), a historical narrative

presented as historical research written by someone not directly acquainted with Jesus, and epistles that respond to particular occasions and people, their reaction is, "How can this be divine revelation?" We need patience, care, wisdom, and literal Christian love, Christ-like love, to understand and answer; but answer we must if we care for Muslims to have a proper understanding of the gospel of Christ. Now, we are ready to inquire about the Muslim Jesus—Jesus in Islam.

### The Quranic Portrait of Jesus

I propose to start with the Quranic presentation of Jesus. There are elements that have connections with the canonical Gospels (and with some apocryphal writings, the proto-evangelium of James and the infancy narratives of Pseudo-Matthew). Four aims are in view: First, to understand the Quranic picture of Jesus; second, to underscore the commonalities and to point out the differences between the Qur'an and the apostolic interpretation in the Gospels and epistles (the Qur'an is, in many instances, closer to the biblical account than suspected); third, to assess and clarify misunderstandings; and finally, to inquire whether the Quranic Jesus is amenable to the biblical elements that give Jesus uniqueness and centrality in the Christian faith.

There are some 93 verses that refer directly to Jesus in the Qur'an. References are mostly grouped in chapters (surahs), namely 2 (vv. 87, 136, 253), 3 (vv. 33-55, 59), 4 (vv. 156-159, 171-172), 5 (vv. 46, 78, 110-117) and 19 (Mary, vv. 2-34). A few other scattered verses include 32:50; 43:63; 57:27; 61:6; 66:12.<sup>24</sup> Other Quranic passages, without referring explicitly to Jesus, have some bearing on the Muslim conception of him, including passages that reject forms of the

doctrine of the Trinity (or what Muslims understand under that label) and those that condemn idolatry in the form of associationism (ascribing divinity to mere creatures or to idols; see 5:117 and 112:2-4).

### *Qur'anic Names and Titles of Jesus*

'Issa is the proper name of Jesus in the Qur'an (used about 25 times) and that by which Muslims generally refer to him. This name is absent from the Bible and Christian tradition and seems to be unknown outside of Islam. Muslims and non-Muslims have speculated concerning its origins. Some Western scholars explained it as a corruption of "Esau" (starting with Pautz Otto and others in the nineteenth century<sup>25</sup>), due to misinformation given to Muhammed by the Jews, whose hostility to Jesus brought about this deception. According to another proposal, Muhammed inversed the Hebrew consonants of the redemptive name (*Yesu'ah* means "Yahweh saves"). This explanation seems forced, as a simple inversion of the letters does not produce 'Issa. Yet, another explanation is that 'Issa is an Arabic derivation—though unusual—from the Greek rather than the Hebrew, combined with imitation of Muss, (Moses). It is difficult to be assertive; any explanation must be harmonious with the fact that the Qur'an fosters a genuine esteem for Jesus and his mother.<sup>26</sup> At any rate, 'Issa bears none of the biblical connotations associated with *Jesus* ("God saves"), the Saviour, because he is *Emmanuel*, "God with us" (see Matt 1:21, 23, quoting Isa 7:14).

*Son of Mary* is the most common title the Qur'an uses to refer to Jesus (2:87; 2:253; 3:45; 4:171; 5:17, 72, 75, 78, 110, 112, 114, 116; 9:31; 21:91; 23:50; 33:7; 43:57; 52:27; 61:6,14; see also Surah 19 (entitled "Mary"), vv. 16-33). Christian apologists, especially in the

Middle Ages, read the title as an attempt at injury, for to refer to a man through his mother and not through his father (as is the general Arabic custom) suggests impropriety. The criticism is unwarranted, for the Qur'an and Islam show the highest respect for both Mary, the blessed one, and her son.<sup>27</sup> The narrative of the virgin birth of Jesus, among the most detailed passages on Jesus and Mary, leaves no doubt in the mind of the reader. Jesus was miraculously conceived when God's Spirit breathed into his mother's womb. After the birth, God instructs Mary to name him "son of Mary." God's vindication is proof that the baby was conceived supernaturally, through God's direct creative act (see 3:45-46). The virgin birth however does not entitle Jesus to be the "Son of God." If God created him miraculously, he did so with Adam too. In fact, the Qur'an warns the Jews of Jesus' time not to "commit excesses" in their religion by saying "Trinity," for Jesus is only the son of Mary (4:171).

Jesus is a *prophet (nabi)* of God (together with Abraham, Ishmael, Noah, and Moses; 2:136; 3:84) and God's *messenger (or apostle, rasul)* to whom God gave a revelation—the gospel (4:157, 171; 5:75; 57:27). As an apostle, Jesus confirms the Torah entrusted to Moses. He "announces good tidings of a messenger who comes after me, whose name is Praised one [*Ahmad*]. When [Jesus] came to the Israelites with clear proofs, they said: It is mere magic" (61:6). Jesus is portrayed as announcing the coming of Muhammed, in a fashion similar to the Old Testament prophets announcing the coming of the Messiah.<sup>28</sup> As a prophet, Jesus was instructed in wisdom, in the Torah, and in the gospel (3:48; 5:113).

Jesus is frequently called the *Messiah (al-Masih; cf. Hebrew Mashiâh)* in the Qur'an: "And remember when the angels

said: ‘Behold! Mary! God gives you glad tidings of a Word coming from him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious (highly honoured) in this world and the hereafter, and one of those brought near (unto) God’” (3:45; see 4:75; 4:171-72). Muslim explanations of the word are many. The most common seems to link the word in Arabic to “wander” or “travel afar,” for Jesus had an itinerant ministry and was in some ways a wanderer who had “nowhere to lay his head.” Others relate the word to the verb for “touch” or “anoint,” since Jesus anointed the sick and the lepers (he passed his hand over them) to heal them. The word was also understood as passive in form. As “anointed,” Jesus was “set aside by God and for his service,” or perhaps “chosen” by God. None of the explanations explicitly display a redemptive meaning for the word. It has nothing of the historical and redemptive development associated with its counterpart in the biblical record. It has no history of redemption that comes to fulfillment in Jesus, son of Mary and son of Joseph, but also son of David and Son of God. Two additional meanings, “king” and “righteous,” mentioned by Razi,<sup>29</sup> would have made it easier to connect the Arabic *al-Masîh* to the “Messiah” and its biblical history from God’s promises to David (2 Sam 7; see also Ps 2; 110; Isa 7; 9; 11) to their fulfilment in the New Testament. Alas, “the Messiah, Jesus Son of Mary, was only a messenger of God and his Word conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from him” (Surah 4:171).

In fact, Jesus is even called *Word of God* (“Jesus the Messiah, son of Mary, was an apostle of God, and His Word,” 4:171) and *Word from God* (in angelic messages to Zechariah and Mary; see 3:39, 45). Muslims explain the expression as applied to Jesus in two ways, either because his birth results

from God’s creative command (compared to that of Adam: “The likeness of Jesus with God is as the likeness of Adam. He created him of dust, then He said unto him: Be! And he is,” 3:59), or because he proclaimed the Word of God with power, accompanied by many signs. Neither of the explanations is satisfying. To the first, one may retort, “Why is Adam not called Word of God, since his birth was similar to Jesus’,” and to the second, “Why was Muhammed not called Word of God, for his preaching was also powerful?” It is likely that the source of this usage is to be found in the writings of John (John 1:1-18; 1 John 1:2); Jesus is called the “Word of God” because he is the eternal Logos of God who “tabernacled” among us, full of grace and truth and revealing God. It is interesting to notice that, for Muslims, the eternal Word of God has been sent down in the form of a book; whereas in the Bible the Word has become incarnate. If the first is acceptable to the Muslims, why should they not consider the veracity of the second?<sup>30</sup>

Elsewhere, the Qur’an uses another title to describe Jesus—*Servant* (or slave) of God: “He is nothing but a slave on whom we bestowed favour, and we made a example for the children of Israel” (43:59; see 4:172). The Arabic word properly means “slave” (see Hebrew *‘ebed*). The New Testament applies the title to Jesus, for he saw in Isaiah’s Servant Songs (42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-11; and 52:13-53:12) Scriptures that applied to and were fulfilled by him. Thus the New Testament uses the title “Servant” of Jesus within a historic and redemptive context. His servanthood is essential because it was the means through which he expressed his solidarity with his people. He identified completely with humanity in order to accomplish a substitutionary atoning work on their behalf, as

the representative of his people (Isa 52:13-53:13; Matt 3:17; 17:5; Mark 10:45; see Phil 2.6-11, which has the Greek *doulos*, equivalent to the Hebrew *'ebed*). In Islam, the title "Servant" underlines the creature status of Jesus (see Surah 3:39). Yet, there is something unique in his perfect obedience, even according to the Qur'an. The New Testament sees in it the supreme sacrifice (for it led him to the cross), the highest expression of love, and the means of humanity's salvation.

In summary, the titles of the Quranic Jesus show him to be a highly esteemed prophet and apostle, with a uniqueness that Muslim tradition is not able to explain satisfactorily. Only Jesus is born of a virgin (the parallel with Adam is really far-fetched). He alone is Spirit and a Word of God. He alone is without sin and praised in unique ways. Yet Jesus is human, like all the other prophets; he is God's creature and his servant. This Quranic portrait falls short of the testimony of the Gospels where Jesus is indeed a prophet and messenger, but more than both. He is the eternal Word, the uncreated Son, incarnated among us. His servanthood is genuine; he is the Servant of Yahweh whose perfectly obedient service led him to secure the salvation of his people from their sins.

### *Jesus' Conception of Himself according to the Qur'an*

The Qur'an relates Jesus' own understanding of himself and his mission. Shortly after his birth, while still in the cradle, Jesus intervenes to protect his mother, who was accused of adultery by her people:

Then she brought the child to her people, carrying him: and they said: "O Mary! Truly, you have committed a monstrous thing! Sister of Aaron, your father was not a wicked

man, nor was your mother a woman unchaste." Mary pointed to the child then; but they said, "How shall we speak to one who is still in the cradle, a little child?"

He said, "I am indeed God's servant; God has given me the Book, and made me a prophet. Blessed he has made me, wherever I may be; and He has enjoined me to pray, and to give the alms, so long as I live, and likewise to cherish my mother; He has not made me arrogant, or miserable: Peace be upon me the day I was born, and the day that I die, and the day that I shall be raised up to life [resurrected]" (19:27-33).

This first prophetic proclamation of Jesus in the Qur'an is extremely instructive. What does it show? (1) Jesus is God's slave. Muslims hear these words in the mouth of Jesus as an early refutation of the Christian claim that he is divine. In spite of his miraculous birth, Jesus testifies to being merely a human being, chosen by God's free and sovereign grace to be His servant and do his bidding. (2) Jesus received the Scripture from God. Aside from the question of the feasibility of a baby receiving God's Word (discussed by Muslims), the words show that God had given his revelation to Jesus while he was still in his mother's womb. God's call could not be more sovereign and Jesus' servanthood (and humanity) more patent in its passivity.<sup>31</sup> (3) Jesus is a prophet (*nabî*)—he reveals God's existence and uniqueness to his people—and an apostle (*rasûl*)—God's messenger who receives a revelation from God, condemns idolatry, fosters the practice of good, and discourages the practice of evil. (4) Jesus is blessed. This special blessing (understood in different ways by Muslim) sets him apart. Faithful to God throughout his ministry, he was kept in the Truth and honoured by God when he was taken up to heaven. The blessing may also refer to Jesus' ability to perform miracles,

heal the sick, and help the needy. (5) The message received by Jesus is basic monotheism. The gospel, according to this verse, is to observe prayer and give alms, two of the five fundamental pillars of Islam. Lacking from this list (when compared with the Qur'an), are the confession of faith, fast, and pilgrimage to Mecca, which are proper to Islam.<sup>32</sup>

### **Jesus' Message and Ministry According to the Qur'an**

Since God's revelation to Muhammed supersedes all the previous ones, it was not necessary to repeat in great detail what had been previously revealed. To rehearse God's message to Jesus and his mission would have had only a historical value. Hence the sketchy and repetitive character of the Qur'an's portrayal of Jesus. Jesus was sent to the people of Israel to bring God's message to them. Quranic interest seems to be limited to the nativity scene and some miracles (some of which were performed during Jesus' infancy).<sup>33</sup> This has truly precluded a genuine attention to the actual ministry of Jesus, his proclamation of the Rule of God, his teaching in parables, his theology and ethics epitomized in the Sermon on the Mount, and his self-consciousness as the King-Servant, Son of God, and God the Son. What do we find?

### ***Confirmation of Previous Scriptures***

Jesus confirms to the Jews what God had already revealed in the Torah. This confirmation is not a simple rehearsal of the Torah; in fact, parts of the Torah are left out, as Jesus brings new truth (the gospel). The Quranic Jesus is not ready to assert with the Matthean Jesus, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but

fulfill them. Truly, I tell you, until heavens and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (Matt 5:17-18). The Christ of the Bible has a ministry of continuity—to fulfill or bring to completion what the Law and the Prophets announced and expected.<sup>34</sup>

The Quranic Jesus confirms a limited amount of Old Testament revelation. There is only one God who is creator, all powerful and universal legislator. He speaks through the prophets, and he rewards mankind according to works on the day of judgment. In other words, Jesus preaches the monotheistic doctrines of Islam available to him.

The Qur'an fails to perceive radical redefinition of basic biblical categories by Jesus in the New Testament. Monotheism is upheld, yet deepened and enriched: "In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God" (John 1:1); "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known" (1:18); "... that they may be one as we are one..." (17:22; see also the trinitarian monotheism articulated by the apostles, e.g. 1 Cor 8:4-6). It is paradoxical that the Muslim Jesus, who came to enlighten his people "with clear proofs, with wisdom, and to make clear to you some of that concerning which you differ" (Surah 43:63), brings so little by way of new truth and wisdom. Razi thought that the wisdom referred to in the passage is knowledge of God's essence, attributes, and actions. Muslim readers would have to turn to the New Testament Scriptures to have access to these.

## *Jesus' Ministry and Death*

Jesus' ministry in the Qur'an would appear rather limited to readers of the Gospels. After his virgin birth, one finds miracles (very few are detailed; Jesus spoke from the cradle and had access to knowledge and information beyond human capacities), healing (expressed in general terms: "the sick and the lepers"), and resurrection of the dead (with little concrete detail) by God's leave and power. Moreover, Jesus preached the gospel and enjoined on his people to worship the unique God, eschew idolatry, perform prayers, and give alms.

The topic of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus (together with his divinity) takes us to the heart of the debate between Christians and Muslims. What is at issue more precisely is Jesus' death on the cross. Three preliminary remarks will help situate the problem:

- (1) For Islam in its entirety, Jesus did not die an atoning death. Aside from Christ's divinity, nothing is denied with equal vehemence (and sometimes violence).
- (2) Yet, some Quranic texts seem (at least on a possible reading) to affirm Jesus' death.
- (3) The Muslim reasons for denying Jesus' death are problematic at best and must be examined.

Four Quranic texts must be studied to understand the Muslim perspective. The traditional Muslim denial of Jesus' death is based on the following text (which responds to Jewish boasting that they have overcome the Messiah):

They claim, "We killed the Messiah Jesus, son of Mary, the Apostle of God." But they killed him not, nor did they crucify him. They were under the illusion that they had (But so it was made to appear to them). Those who differ about this matter

are full of doubts. They have no knowledge but follow only conjecture. Assuredly, they killed him not. On the contrary, God raised him to himself, and God is all-powerful, all-wise. And there are none of the people of the Book, who will not believe in him before his death. On the Day of the Resurrection he [Jesus] will be a witness against them (4:157-59).

A fair reading of the passage would lead to the conclusion that, in spite of their boast to have overcome the Messiah, the Jews were not able to kill him or crucify him. God has vindicated him and caused him to ascend to the heavens.<sup>35</sup> Yet, it is possible to read it otherwise. Before offering that suggestion, the other texts will be quoted.

The second text states,

And remember when God said: "O Jesus! I am gathering you [*tawaffa*, "causing you to die"] and causing you to ascend unto Me [I will exalt you to Myself], and cleansing you of the unbelievers and am setting those who follow you above those who disbelieve until the Day of the Resurrection. Then unto Me ye will return, and I shall judge between you as to what wherein ye used to differ." (3:55)

Here, non-Muslim readers of the Qur'an point out that the verb *tawaffa*, which means literally "to receive," "to take back," "has become the most common verb in Arabic to express the action of 'causing someone's death.'"<sup>36</sup> According to this reading, God allowed Jesus to die, but he vindicated him by "causing him to ascend unto Him" through the resurrection. The other two passages are read in a similar fashion.

In the third text, on the day of judgment, God asks Jesus about his teaching during his lifetime:

God said “Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to people, ‘Worship me and my mother as gods in disregard of God Himself?’” He will say: “Glory to you, never would I say what I had no right to.... I said to them only what you commanded me to say, namely ‘Worship and serve God, my Lord and your Lord.’ As long as I was among them I bore witness to them and when you took me to Yourself, it was you who were Watcher over them. For you are a Witness to all things” (5:116-117).

The fourth text is found in Surah 19, which contains an account of the birth of John the Baptist, followed by the annunciation and the birth of Jesus (19:16-33). While in the cradle, Jesus expresses the blessing granted to him by God in these words: “Peace be upon me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the day that I shall be raised up to life” (19:33). The same formula (using the third person singular) is used in the case of the Baptist in v. 15: “Peace on him the day he was born, the day that he dies, and the day that he will be raised up to life.” If John the Baptist was put to death (Mt 14: 3-12), should the same meaning not be attributed to the phrase used of Jesus—that he would be put to death?

These Quranic texts, at least when taken at face value, seem to suggest that even from a Quranic point of view, Jesus died. Moucarray, who thoroughly studied these texts, reaches the conclusion that the Qur’an does recognize Jesus’ death and proclaims God’s vindication of his servant through the resurrection. He interprets the difficult verses in 4:157-59 in light of the other three passages:

The Jews wanted to subject Jesus to such a shameful death [death by hanging, which falls under the curse of Dt 21:22-23] (cf. Matt 27:20-23). Did they succeed? They certainly

thought they did, but they were under an illusion, for God saved his servant, cleared his name of guilt and justified him by raising him from the dead and lifting him up to be with himself.<sup>37</sup>

If such an interpretation is possible, it may establish from the Qur’an, that the prophet Jesus was faithful to God unto death and that God somewhat vindicated him by resurrection and ascension. However, it would not prove that such a death was redemptive. Jesus’ elevation to God would not really be vindication, for resurrection and ascension were not, in this scenario, public.

### **A Christian Response**

Any self-consistent Christian response will discern major truths in the Quranic portrait of Jesus, some serious Muslim misunderstandings of Christian doctrine and interpretation, and ultimately irreconcilable differences between the two faiths. In dialoguing with Muslims, Christians should acknowledge shared beliefs, clarify Muslim misunderstandings, and think through possible bridges from Islam to the gospel.

First, in regard to shared beliefs, Christians and Muslims hold in common important truths that should be emphasized in the face of easily erected barriers. Two examples will suffice. (1) Both Christians and Muslims affirm the humanity of Jesus. Jesus’ humanity is a central truth of the New Testament Scriptures (see the synoptic narratives; John 1:9, 14; Heb 2:14, 17; 5:7-81) and Christian theology. Christian faith and salvation are in no way diminished by fully and gratefully acknowledging Jesus’ humanity. The spirit that denies that Christ has come in the flesh is of the Antichrist (1 John 4:3-4). The heresy of Docetism (Christ only “appeared” to be

human), which arose before the birth of Islam, must be declared as heretical in Christian-Muslim dialogue. Furthermore, from a Christian viewpoint it must be stated even stronger: Jesus' humanity is seen as a clear demonstration of God's awesome love for his creatures. The apostles marvel that the Creator so loved His creatures that He became one of them (Phil 2:5-8; Heb 2:10-16). That the Creator becomes creature and suffers and dies is the supreme expression of love and might.

(2) Both Christians and Muslims affirm monotheism and reject tri-theism. The confession of the Torah, "Hear O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut 5:4), is the Christian confession. Belief in the Trinity does not imply belief in three gods, as Muslims falsely accuse us of affirming (more on this below). In fact, on this point, one who truly values God's transcendence and his mystery will find it difficult to understand the Muslim insistence, itself based on the Qur'an, that God *must* be one and unique. Whence this necessity? Should God not be allowed, especially if we seriously affirm these attributes, the freedom to be as he reveals himself to be? The question itself points to the arrogance, perhaps the idolatry of doing otherwise.

Second, a genuine interest in Muslims will lead us to clear up any misunderstandings of which we may be aware. Let there be no other *skandalon*—no other stumbling block—but that of the cross of Jesus the Christ (cf. 1 Cor 1:23). Believers should attempt to dispel Muslim confusion concerning several Christian doctrines. Three examples will be given.

(1) As mentioned above, The Trinity is not tri-theism; Christians do not believe in three gods. A particular Muslim confusion is that the "Trinity" consists of the Father, Son, and *Mary*. The problem here is prob-

ably related to historic assertions of Monophysist Christianity between the fifth and the seventh centuries. The affirmation of Cyrillian Christianity that Jesus had only one nature, coupled with a developing devotion to Mary, ended in her being declared *theotokos*, "God's bearer" or the "mother of God." Since in Syria, Egypt, and Arabia, Christianity was represented in the form of Monophysism, it was probably this formulation that influenced Muhammed's understanding.

(2) Though the confusion has been denounced many times, we need to emphasize that Jesus' sonship is not "adoptionism." The divinity of Jesus is not the result of God taking to himself a human being, Jesus the son of Mary who would *become* God's son. The language of "beget" and "begotten" (to translate *monogenēs*) is partly at fault here.<sup>38</sup> The eternal Son of God became man. Without renouncing his divinity he acquired a human nature, so as to become truly and fully human.<sup>39</sup> Part of the misunderstanding stems from pre-Islamic polytheism in Arabia, when Arabs believed that God could have a wife or wives (72:3) and sons (2:116; 6:100-101) or daughters (16:57; 17:40; 37:149-153).

(3) The Christian understanding of the cross must also be clarified. Jesus' death is not evidence of God's failure, but instead, it is the very wisdom and power of God rooted in the plan of God before the foundations of the world to save his people from their sins (cf. Acts 2:22-23; 4:27-28; Mt 1:21). The Muslim rejection of the reality of the cross is often backed by objections such as, "How could God allow his faithful prophet (let alone his Son!) to be killed in so unjust and degrading a manner? Why was he not rescued?" The Quranic consensus and Muslim misconception declare, "To Jesus at the cross, death did not hap-

pen. . . . It need not happen, and, moreover, it should not happen. It did not, historically, it need not redemptively, and it should not, morally, happen to Jesus.” The Christian testimony, however, is that “it did, necessarily, and it ought—however disconcertingly—to happen.”<sup>40</sup> God could have rescued Jesus from death on the cross, but *that*, in light of God’s plan of redemption, would have been a defeat. According to Hebrews 5:7, “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and *he was heard*”—not to be rescued from death, but to die in order to destroy death and its power in a glorious resurrection.

Third, in regard to potential bridges from Islam to the gospel, one example will be mentioned here. The Sonship of Jesus in the New Testament may be compared to the relation between God and his Word in the Qur’an: God’s Word is eternal and uncreated, yet distinct from God. It has “descended” on Muhammed and found verbal expression in the Qur’an, yet, it remains in heaven. Muslims lack consistency when they accuse Christians of polytheism for believing something that is structurally parallel. The eternal Logos of God did not come to us in the form of a book, but as the God-man, the Lord who took the condition of a servant. In Christian-Muslim dialogue this potential bridge needs to be explored further.

### Conclusion

In the end, what do Christians find distinctive in the teaching of the New Testament? In a sentence—God is in Christ reconciling the world to himself. As Cragg notes perceptively, the meaning of “God in Christ” for Christians

will be seen to rest upon a conviction characteristic of all three Semitic faiths, namely, that God can be known by man only in conjunction with the human situation. The formula . . . has always to be: ‘God and...’ . . . . In Judaism, the central ‘association’ by which God is believed and known is peoplehood and covenant—‘God and His people’. In Islam, that which ‘associates’ God with humanity is prophethood, and supremely the prophethood of Muhammed. The Christian faith has the same trust in God’s ‘relationality’ to man and history but locates it finally and inclusively in Jesus—in Jesus not simply as the spokesman of a message, but also as the ‘event of grace’ in which divine love is known in action.<sup>41</sup>

Christian apologetics strives to show that, if monotheism is to retain its sense, it must be trinitarian; otherwise it risks degenerating either into some form of dualism (God and man, God and creation, God and matter, God and power), or a form of pantheism. Trinitarian monotheism ensures that there is a valid distinction between God and his creatures and provides the foundation for it in Christ. Dualistic and pantheistic tendencies have been shown to grow on the soil of strict (unitarian) monotheism (Al-Hallâdj is reported to have said, “I am God, I am the ultimate Reality—or truth”: *Ana’l-Haqq*).<sup>42</sup> Trinitarian monotheism, manifested concretely in the Lord Jesus Christ, the God-man, is the foundation for all saving religion and genuine monotheistic religion.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Kateregga’s rejoinder to Shenk’s presentation of Jesus in B. D. Kateregga and D. W. Shenk, *Islam and Christianity: A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 132. The point may have to be conceded. Christian ideas, almost always negative, about

Muhammed are often formed without any serious reading of the Qur'an or Muslim tradition. If a number of books have been written on Islam (fewer on Muhammed) by Christians (especially after September 11), few have sought truly to understand. Among the exceptions are C. G. Moucarray, *The Prophet and the Messiah: An Arab Christian's Perspective on Islam and Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002); K. Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956, 1964); idem, *Muhammad and the Christian: A Question of Response* (New York: Orbis, 1984); and idem, *Jesus and Islam: An Exploration* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985).

<sup>2</sup>After I finished writing this article, I came across Tarik Khalidi, ed. and trans., *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), who seeks to offer a portrait of Jesus from Islamic tradition: ascetic, mystical, and spiritual. The hundreds of quotations gathered paint a portrait that is faithful to Islam and may be challenging to Christians.

<sup>3</sup>If Muslim attempts at understanding Jesus (few and far between today) are mostly aimed at controversy and apologetics (yet, see Khalidi's book), there are better examples from the past.

<sup>4</sup>"There is a Christian constituency to educate in the significance of the place Jesus occupies in the belief and devotion of Muslims. The status he enjoys there has often been neglected or discounted by Chris-

tians. The reasons are not far to seek; for, as they see it, a sad reductionism has occurred. By New Testament criteria the Quranic Jesus is a very attenuated figure. Many of his most cherished deeds and sayings are left to silence, and what the Qur'an does with the final climax of Jesus' ministry ... has desolating consequences for Christianity" (K. Cragg, *Jesus and Islam*, 4). One can feel some of this desolation even in scholars otherwise sympathetic to Muslim concerns. See for example Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus and the Qur'an* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); and R. Arnaldez, *Jésus dans la pensée musulmane* (coll. « Jésus et Jésus-Christ »; Paris: Desclée, 1988). On the other hand, genuine dialogue means for Christians "not comparing the ideals of Christianity with the reality of Islam, radical Muslims with moderate Christians, or mainstream Christianity with Islamic sects" (Moucarray, 17).

<sup>5</sup>The story is reported in the Hadith (see Bukhari, *Sahih*, Arabic-English ed. in 9 vol. [Beirut: Dar al-arabia, 1985] 6:477-481), as quoted in Moucarray, 38-39. Very competent summaries are found in R. Blachère, *Introduction au Coran*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1991); and A. Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ân* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1937).

<sup>6</sup>The "Prophetic tradition" (*Hadith*) sometimes alludes to this phenomenon. The reliable Bukhari (870) reports the following narrative that shows why Muslims, in general, are dissuaded from reading previous

Scriptures: "Ibn 'Abbas noticed that some Muslims had talks with Jews on religious issues. He was concerned about the outcome of these relations and sought to deter Muslims from engaging in such discussions. 'Muslims! How do you ask the people of the Scriptures, though your Book [i.e. The Qur'an] which was revealed to his Prophet is the most recent information from God and you recite the Book that has not been distorted? ...' And Ibn 'Abbas added: 'Isn't the knowledge revealed to you sufficient to prevent you from asking them?'" (as quoted in Moucarray, 58). This state of affairs shows a non-Quranic attitude, for the Qur'an encourages Muslims to turn to the Jewish and Christian Scriptures if they have questions or doubts about God's revelation (Surah 10:94; 16:43). Moreover, by not considering seriously the biblical record on Jesus and the developments of Christian tradition, Islam ended up with an extremely impoverished portrait of Jesus. Even Mystics and Sufis, more sensitive and less hindered by dogmatic considerations, did not avail themselves of truths that could have transformed not only their vision of Christ, but their own spiritual pilgrimage. On this question, see R. Arnaldez, *Jésus dans la pensée musulmane*, 242ff.

<sup>7</sup>See the excellent treatment of Moucarray, 25-79.

<sup>8</sup>These questions are dealt with in any reasonably good introductions to the Old and New Testaments. One may also turn to Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the*

*New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); and F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1988) for detailed information. Misguided and radical biblical criticism has at times fuelled Muslim opposition to the Gospels.

<sup>9</sup>Augustine and Pascal both appealed to forms of this argument. See Augustine, *The City of God* 18.46, vol. 2, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956); Blaise Pascal, *Pensees: Notes on Religion and other Subjects*, ed. Louis Lafuma, (Aldine Press, 1960) 474, 502. There is a very competent summary of this question in P. Sellier, *Pascal et Saint Augustin* (Paris: Arm-and Colin, 1970), 483ff.

<sup>10</sup>Muhammed's relations with the Jews in Medina started on a positive note, but deteriorated when the Jews refused to acknowledge him as a prophet. For the Qur'an asserts that the coming of Muhammed was predicted in both Torah and Gospel (7:157; 61:6). Jews found no such indications in their Scriptures (neither did Christians in theirs); the doctrine of the falsification of Scriptures by Jews (and Christians) has to do with events surrounding Muhammed's life. On predictions of Muhammed in the Torah and Gospel, see Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 260-76; and Moucarray, chapter 20.

<sup>11</sup>This seems to be the regular interpretation of most classical Muslim theologians, such as the venerable Razi (1149-1209). For him, since they

are both God's Word, Torah and Gospel have been protected by God and passed down through safe and trustworthy means of transmission (in spite of minor changes they may have suffered). Hence, Razi interprets almost all the Quranic passages relevant to our discussion as referring to misleading interpretations, not to textual corruptions. See Moucarray, 44-53, for citations from Razi's commentary.

<sup>12</sup>See the attempt by Christians and Muslims to read each other's Scriptures documented in *The Challenge of the Scriptures: The Bible and the Qur'an*, Muslim-Christian Research Group, trans. Stuart E. Brown (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989).

<sup>13</sup>Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 6.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 7. Such an introduction would retranslate the New Testament from Greek categories to more Semitic and oriental ones. The exercise is surely justified, for the New Testament background, and in particular Jesus' ministry and teaching, is utterly Semitic.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 8 (see also 191). This mode of revelation applies to all prophetic revelation: "The Prophet receives *verbatim* the given content in the given words. Subsequent inscribing is the exact reiteration of what was divinely mediated to his lips" (*Ibid.*). As a matter of fact, we know that there have been different collections of the Qur'an and that it required interventions of the kaliphates to bring about unity and uniformity. The third Khalif, 'Uthman, insured that all copies that did not conform to the *editio princeps* were destroyed. On matters of

textual criticism of the Qur'an, Muslims' efforts are timid or non-existent to date. Mostly, Quranic textual critical endeavors have been attempted by non-Muslim scholars. See R. Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1953); R. Blachère, *Introduction au Coran*; Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'an*; and *idem*, *Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938).

<sup>16</sup>This interpretation of the word 'ummî has been disputed by a number of western scholars (such as Régis Blachère) who understand the word to mean rather "prophet of the Gentiles." Muhammed had been sent to a pagan people, who had not previously received a revelation from God (See Blachère, 6-8). Muhammed's illiteracy may have been advanced for apologetic reasons. Since the prophet could not have read the previous Scriptures, the Qur'an must have come directly from God.

<sup>17</sup>The latter is Cragg's formulation in *Muhammad and the Christian*, 84. In this perspective, adds Cragg, "God's recruitment of personal powers requires an abeyance of their due exercise in reason, emotion and love" (84). "Less to man, more to God" is the more succinct formulation by Henri Blocher, "L'Évangile et l'Islam : Relever le défi théologique," *Fac-Réflexion* 32 (1994) 4-17.

<sup>18</sup>See *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>19</sup>Cragg, *Muhammad and the Christian*, 84.

<sup>20</sup>See B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and*

*Authority of the Bible*, edited by Samuel G. Craig (reprint, with an introduction by C. Van Til, Phillipsburg, P&R, 1948).

<sup>21</sup>As noted by Blocher, 7.

<sup>22</sup>A fact recognized by serious parties concerned. See Kateregga and Shenk, 32-33, 117.

<sup>23</sup>See Syed Muhammad al-Naqib al-'Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, 1978) 127f., as quoted in Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 8-9. For this Muslim writer, this is clear proof that contemporary Christianity is different from the religion founded by Jesus and authorized by God.

<sup>24</sup>Books on Jesus in Islam usually quote at length the Quranic material. See S. M. Zwemer, *The Muslim Jesus* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1912), (see chapters 1-3 in particular); H. Michaud, *Jésus selon le Coran* (Neuch, tel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1960); E. Hahn, *Jesus in Islam: A Christian View* (Hyderabad: Henry Martyn Institute of Islamic Studies, 1975); G. Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); R. Arnaldez, *Jésus, Fils de Marie, Prophète de l'Islam* (Paris: Desclése, 1980); Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 17-40; and Moucarry, *The Prophet and the Messiah*.

<sup>25</sup>See Zwemer, 34.

<sup>26</sup>Unsatisfied with the attempts at explanation, Cragg (*Jesus and the Muslim*, 38) suggests, with his usual irenism, "to leave possible technical explanations ... to silence and simply allow the puzzle to symbolize the deep distinction obtaining between the Christian Jesus of the

New Testament and the Islamic Jesus of the Qur'an. Two names, if remotely cognate, for one persona: one persona divergently revered and received."

<sup>27</sup>"And (remember) her who guarded her chastity; We breathed into her of Our Spirit, And We made her and her son a Sign for all peoples" (21:91; cf. 66:12). The sending of Jesus into the world is a manifestation of God's mercy to the peoples. Together with Mary, Jesus is the recipient of a special favour from God (23:50; 5:113). As an apostle sent to Israel, Jesus was made an example (43:57).

<sup>28</sup>The "Praised one" is in Arabic *Ahmad*, a grammatical form of Muhammed. Muslims correlate this verse with the promise made by Jesus of a comforter, a "Paraclete," whom the Father would give after Jesus' departure (John 14:16). The Greek form, *paraklētos*, is said by popular Muslim apologetics to have been substituted to *periklytos*, meaning the "praiseworthy one," roughly equivalent to the Arabic *Ahmad*. In truth, such an interpretation is practically impossible to defend. See Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 262-4; and Moucarry, 246ff.

<sup>29</sup>Razi lists ten different interpretations of the word. In addition to those mentioned above, *al-Masîh* was explained as attributed to Jesus (1) because he was pure; (2) because Gabriel touched him with his wing at birth to protect him from Satan's harm; (3) because he had sacred oil put on him at birth. The meanings *al-malik*, "king," and *al-siddik*, "the righteous one," are the closest pro-

posals to the biblical record (see references in Moucarry, 179-180).

<sup>30</sup>The Qur'an calls Jesus a Spirit from God (21:91; also in 4:171). In spite of some claims by Muslims, the word does not seem to refer to Gabriel. Though the source of the expression is difficult to ascertain, it may be connected to 1 Cor 15:45 where the risen Christ is called "life-giving Spirit."

<sup>31</sup>See R. Arnaldez, *Jésus, fils de Marie, prophète de l'Islam*, 134f., 145f.

<sup>32</sup>Muslim theologians observe that Jesus could not have recited the Islamic confession ("I believe that there is no other god but God, and that Muhammed is his Messenger"), for Muhammed was not yet born. Fast during the month of Ramadan commemorates the giving of the Qur'an and, thus, was not part of Jesus' mission. Pilgrimage to Mecca, because of its historical relation with Abraham through Ishmael, is proper to the Meccan prophet. So, the only two commandments that define monotheism during Jesus' time are prayer and almsgiving, and these were central to Jesus' religion. One should notice the emphasis on Jesus' love for his mother. Everywhere else, the Qur'an enjoins on children to respect both parents (2:83; 4:36; 6:151; 17:23). To single out Mary for respect is a proof of his miraculous birth. See Arnaldez, *Jésus, Fils de Marie, prophète de l'Islam*, 136-37.

<sup>33</sup>As Cragg observed, if the Gospels are sometimes said to be passion narratives with extended introductions, the Jesus' cycle in the Qur'an

is “nativity narrative with attenuated sequel” (*Jesus and the Muslim*, 26).

<sup>34</sup> Notice that the writing and collecting of the New Testament did not do away with the Old Testament documents. They are truly part of a unique Book, from beginning to end. Would that Muslims had included all the previous Scriptures with the Qur’an, to allow all those who are interested to read and compare.

<sup>35</sup> Muslims explain the phrase, “They were under the illusion that they had (But so it was made to appear to them),” to mean that God made someone (Judas Iscariot or someone else) to look like Jesus. Such a person was crucified, and Jesus himself was lifted up to heaven. For some of the theological and ethical problems raised by such a proposal, see Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 170ff.; and Moucarry, 133-137.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>38</sup> Cragg writes: “... ‘adoptionism’ and ‘docetism’ do betray their presence in what the Qur’an has to say about ‘errors’ concerning Jesus the prophet-servant, for which Christians were responsible.” (*Jesus and the Muslim*, 28)

<sup>39</sup> Cragg confirms this point despite (or, better still, because of) his sympathetic reading of Islam and the Qur’an: “One familiar example of the need for mutual sympathy here in Muslim/Christian discussion lies in the fact that technically, where the Qur’an remonstrates against Christian faith on Jesus’ incarnation, what it in fact accuses is not incar-

nation but adoptionism, itself a heresy. . . . The operative term is *ittikhadh* (cf. 17:111, 19:35, 25:2, 39:4).

God’s not taking to himself a son does not in itself deny, what the gospel means by ‘the Word became flesh’ and the Creed by ‘the only begotten Son’” (*Ibid.*, 38-39, note 7).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12. “Jesus is, for Christian faith, the warrant for confidence that God is love, but only because the warrant originates from God’s own initiative” (13).

<sup>42</sup> Blocher, 16.

Muslims love Jesus, too: 6 things you didn't know about Jesus in Islam. Muslims don't believe Jesus was the son of God, but they do revere him as a holy prophet. By Jennifer Williams@jenn\_ruth. Updated Dec 20, 2019, 1:01pm EST. Muslim women take a selfie in front of a Christian manger displayed in front of the Church of the Nativity in the West Bank town of Bethlehem on December 18, 2014. Thomas Coex/AFP via Getty Images. In Islam, Jesus, peace and blessings be upon him, is one of the five greatest messengers of God who are collectively known as the *al-Azm* or the Possessors of Steadfastness. Jesus is also a real person who lived in Roman Judea in the first century of the Common Era. Muslims share with Christians most of the basic outlines of Jesus's story, though there are certainly differences. In Islam, as well as in Christianity, Jesus was born to the Virgin Mary and was without a father. But for Muslims, Jesus is neither God nor the Son of God.