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Heavenly Religion or Unbelief? Muslim Perspectives on Christianity¹

David Marshall initially considers attitudes towards Christianity and Christians in the Qur'an, the primary sacred text of Islam, and how these have been classically interpreted. He then examines views of Christianity among contemporary Islamic writers, drawing on both scholarly figures such as Isma'il al-Faruqi and Seyyed Hossein Nasr as well as the highly polemical style of Ahmad Deedat. In the process he identifies how, from the Qur'an onwards, Islam has validated both the affirmation of Christianity as a heavenly religion and the rejection of Christianity as unbelief.

Anyone who becomes seriously involved in Christian-Muslim dialogue will soon become aware of a significant asymmetry within it. As they approach dialogue with Christians, Muslims bring with them an understanding of Christianity which they have absorbed from the days they first started to learn about their faith, because there is an understanding of Christianity built into the very foundations of Islam. You cannot be brought up and educated as a Muslim without at the same time acquiring an understanding of Christianity. In contrast, it is perfectly possible to be brought up as a Christian and to learn a great deal about the Christian faith without knowing a single thing about Islam (however unlikely that is becoming in today's world).

The obvious historical explanation for this contrast lies in chronology. Muhammad lived 600 years after Jesus and he believed that the message he proclaimed – Islam – was the fulfilment of the message of Jesus. Islam's essential theological bearing towards Christianity is thus broadly analogous to that of Christianity towards Judaism. Islam thus had an inbuilt, canonical view of Christianity from the start, whereas the inverse is clearly not the case: there is no canonical Christian view of Islam, and Christianity developed for 600 years before having to engage with Islam.

The aim of this article is to explore the roots and something of the range of Muslim perspectives on Christianity. I shall begin by looking at the canonical basis for these perspectives in the Qur'an itself. I hope to show that the Qur'an contains

1 This is a slightly revised version of a paper given at the Parkes Institute, Southampton University, in January 2006.

both positive and negative strands in its approach towards Christianity, and that there is therefore sufficient complexity and width in the Qur'anic approach to generate and sustain different Muslim interpretations, some of which I shall briefly illustrate. This variety in Muslim interpretations is alluded to in my title. Is Christianity a 'heavenly religion', revealed by God, with Christians seen as 'People of the Book', suggesting common ground with Muslims? Or is Christianity 'unbelief' and are Christians unbelievers or even idolaters? Only a few moments browsing the internet will introduce one to both viewpoints among Muslims today. Holders of both viewpoints can appeal to the Qur'an for support, so it is to the Qur'an that we now turn.

Christianity in the Qur'an

Muslims see the Qur'an as the compilation of the messages which God revealed to Muhammad and commissioned him to proclaim in Mecca and Medina over some 23 years, roughly 609-632. To understand what the Qur'an says about Christianity we must first grasp its understanding of religious history as a whole. According to the Qur'an, God sent many prophets over the centuries, all of them entrusted with fundamentally the same message: that people should worship the one Creator God and turn away from idolatry and all forms of injustice to live as God commands – the same message as Muhammad himself proclaimed. Many of these prophets, such as Abraham, Moses and Jesus, are familiar from the Bible.

A key feature of the Qur'anic understanding of these prophets is that they are all looking ahead to the culmination of religious history in Muhammad; they are all forerunners of Muhammad. The Qur'an calls Muhammad 'the seal of the prophets' (33:40), which Muslims understand to mean that he is the last of God's prophets, the one in whom the long history of revelation comes to an end. This is the basic context within which what the Qur'an says about Jesus makes sense. He is part of a religious history which culminates in Muhammad. One can draw an analogy with how the New Testament understands the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus. John has a greatness of his own, but he points ahead to the one who is to come. Likewise, the Qur'anic Jesus is a great figure in his own right, but his significance is penultimate; he points ahead to Muhammad (61:6).

Jesus in the Qur'an

What the Qur'an says about Jesus can be summarised fairly briefly.² It teaches that he was born of the Virgin Mary (3:45-7; 19:19-21), who is mentioned in the Qur'an almost as much as Jesus and is viewed with enormous respect. From his birth onwards, Jesus' life is marked by miraculous signs. For example, as an infant, he speaks from the cradle, declaring himself to be God's servant and a prophet and saying that God has given him the Book, or scripture (19:30); he breathes life into a clay bird; he heals the sick and raises the dead (3:49). The Qur'anic Jesus has followers, but also faces unbelieving opponents who conspire to kill him. However, God outwits these unbelievers and delivers Jesus from them. Jesus apparently does

2 For a fuller account see David Marshall, 'Christianity in the Qur'an' in Lloyd Ridgeon (ed.), *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*, Curzon, 2001, pp 3-29.

not die but is raised alive to Heaven (3:52-5; 4:157-8).³ Muslims therefore believe that Jesus is alive and, building on another Qur'anic passage (43:61), they also believe that he has an eschatological role yet to fulfil; he will return from Heaven and defeat the forces of anti-Christ.

Jesus is given many exalted titles in the Qur'an. Within just one verse he is called Messiah, God's word and a spirit from God (4:171). These titles resonate, to varying degrees, with the Christian faith, but without having the same significance as they hold for Christians. For example, Muslims normally understand the Qur'anic reference to Jesus as 'God's word' as a pointer to the word of command by which God created Jesus in the womb of Mary – something quite different from what John's Gospel says about Jesus as the eternal Word of God made flesh. But these special titles of the Qur'anic Jesus do point to a particular, rather mystical, closeness to God. Building on this, Islamic tradition has tended to think of Jesus as a deeply spiritual, otherworldly kind of figure.⁴

So Muslims stress that the Qur'anic attitude to Jesus is entirely positive. Jesus is a holy prophet who, together with his mother Mary, is the focus of particular blessings from God. Nothing negative or critical is said about Jesus in the Qur'an. However, although the Qur'an is positive about Jesus (as it understands him), it directs plenty of criticism at Christianity, or, to be more precise, at the Christianity encountered by Muhammad in seventh-century Arabia.

Attitude to Christian beliefs about Jesus

Above all, the Qur'an criticizes belief in and worship of Jesus as the Son of God. The background to bear in mind here is the Qur'an's fierce hostility towards idolatry, and primarily the widespread polytheism of Arabia. The worst of sins is to elevate anybody or anything to the level of divinity. Worshipping Jesus as the Son of God denies the most basic of truths that only God is God; everything else is a created being. Even a holy prophet like Jesus, who might be born of a virgin and raise the dead, is emphatically not divine and should not be worshipped.

So how did this mess arise? How does the Qur'an explain the fact that the followers of Jesus, the Christians to be encountered in Arabia in Muhammad's day, have such mistaken beliefs? The Qur'an does not itself give a systematic answer to that question, but it says enough to lay the foundations of subsequent Islamic teaching. This is that, after the earthly life of Jesus, his followers departed from his teaching; they exaggerated the significance of the prophet Jesus, making him out to be more than he really was. They were thus also misled into ideas of God

3 The unanimous Muslim interpretation of these exegetically difficult passages is that Jesus did not die but was raised to Heaven alive. Some non-Muslim scholars have asked whether the Qur'an really does deny that Jesus died (e.g. Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an*, Faber, 1965, chpt 11). This is an interesting exegetical question, but it should be stressed that the Qur'an does not understand Jesus (or anyone else) as bringing redemption or salvation, as

Christianity has understood these terms anyway. The Qur'anic prophets are above all bearers of divinely revealed guidance. So even if it could be shown conclusively that the Qur'an does not deny the reality of the death of Jesus, his death could not (for the Qur'an) have the same redemptive significance that it has for the New Testament.

4 See Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, Harvard University Press, 2001.

as three (which the Qur'an also denounces, though the Trinity it rejects seems to consist of God, Mary and Jesus⁵ – 4:171; 5:73, 116).

This critique of Christianity is neatly expressed in a Qur'anic passage in which Jesus explains to God that he never asked his disciples to worship him (5:116-17). For the Qur'an, the message of Jesus was by definition essentially the same as that of Muhammad. If the Christians whom Muhammad met could not see this, and continued to adhere to false beliefs about Jesus as divine and God as Trinity, then the problem lay with them. Their faith was a distortion of the true message and significance of Jesus. So the Qur'an sees itself as an attempt to rescue the original Jesus from the distorted understandings of him to be found in the forms of Christianity which developed after his earthly life. The Qur'an reinstates Jesus as a prophet of Islam.⁶

The Christian scripture and gospel

So with regard to Jesus there is a Qur'anic 'Yes' and a Qur'anic 'But': an affirmation and a rejection. The Qur'an affirms the ideal Jesus, the 'Islamic' Jesus who is Muhammad's forerunner; but it rejects the Jesus of Christian faith as a distortion of the ideal. There is something of the same 'Yes, but' attitude to scripture. The Qur'an does not only speak of prophets who were forerunners of Muhammad; it also refers to scriptures which one could, by analogy, call forerunners of the Qur'an. Of these earlier scriptures the Qur'an shows most interest in the Torah, revealed to Moses, and the Gospel, revealed to Jesus. The Qur'an does not go into the contents of the Torah or the Gospel in any detail, but it presents them as stages in the history of revelation which culminates in the sending down of the Qur'an. With regard to the Gospel, note that the Qur'an always refers to it in the singular; the Gospel is a book (*one* book) revealed to Jesus. Muslims thus tend to think that the existence of *four* Gospels is another pointer to how historic Christianity has deviated from what God originally revealed through Jesus.

So there is a tension in what the Qur'an says about the 'Gospel'. On the affirmative side, the Qur'an often refers to 'the Gospel' positively and calls upon Christians to adhere to it (e.g. 5:46-7; 5:68). But there is another side to the story. As Muhammad encountered Jews and Christians who were unconvinced by his claims to be the fulfilment of their own traditions, this raised the question of what was in their scriptures or of how they interpreted them. If the scriptures of the Jews and Christians didn't appear to them to point to Muhammad, then either they were misinterpreting their scriptures, or perhaps the very text of their scriptures had been altered, corrupted, so that their original wording was now concealed.

5 This understanding of the Trinity suggests that some of the forms of Christianity criticised by the Qur'an were seriously unorthodox. Certainly, Arabia was far from the main centres of Christian culture and doctrinal control, so Muhammad may well have encountered atypical versions of Christian faith (especially of the doctrine of the Trinity); cf. Parrinder, *Jesus*, chpt 14. This raises the question of how widely applicable these Qur'anic denunciations are:

should they be applied to all understanding of God as Trinity or only to the particular understandings which Muhammad met?

6 The phrase 'prophet of Islam' does not occur in the Qur'an but aptly summarizes the Qur'anic understanding of Jesus. Note its use in the title of the apologetic work by Muhammad 'Ata'ur-Rahim and Ahmad Thompson, *Jesus, Prophet of Islam*, Ta Ha Publishers, 1996.

The Qur'an suggests both of these alternatives, and so leaves us with a 'Yes, but' impression about the Torah and the Gospel. These scriptures are the focus of something that has gone wrong, whether in the actual text or how it is interpreted (2:75, 79, 101, 174). This Qur'anic perspective on the Bible has been tremendously significant for Islamic attitudes to Christianity over the centuries and remains so today.

Political power

One final aspect of the Qur'anic perspective on Christianity should be mentioned: the question of political power. Within his own lifetime Muhammad was 'his own Constantine',⁷ becoming a successful political and military leader and uniting the Arabian peninsula under the banner of Islam. In the process there was conflict with various tribes, some of which were Christian. This is reflected in the later stages of the Qur'an which envisage that those Christians and Jews who reject Islam should be fought and made politically subordinate to the Islamic community (9:29-3).

There is thus an expectation in the Qur'an that Islam would come to be not only religiously but also politically dominant. This expectation was fulfilled in an astonishingly rapid process of conquest in the decades following Muhammad's death, which saw the Arab Muslim armies overrun much of the traditional Christian heartlands, including areas such as Egypt and Syria. Christians in these areas were not forced to convert to Islam; their religious identities were protected and individual Christians were capable of rising to high office under Islam. But although Christianity was protected, it was politically and culturally subordinate to Islam.

Summary

To summarize this brief survey, there is a tension, a 'Yes, but' quality in the attitude to Christianity to be found in the Qur'an, and so also in the foundations of Islamic self-consciousness. There is a clear Qur'anic 'Yes' to the *ideal Christianity* of the original Jesus and his 'Gospel', as an earlier stage in the history of revelation pointing ahead to Muhammad and the Qur'an. However, there is an equally clear 'But' as the Qur'an comments negatively on the *actual Christianity* which Muhammad encounters in Christians who did not accept him as a prophet and his message as the fulfilment of their own faith. There is in the Qur'an a sense of disappointment, even exasperation, at how Christians could continue to hold mistaken doctrines based on a scripture which either had been tampered with or was being misinterpreted. This 'Yes, but' response extends to the political order as well. Yes, Christians are to be protected; they are 'People of the Book', different from outright pagans; there is a sense of kinship with them, despite their errors. But they are also to be subordinate, tolerated within a polity which proclaims the triumph of Islam and of the Muslim community.

The Qur'anic material thus contains sufficient complexity and width to generate and sustain a range of Muslim attitudes towards Christianity. We turn now to consider some examples of this range of attitudes.

7 Bernard Lewis, 'Politics and War' in Joseph Schacht and C. E. Bosworth (eds), *The Legacy of Islam* (2nd edn.), Oxford University Press, Oxford 1979, p 156.

Islamic attitudes to Christianity: classical developments

In my survey of the Qur'anic account of Christianity, one aspect that I passed over is the references to Christians, as distinct from references to Jesus or the Bible. Here too we find a tension between the positive and the negative, passages praising Christians and passages critical of them. In her study *Qur'anic Christians*,⁸ Jane Dammen McAuliffe identifies seven texts which appear to speak positively of Christians and considers how these texts were interpreted by ten influential commentators on the Qur'an, from al-Tabari (d.923), to the Iranian Tabataba'i (d.1982). McAuliffe thus offers a very helpful survey of how, over many centuries, Muslims have read the Qur'anic material on Christianity.

McAuliffe identifies as 'the most striking example of Qur'anic praise of Christians'⁹ a text, part of which runs as follows: 'You will surely find that those closest in friendship to those who believe [i.e. Muslims] to be those who say "We are Christians." That is because among them are priests and monks and because they are not arrogant.' (5:82) These words, which seem to speak so appreciatively of Christians, have often been quoted in the context of contemporary dialogue; they hold out the promise of warm Christian-Muslim relations. However, McAuliffe's survey demonstrates that the commentaries consistently argue that the Christians who are being praised here are in fact *Christians who convert to Islam*. It is not a difficult argument to make in textual terms as the next verse describes how, when these Christians heard the message revealed to Muhammad, 'their eyes overflowed with tears because of what they recognised as the truth' (5:83). The twelfth-century commentator Ibn Jawzi puts it very sharply: 'Should any ignoramus find in this verse praise for the Christians in general, he would be completely wrong. It is praise only for those among them ... who become Muslims'.¹⁰

This same basic point emerges again and again in McAuliffe's study. The commentators consistently take the view that where the Qur'an appears to be positive about Christians it is referring to Christians at some point in the process of becoming Muslims; stories about conversions of Christians to Islam during the life of Muhammad are cited as examples. The logic of these classical commentaries is thus that when the Qur'an is positive about Christians, or Christianity more widely, it is actually being positive about the 'ideal' Christianity taught by the 'ideal' Jesus pointing ahead to Islam and Muhammad. The Qur'an is positive towards Christianity inasmuch as Christianity sees itself as fulfilled in Islam. So it is only positive about Christians who become Muslims; it cannot be positive about Christians who, having heard the message of Islam, choose to remain Christians. As McAuliffe puts it: 'It is inconceivable under the Qur'anic definition of authentic Christianity, as interpreted by these ten commentators, that a "true" Christian who had been exposed to the Prophet's message would refuse to become a Muslim.'¹¹ So, in terms of the title of this article, the commentators surveyed by McAuliffe would perhaps say of Christianity that it is a heavenly religion inasmuch as it concedes its own penultimate character, its need to be superseded by Islam. But it is unbelief inasmuch as it affirms its continuing validity independently of Islam; Christianity is unbelief so long as it resists its divinely willed supersession by Islam.

8 Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991.

9 McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians*, p 204.

10 McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians*, p 222.

11 McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians*, p 290.

Actual (as opposed to ideal) Christianity therefore seems to be defined firmly as unbelief.

There is, however, one other significant point made in McAuliffe's study which should be mentioned. This concerns the two most recent of the commentators, Tabataba'i and the early twentieth-century Egyptian Rashid Rida. From time to time McAuliffe notes how these two depart from the earlier consensus; she refers to 'the few allusions in modern commentaries to the overriding importance of belief in God and of right action *under whatever label* such faith and action are sustained.'¹² '*Under whatever label*': the modern commentators seem more ready to concede that even where the label 'Muslim' does not occur there may be true faith and good works, and so also salvation.

Contemporary Muslim Attitudes to Christianity

Turning to the modern period, it is important to acknowledge that contemporary Muslim attitudes to Christianity are not simply derived from the Qur'an in a vacuum. Christian-Muslim relations have never unfolded in a purely theological context; there has been a political dimension to the encounter from the time of Muhammad to the present. So we need to be aware of the very different political contexts around the world in which Muslim attitudes to Christianity are formed today. Are we talking about Saudi Arabia or Egypt; Pakistan or India; Bradford or Southampton? Furthermore, these different contexts inter-penetrate because of increasing awareness of our global context. One should not underestimate the impact of information technology on the self-consciousness of the Islamic *umma* or world-wide community. It is becoming easier all the time for a Muslim anywhere in the world to feel networked into all that is happening around the *umma* and especially to be aware of situations where Muslims are perceived to be suffering injustice and oppression. So the view of Christianity held by many Muslims living in London, for example, may have less to do with the local activities of the Church of England than with events in Iraq or in Chechnya. Less obviously, it is perhaps also possible that the kind of debates about Islam and pluralism happening in the West may have some impact on attitudes in the Islamic heartlands. Although there is not space to explore this point further, it is important to keep in mind that political context, local and global, is a constant factor in the shaping of the attitudes of Muslims to Christianity.

Isma'il al-Faruqi: From Jesus to Christianity

We saw earlier that the Qur'an sharply criticizes a number of aspects of Christianity. Many contemporary Muslim writers, at both scholarly and popular levels, continue the centuries-old tradition of building on the Qur'anic material to develop a more systematic critique of the Christian faith. In recent years, one of the most impressive examples of this at the scholarly level was in the writings of Isma'il al-Faruqi, a Palestinian who studied and taught at universities in Canada and the USA.¹³ Al-Faruqi attempts a rigorous sifting of the material in the gospels to

12 McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians*, p 290, italics added.

13 Isma'il al-Faruqi, *Christian Ethics*, McGill University Press, 1967. See also the

compilation *Islam and Other Faiths*, Islamic Foundation, Leicester 1998. Al-Faruqi is discussed by Kate Zebiri in *Muslims and Christians Face to Face*, Oneworld, 1997.

distinguish between what he believes could genuinely have come from the historic Jesus and what was produced by early Christians as they distorted the original simple Semitic message of Jesus into something quite different, which al-Faruqi dismissively calls 'Christianism'. His understanding of the mission of Jesus is distinctively Islamic but also quite original. Two features of Jesus' message are emphasized: firstly, Jesus aimed to achieve the 'interiorization of ethics' (in contrast to a merely external piety); secondly, Jesus came to universalize the prophetic message (in contrast to a narrow Jewish exclusivism). So al-Faruqi argues that while material in the gospels in line with these emphases must be authentic, other material must have been added by those who corrupted the message of Jesus.

Echoing arguments used by other writers (not just Muslims), al-Faruqi suggests that St Paul had a leading role in this process of corruption; further down the track of historic Christianity he also has harsh words for St Augustine. Al-Faruqi argues that the corruption of the original message of Jesus into Christianity is seen most clearly in the introduction into the New Testament and then into traditional Christian doctrine of two false principles for which he coins the terms 'peccatism' and 'saviourism'. By 'peccatism' he essentially means belief in original sin: he is very critical of what he calls Christianity's 'black-painting of human nature'. In contrast Islam has a positive, optimistic view of our humanity. By 'saviourism' al-Faruqi means the Christian conviction that humanity stands in need of a salvation which it cannot achieve itself but which is given in Christ; in contrast, Islam does not offer salvation but *guidance*, and then it is for humans to grasp that guidance and thus save themselves.

On close inspection, al-Faruqi's critique of Christianity contains serious weaknesses, but to his credit he did engage in impressive detail with the Bible and major Christian thinkers.

Ahmed Deedat: polemical rejection

The next Muslim to be considered here, Ahmed Deedat, certainly engaged extensively with the Bible, but he did not do so as a serious scholar or out of any genuine attempt to understand the Bible on its own terms. Rather, Deedat, who until his recent death had been probably the most influential popular Muslim anti-Christian apologist, seems to have been concerned simply to discredit the Bible and Christian belief with it. To give a flavour of his approach, I quote at some length from Kate Zebiri's *Muslims and Christians Face to Face*:

'When speaking of contemporary Muslim attitudes towards Christianity, it is scarcely possible to avoid reference to Ahmed Deedat. The extensive popularity and influence of his works are unquestionable . . . even though they are undeniably inauspicious for Muslim-Christian relations. Deedat is a South African of Gujurati origin who has achieved near-celebrity status among many Muslims for his rebuttals of Christianity... His lecture tours have taken him to Europe, the United States, and many Muslim countries... Deedat's flamboyant rhetorical style seems as much designed to entertain as to edify; he employs ridicule and sarcasm, and not infrequently raises laughter from the Muslim section of his audience. He also utilizes crude language and

images... His arguments against the divinity of Jesus, for example, tend to focus on bodily functions, including the more intimate ones, and he implies that Christians believe that Jesus was the product of a physical act of procreation between God and Mary.' [Much of Deedat's polemic is directed against the Bible and he expounds at great length its errors, contradictions and variant translations, which are all compared unfavourably with the supposed perfection of the Qur'an. He even] 'goes so far as to recommend that the Bible should be censored on the grounds that it constitutes pornographic literature. After relating some of the less savoury incidents which occur in the Old Testament, he claims a causal connection between [these and] the contemporary moral and social decay in Western nations. He comments that "you will come across perverted people who will gorge this filth" and adds that "such filth certainly has no place in any 'Book of God'".¹⁴

It is depressing but probably true to say that, through his widely distributed materials, Deedat has shaped the attitude of more Muslims towards Christianity than any other contemporary Muslim communicator.

Converts to Islam

Between the sophistication of an al-Faruqi and the knockabout polemic of a Deedat there are naturally many other approaches. One significant feature of the Islamic literature in this field is that a significant amount is written by converts to Islam from a Christian background.¹⁵ The importance of such literature, at least to some Muslims, was demonstrated in the wake of 9/11 when a prominent British Muslim organisation sent to every member of the Houses of Parliament copies of two books by converts to Islam.¹⁶ This was doubtless intended sincerely as a bridge-building exercise, to increase sympathetic understanding of Islam at a time of considerable vulnerability for Muslims in this country. But it was telling that both books were written by Western converts to Islam and that one of them was full of withering references to Christianity.

Such converts to Islam have great symbolic significance for other Muslims because they embody 'what ought to be the case'. From the Qur'an onwards (5:82-85), it has been instinctive to Muslims to assume that open-minded, unprejudiced Christians will see that Islam is a more perfect way. Conversion to Islam is never to be forced – the Qur'an itself forbids this (2:256) – but there is nonetheless a deep and entirely logical instinct to bring Christians to a recognition of the truth. On the other hand, conversion from Islam to Christianity has traditionally been treated under Islamic Law as a capital offence. However, reinterpretations of the Islamic sources on this question of apostasy have been proposed by leading contemporary Muslim scholars.¹⁷

14 Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians*, pp 46-7.

15 Converts to Islam often prefer to speak of themselves as 'reverts'. The idea here is that they are reverting to what they were by birth: to be Muslim is to be what humans are by nature; to be a Christian, in contrast, is a deviation, at least to some degree, from the path of true humanity.

16 Ruqaiyyah Waris Maqsood, *What Every Christian Should Know About Islam*, Islamic Foundation, 2000 and Murad Wilfried Hofmann, *Journey to Islam*, Islamic Foundation, 2001.

17 For example, Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Freedom of Expression in Islam* (revised edn.), Islamic Texts Society, 1997.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr and other positive accounts

I have touched on some of the ways in which Muslims might express criticism towards Christianity, or rivalry with it. In their different ways, these might be seen as extensions of the Qur'anic critique of the errors of 'actual' Christianity. However, as we have seen, despite all it says about these errors, the Qur'an still speaks of Christians (and of Jews) as 'People of the Book', people with whom there is some sense of kinship, people certainly on a different level from outright pagans. The review above of McAuliffe's research might have given the impression that Muslims have consistently refused to read the positive-sounding Qur'anic references to Christians in ways that would encourage respect for Christians *as Christians*, respect for Christianity in its otherness from Islam. But the fact is that not all Muslims have been as systematic as the classical commentators considered by McAuliffe, or as negative in their conclusions. Perhaps actual human contact between Christians and Muslims has at times eroded the harder edges of the tradition and one certainly does find, especially more recently, Muslims making use of positive-sounding texts in the Qur'an to validate more appreciative approaches. We turn now to consider where we might meet such positive appreciation of Christianity and Christians among Muslims today.

Firstly, one encounters in many Muslims the sense that there are important values which they share with Christians. An illustration of this is the creation of the new Christian-Muslim Forum for England, launched in January 2006 at Lambeth Palace. The aim of this national body is not primarily to foster theological dialogue but to enable consultation and co-operation between Muslims and Christians for the common good on practical matters of shared concern. Before the Forum was created a long listening exercise was carried out, during which Muslims around the country were asked if they supported such an initiative. They did, overwhelmingly. Doubtless the Muslims involved hold a range of theological opinions on Christianity (as do Christians on Islam) but there is implicit within that basic commitment to working together a positive appreciation of Christians and positive assumptions about Christianity's moral values and its potential for beneficial impact on society.

Within this general sphere of Christian-Muslim co-operation for the good of society one might also mention the work of Farid Esack, a South African Muslim whose commitment to the struggle against apartheid led him to work closely with leading Christian activists. He came to see such Christians as co-workers in the path of God. This challenged his understanding of the relationship between Islam and the religiously 'other' and prompted Esack's essay in Islamic liberation theology *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*.¹⁸ Whether or not Esack's views are mainstream, his story shows that where Muslims work together with Christians on the basis of shared values (here a commitment to racial equality) this can have a transforming impact on views of the 'other'.

A second place where one might find more positive attitudes to Christianity is Sufism, Islam's mystical tradition. Sufism can take many forms, but the common

¹⁸ Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, Oneworld, 1997.

factor is a concern that merely to observe Islam's laws and assent to its doctrines is not the essence of Islam, which essentially is about experience of God, heartfelt devotion to the merciful Lord. It is natural that within that kind of perspective doctrinal differences between Islam and other faiths can be much less of a barrier than they are in other contexts. The following lines from Ibn al-Arabi (d.1240) give a striking example of this tendency:

'My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture of gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,

And a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Ka'ba and the tables of the Tora and the book of the Koran.

I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith.'¹⁹

In our own day, one finds in the writings of the Shi'ite scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who works within a 'Perennial Philosophy' perspective, a respect for religious experience in different traditions. His classic introductory work *Ideals and Realities of Islam*²⁰ contains some strikingly perceptive observations about Christianity. It seems to be true in general that the influence of Islam's mystical traditions is likely to incline Muslims to greater empathy and respect for Christian faith, and particularly the religious experience of Christians.

Thirdly, one might also encounter positive appreciation of at least aspects of Christianity among Muslims involved in dialogue with Christians. Such Muslims will often say that the Qur'an itself calls them to a respectful, rational way of engaging in discussion with Christians (3:64; 29:46). There is an assumption here that because Christians share in a common monotheistic heritage with Muslims, they can be reasoned with; the Christian is someone with whom important religious convictions are held in common.

The term 'dialogue' can cover a huge range of activities. It can be an enriching experience of discovering that one has much in common with people of other faiths. It can also quite properly be a deeply unsettling and challenging experience, leading one to look at one's own faith as it appears to those who do not share it, and also causing one's preconceptions about another faith to be dismantled and reconstructed as one achieves a better understanding of what that faith means to its adherents.

In Muslim-Christian dialogue there are challenges of this kind for both communities. A particular challenge for Muslims involved in dialogue may arise precisely because they grow up believing that the Qur'an offers the true account of Jesus, from which Christians have diverged. This can often mean that the Christian understanding of Jesus, and all that flows from it, are scarcely worth trying to understand. The Bible is hardly worth reading because whatever truth is in it is also in the Qur'an, which, furthermore, contains none of the Bible's misleading errors. So the Christian faith as Christians actually understand and experience it can easily be a closed book for Muslims. (The same point can be made about Christian attitudes to Islam, though the issues are slightly different.)

19 From *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*, quoted in John Alden Williams (ed.), *Islam*, George Braziller, 1961, p 155.

20 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, George, Allen and Unwin, 1966.

In another of his books Nasr challenges Muslims on their need to understand Western culture: 'within the whole width and breadth of the Islamic world', he asks 'how many scholars do we have who know Greek and Latin?'²¹ This is a challenge which can also be related specifically to the scarcity of serious contemporary Islamic scholarship on Christianity.

However, the challenge of studying Christianity *as it is understood by Christians*, and not simply as it is presented in traditional Islamic textbooks, is being taken up by Muslims and Islamic institutions. A significant exchange programme has developed, for example, between an Islamic theological faculty in Turkey and a Roman Catholic University in Rome. There are Iranian Shi'ite institutions with great interest in understanding different religious traditions (including Anglicanism) and learning about them from their representatives. There are similar examples elsewhere, including in this country. The number of Muslim scholars with some knowledge of Greek and Latin (and Hebrew) is perhaps starting to grow. Such developments presuppose a growing interest in and respect for Christianity in its otherness from Islam; it will be interesting to see how such initiatives shape Islamic attitudes to Christianity in coming years.

These, then, are a few examples of positive contemporary Muslim attitudes to Christianity to balance the types of rejection or hostility mentioned earlier. Clearly much more could be said in both categories, but the examples given begin to illustrate this article's central argument. From the Qur'an onwards Islam has validated both the affirmation of Christianity as a heavenly religion and the rejection of Christianity as unbelief. To understand Muslim perceptions of Christianity we therefore need to become aware of the complex interplay between affirmation and rejection that is at work in the great variety of Muslims to be found in very different contexts around the world.

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21 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World*, Islamic Texts Society, 1993, p 130.