

ADDRESSING ISLAMIC TEACHINGS ABOUT CHRISTIANITY

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INTRODUCTION

In September 2006, Pope Benedict XVI, in a scholarly address, quoted the fourteenth century Byzantine Christian Emperor Manuel Paleologos II, “Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.”¹ Benedict did not explicitly agree with the statement nor repudiate it.¹ However in multiple Islamic locations violence against Christians and Christian institutions followed.

Beginning shortly after the pope's address, Jordanian Muslim scholars instituted two pleas for dialog. The second of these, proposing a reasoned dialog between Muslim and Christian communities,² engendered a response from Christian scholars.³

Recently, the trustees of the International Mission Board (SBC, USA) provided guidelines for cross-cultural evangelism especially among Muslim peoples.⁴ Although helpful, both of these discussions expose a reluctance to address core Islamic teachings concerning Christianity so as to enable coherent Christian conversations with Islam and Muslims. While the author applauds quests for common ground and clear communication by Muslims and Christians, it is imperative that Islamic teachings concerning core Christian beliefs be addressed for meaningful conversation to begin.

ISLAMIC TEACHINGS OBSERVED

For serious followers of Christ meaningful discussions with Muslims should begin with Muslim understandings of divine revelation, the Bible, the nature of God, the person of Christ, and the purpose and work of Christ. This paper explores the Qur’anic and Islamic

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¹<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/09/15/ap/world/printableD8K5CCBG0.shtml>.

²<http://www.acommonword.com/>.

³<http://www.yale.edu/faith/about-commonword.htm>.

⁴See text elsewhere in this issue or Appendix.

view of divine revelation, the Bible and the nature of God. The purpose of observing these Islamic teachings is to open discussions with Muslims in these and other areas of concern.

ISLAMIC UNDERSTANDINGS OF BIBLICAL TEXTS

The Qur'an repeatedly cites the Christians and Jews as people of the Book and identifies the *Torah* of Moses, *Injil* of Jesus and *Zabour* of David. Both biblical testaments are said to predict the prophet of Islam and the Qur'an. The entire host of biblical prophets are claimed as Muslims and precursors of the community Muhammad was establishing. Yet, Muslims do not accept the current Bible as authoritative. Islam, in the Qur'an, claims to possess the correction and seal of the totality of divine revelation. The complex relationship of Islam with the books which preceded the Qur'an is reflected in these statements. Muslim teachings about the Bible as the Word of God to Christians are immensely important to Christians seeking to understand and be understood.

The Qur'an states its continuity with the Bible.⁵ God's mission for the Qur'an is to confirm and guard the earlier books.⁶ The task of the Qur'an, translated "guard" or "supervise" in Surah 5: 48 is an Arabic word which is built on the word "Amen". The Qur'an is to affirm the truthfulness of the previous Scriptures. The Qur'an is to confirm and say "yes!" to the Books which came before. In Islam the affirmation of Scriptures is understood to be bi-directional. Muhammad and the Qur'an are understood to be prophesied in the earlier Books. In Surah 3, the early Christians answer Jesus with a claim that they are Muslims and followers of The Messenger or The Apostle which is understood to be Muhammad.⁷ Several other important facts about the Qur'anic view of the Bible can be drawn. However, since the Qur'an clearly teaches that God delivered to Christians and Jews His Books, the issue is how can Islam teach that the present Bible has lost its divine authority?

Four Muslim views of the state of the previous Scriptures during the epoch of the Qur'an's revelation are found.⁸

⁵Surah 5: 44-48.

⁶Surah 5: 48a "To thee We sent the Scripture in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety;" *The Holy Qur'an* translated by Abdullah Yusef Ali (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 2001). Unless otherwise specified all Qur'anic citations and quotations in this paper refer to the English text of this Arabic/English Qur'an.

⁷Surah 3: 52-53.

⁸The confusion over this issue is borne out in the Qur'an. At times it seems that there can be no changes in God's word and decree. Surah 6: 34, 115; 10: 64; 18: 27. Yet Surah 16: 101 clearly shows God exchanging revelations, "When We substitute one revelation for another, —and God knows what he reveals (in stages)—they say, 'thou art but a forger': but most of them understand not." and Surah 87: 6-7 teaches that God may promote forgetfulness, "We shall make you recite our revelations, so that you shall forget

1. Some view these Books as superseded by the Qur'an. Their understanding is that God directed those previous Books to a specific people and for a set time. This is illustrated from a saying⁹ concerning Muhammad narrated by Jabir ibn Abdullah.

Umar ibn al-Khattab brought to Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) a copy of the Torah and said: Allah's Messenger, this is a copy of the Torah. He (Allah's Messenger) kept quiet and he (Umar) began to read it. The color of the face of Allah's Messenger (pbuh)¹⁰ underwent a change, whereupon Abu Bakr said: Would that your mother mourn you, don't you see the face of Allah's Messenger? Umar saw the face of Allah's Messenger (pbuh) and said: I seek refuge with Allah from the wrath of Allah and the wrath of His Messenger. We are well pleased with Allah as Lord, with Islam as religion, and with Muhammad as Prophet. Where upon Allah's Messenger (pbuh) said: By Him in Whose hand is the life of Muhammad, even if Moses were to appear before you and you were to follow him, leaving me aside, you would certainly stray into error; for if (Moses) were alive (now), and he found my prophetic ministry, he would have definitely followed me.¹¹

2. Other Muslims understand specific teachings of the earlier Books have been abrogated by Qur'anic content. This is based on the teaching of Surah 2: 106, "Any of our messages that we abrogate or consign to oblivion, We replace with a better or a similar one. Do you not know that God has the power to will anything?" The Arabic term translated abrogate, *nasekh*, means to delete, abrogate, replace, substitute or copy. Qur'anic scholar's classify five modes of *nasekh*:

1. Qur'anic abrogation of the divine scripture which preceded it;
2. Abrogation of some Qur'anic texts which are said to have been blotted out of existence;
3. Abrogation of some earlier commandments of the Qur'an by the later revelations, while the text containing those commandments remained embodied in the Qur'an;
4. Abrogation of a *sunnah* (prophetic practice) by a Qur'anic injunction;
5. Abrogation of a Qur'anic injunction by *sunnah*.¹²

none of them except as God pleases. He has knowledge of all that is manifest and all that is hidden."

⁹These individual sayings and their several varied collections are called *Hadith*.

¹⁰In Islamic speech and writing when a prophet's name is mentioned a brief prayer is attached. *pbuh* stands for "Peace be upon him." This is a personal blessing and call for God's blessing on the prophet.

¹¹Sunan Ad-Darimi Vol. 1 Hadith 435.

¹²Farid Esack, *The Qur'an a User Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2005), 126.

The Qur'an presents Jesus as practicing this doctrine concerning the teachings of the Torah, "(I have come to you), to attest the Law which was before me. And to make lawful to you part of what was (before) forbidden to you."¹³

3. Many Muslims believe the Qur'an teaches that these Books have been corrupted by the peoples of the Book. Muhammad 'Ata ur-Rahim states this view.

Certainly, the picture many people have been given of Jesus—of who he was, and what he did—is a distorted one. Although there is some truth in them, it has been established that the four accepted Gospels have not only been altered and censored through the ages, but also are not eyewitness accounts.¹⁴

Islamic scholars cite non-canonical sources as the lost but true witnesses to the historical Jesus and his gospel. The most popular of these sources for Muslims today was not cited by any Islamic writer before the fifteenth century. An Italian manuscript of the *Gospel of Barnabas* began to circulate during the fifteenth century.¹⁵

4. Another view is that the Books have not been abrogated or superseded but Christian and Jewish teachers were corrupt.¹⁶ In the words of the Qur'an:

And There are some among them (people of the Book) who twist their tongues when quoting the Scriptures, so that you may think that what they say is from the Scriptures, whereas it is not. They say: 'this is from God,' whereas it is not. Thus they knowingly ascribe a falsehood to God.¹⁷

An example of the corrupt practice of the people of the Book is found in Bakhari's Hadith.

A jew and a jewess were brought to Allah's Messenger (pbuh) on a charge of committing an illegal sexual intercourse. The Prophet (pbuh) asked them. 'What is the legal punishment (for this sin) in your book (torah)?' they replied, 'Our priests have innovated the punishment of blackening the faces with charcoal and Tajbiya.' Abdullah bin Salam said, 'O Allah's Messenger, tell them to bring the Torah.' The torah was brought, and then one of the jews put his hand over the Divine verse of the rajam (stoning to death) and started reading what preceded and what followed it.¹⁸

¹³Surah 3: 50a.

¹⁴Muhammad 'Ata ur-Rahim, *Jesus Prophet of Islam* (Elmhurst: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 1991), 17.

¹⁵Unknown, *The Gospel of Barnabas* (Brooklyn: A & B Publishers Group, n.d.), xvi.

¹⁶Surah 5:46-50; 9:31-35.

¹⁷Surah 3: 78.

¹⁸Sahil Bakhari, vol. 8 Hadith 6819.

Clearly the corruption was not in the text but in the teachings and practices of the previous peoples of the Book.

Thus, the current Islamic practice of presupposing that the Qur'an alone of the Heavenly books has been preserved by God stands on a questionable Qur'anic basis. If a Muslim is confused about this or other matters, the Qur'an offers a solution. "If you doubt what We have revealed to you, ask those who have read the Scriptures before you."¹⁹ Beyond this confusing Islamic view of the biblical texts is the Qur'anic doctrine of divine revelation or the Word of God.

THE QUR'AN AND THE WORD OF GOD

The Qur'an and the Bible each presents itself as WORD OF GOD. However the normative Islamic view of Word of God is dramatically different from most Christian understandings of "Word of God" used in reference to a text. For Muslims the Qur'an is Word of God because the Arabic book is an exact copy of the eternal book with God. For them the Qur'an which descended to Muhammad in a period of human history is precisely the same as the heavenly book which is an uncreated and eternal attribute of God.²⁰ Muslims are taught that their Arabic Qur'an has no human content, earthly precursors, or influences. The Qur'an implies that the *Torah*, *Zabour*, and *Injil* were each sent down from heaven as intact books²¹ to the respective earthly messenger. These books are like the Qur'an God's speech. The closest Christian counterpoint to this concept is the *Logos*, the second person of the Godhead who is incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. The Islamic concept of Books descending from God mediated by angels proceeds from and is controlled by the Islamic view of God.

ISLAM AND ALLAH AS GOD

Two major themes about God are found in the Qur'an. God, who stood behind the Qur'an, is singular, unique, and creator of all else. The Qur'an also presents him as the God who spoke through all the biblical prophets. However, the nature of Allah exposed in the Qur'an adds to and deletes understandings drawn from the biblical revelation.

¹⁹Surah 10: 94a.

²⁰Surah 43: 2-4.

²¹Surah 3: 3 "The book of truth descends to you confirming the *torah* and the *injil* which are with God and He sent down." (Author's translation).

ALLAH'S NATURE IN THE QUR'AN

The Qur'an agrees with Jewish and Christian Scriptures that God is the eternal all-powerful, all-knowing creator of all. He is unique and holy, different from all of creation. He is sufficient in Himself. He is one and there is no other eternal reality or being beside Him.²² The Islamic term for God's oneness is *tawheed*. The theological concept is based on the definite article and the number one (*alwahed*),²³ and describes Islam's central understanding of God—His singular identity. However, the Qur'anic concept of oneness goes beyond the concept of biblical unity and uniqueness of God. One expression of unique nature of the oneness of God in Islam is the Muslim reluctance to use foreign words meaning "God" in target languages; instead, Muslims transliterate "*Allah*", the Qur'anic word for God, into the target language.

ALLAH AND *TAWHEED*

The Qur'an presents God as absolute will. Geisler and Saleeb note,

God is absolute Will, and absolute Will must be absolutely one. . . . And Muslims believe God is absolutely One (both from revelation and by reason) Reason informed Muhammad that unity is prior to plurality. . . . Thus, unity is the most ultimate of all.²⁴

Allah as absolute is beyond and behind all creation. The Qur'anic god transcends all and has no direct access to his creation despite his absolute sovereignty. Yet he is merciful towards his creatures.²⁵ He is not directly involved in creation, once it is created, but he expresses a nearness to humanity.

It was We Who created man, and We know what dark suggestions his soul makes to him for We are nearer to him than (his) jugular vein. Behold, two (guardian angels) appointed to learn (his doings) learn (and noted them), one sitting on the right and one on the left. Not a word does he utter but there is a sentinel by him, ready (to note it).²⁶

²²Surah 6: 19.

²³Surah 2: 163; 6: 19; 37: 1-7; 38: 65-68; 112: 1.

²⁴Norman L. Geisler & Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 135.

²⁵Surah 6: 12; 7: 156.

²⁶Surah 50 : 16-18.

Thus, the transcendent God in Islam employs angelic beings²⁷ to observe humanity. The second way in which Allah shows mercy by angelic mediation is through guidance. This guidance takes the form of the office of prophet and provision through angels of their messages and books.

The God of the Bible, while incomparable, transcendent, and beyond human discovery in similar ways to the Qur'anic description, condescends to reveal Himself and relate to humanity, ultimately in the Incarnation.

Allah and 98 additional Qur'anic names²⁸ are descriptive of divine attributes.²⁹ However, none of these names even gives a shadow of the meaning of the Greek word, *agape*—love as found in 1 Jn 4: 16, “And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is Love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.”

Relationship is not a characteristic of Allah. *Shirk* is the Islamic concept of blasphemy which is defined as ascribing a relationship with Allah to anything. The Qur'an accuses some of tritheism³⁰ in worshiping three gods: God, Mary, and Jesus.³¹ There is no Qur'anic mention of a complex unity of God, nor God as one being expressed in three persons. The Christian concept of Trinity or Triune God is unknown in the Arabic Qur'an. What the Qur'an condemns is worshiping *thaletha*,³² three (gods). Others are condemned for teaching that God was physically and sexually involved with Mary which resulted in the birth of Jesus.³³ None of this is to deny Islamic opposition to the biblical revelation of the nature of God, but simply to point out that most of the Qur'anic objection is against non-biblical concepts. Many Muslims debate the meaning of terms such as “the face of Allah” and “the hand of Allah”, reluctant to go beyond the Qur'anic statements themselves. Yet, the same Muslim writers extend Qur'anic statements to Christian doctrines not specifically addressed in the Qur'an. Others use terms for the Arabic Qur'an's identity with God which add a complexity beyond the simple unity of the Islamic creed.³⁴

²⁷Angels and *jinn* (from which the English word genie is derived).

²⁸Ibid: 21-26.

²⁹Esack, 148-150.

³⁰Surah 4: 171; 5: 72-73.

³¹Surah 5: 116: “And behold! God will say: ‘O Jesus the son of Mary! Didst thou say unto men, worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of God?’”

³²Surah 4: 171; 5: 73.

³³Surah 3: 64; 9:30; 112: 3.

³⁴Sachito Murata & William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House: 1994), 52, 174 and 179.

ADDRESSING QUR'ANIC TEACHINGS WITH MUSLIMS

After observing the teachings about these key doctrines of Christianity, some tentative conclusions appear.

1. The Qur'anic basis for the common Muslim teaching of corruption of the biblical text is questionable.

a. Assumptions of corruption in the texts of the Bible conflict with *hadith* which bear witness to Muhammad using the Bible to mete out judgment.

b. Assertions of the Bible being totally superseded by the Qur'an are not supported by the Qur'anic use of the Bible to verify itself and the prophetic ministry of Muhammad.

2. Muslims are encouraged to seek out Christians and Jews who received heavenly Books before them when beset by doubts or confusion. Although this Qur'anic injunction contradicts the common advice of contemporary Muslim teachers.

3. Teachings usually understood to condemn biblical faith in the Trinity are seen, on closer examination, to critique a non-biblical worship of tri-theism.

CONCLUSION

Amidst the calls for Christian-Muslim conversations the fact remains that the Muslims draw teachings from the Qur'an which oppose Christian positions on the nature of God, divine revelation, and the Bible. It is incumbent on Christians to address Islamic teachings about Christianity. Desired and necessary discussions between the two communities must be informed by the Qur'an's assessment of the Bible and understanding of the Christian faith.