

REAPPROPRIATION: AN ACCOMMODATIONIST HERMENEUTIC OF ISLAMIC CHRISTIANITY

BY DUANE ALEXANDER MILLER

1 Introduction

1.1 The Purpose of this Article

The purpose of my current research is to examine *Muslim Background Congregations* (MBC's), meaning congregations consisting primarily of *Muslim Background Believers* (MBB's). A good deal of work has been done on individual Muslims who have either converted to Christianity or, claiming to stay within Islâm, have made a commitment to follow Jesus Christ as he is known not only in the Qur'ân, but in the Gospels as well. This article will examine how some of these MBC's interpret the Qur'ân and reconcile it to the Bible.

That there are enough MBB's to form such congregations, and that there are enough congregations to be able to attempt to study them in any systematic way is, in itself, an historical novelty. Thus the first part of this work will look into the historical background. Given that preaching missions go back to the 13th century, why is it that only now in the latter half of the 20th century that we have seen a notable increase in conversions to the Christ of the Gospels?

The goal is the study of Christianity outside of the Western world, and multiple disciplines will be called on to give an account of the genesis, life, and future of Islâmîc Christianity. They include history, linguistics, religious studies, anthropology, and ethnography. The written materials drawn on are from those areas as well theology, missiology, polemics, and politics. It should be clear, though, from the beginning, that this work is not missiological in nature. That is, no recommendations or methodology are provided for how Christians should engage in mission, nor for that matter, for how Muslims can prevent members of their communities from converting to the Christ of the Gospels.

The political and global events of the 20th century caught the attention of Western evangelicals, who were and still are by far the most active in evangelizing (if one can call it that) Muslims. A new generation of missionaries arose who had a very different ethos from their predecessors; new missionary organizations were founded; new strategies were conceived, and indeed Islâm and Muslims were, by some at least, re-evaluated. All of this is the genesis of the MBC's we find today.

Also important to keep in mind is that any community of converts will be inexorably influenced by the spirituality of those who brought about their conversion. It is one of the three elements - the other two being Scripture and their culture - that will influence any religious contextualization that occurs¹.

1.2 Terms and Vocabulary: Islamic Christianity and MBC's

Islâmic Christianity. The two words don't seem to work together well, but they are at the heart of this work's topic. The placing together of two words - two words which have often been seen as exclusive of each other - is unsettling to many people. Yet recent decades have seen a genuine and substantial, if numerically minute, growth of individuals and indeed communities that have allegiances to both ways of life. It is also important to specify what I am not purposing to do: I am not intent on making a verdict regarding whether different forms of Islâmic Christianity are legitimate forms of Islâm or Christianity, or some syncretistic *tertium quid*. To put it simply, I will take no position in the debate among proponents and opponents of the C4, C5, and Insider Movement debate, for those familiar with that nomenclature.

To start, the term *Muslim Background Congregation* is one of my own creation, though it is a simple variation of the individual Muslim background believer. The word *congregation* is used because it is not proper solely to either Islâm or Christianity, nor does it entail anything about the form of Islâmic Christianity being practiced. Nor does it entail a building or physical space of any specific kind, or any minimum or maximum number. Of course the term does not preclude the use of a

¹ Peter S.J. Schineller, 'Inculturation: A Difficult and Delicate Task' in *IBMR* Vol. 20:3 (July 1996), p. 109.

church building or a mosque. One could have an MBC meeting in St Peter's Basilica or the Blue Mosque or someone's car or in a park or living room.

I am aware that some Christians who used to be Muslims will find the term objectionable, because it seems to define a person (or community) by what they were, and not what they are now by their own choice and actions. On the other hand, there are also Muslims who follow Jesus Christ as he is portrayed in the Gospels and the term is equally worrisome for them, they are not Muslim-background anything, they are simply Muslims. Indeed, some of them claim that they are the truest Muslims, all since they believe not only in the Qur'an but in all the books sent by God (Torah, Psalms, and the Gospel) and thus submit to God's will more completely than other Muslims. One must be aware of and sensitive to these objections, so it must be stated clearly that the term is not used with the intention of being prejudicial in any way. There can be (and there are) Catholic and Orthodox priests who are MBB's; there can be (and there are) imams and religious leaders of great influence who are MBB's.

Other attempts to name have been presented, including the unfortunate *messianic Muslims*² to simply Muslim believers. The problem with the term *messianic Muslim* is that it is ambiguous: Muslims already believe that Jesus is the Messiah, though few Muslims know what the title actually means³ - which is also the case with many Christians. Even the term *believer* can be understood as disrespectful because the implication is that others are not believers, or at least not the right kind of believers. All this to say that these terms are all problematic.

What must be understood by MBB, in this context then, is someone whose past is Islâmic, whether through an act of their own volition or chance, and who has converted to the Jesus of the Gospels. With these stipulations we make room for both the imam and the priest. Nothing is said about their point of view on the Qur'an or Muhammad or how they

² Joshua Massey and Rick Brown both use this term.

³ The Arabic word *masih* is of Hebrew origin, though creative attempts have been made by Muslim scholars to secure it for some Arabic provenance, for examples see Neal Robinson, 'Crucifixion' *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, Ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Washington DC: Brill), accessed 7 March 2009 on www.brillonline.nl.

pray and worship or what they eat or how they dress. Of course, this definition with these stipulations may soon be deficient, as children are raised in Islâmic Christian households and lack a personal act of conversion - an essential element of the evangelical ethos - but this is a very recent phenomenon and it remains to be seen how different MBC's will address it.

1.3 The Two Stream Hypothesis: Rejectionists and Accommodationists

Continuing research in this area is needed, but I have come to a preliminary conclusion that there are two fairly different kinds of communities within Islâmic Christianity. The Rejectionists are people who have come out of Islâm and often times have a negative impression of it as a *dîn*. They are women who have come to an understanding that Islâm teaches they are inferior to men; they are men who have been submitted to torture and persecution under Islâmic regimes, all to the glory of God. They are people who want to coexist in a fragmented and globalizing world and grow tired of the teaching that Jews and Christians are descended from apes and pigs; they are scholars who studied history and the life of the Prophet only to be sourly disappointed with what they found in the earliest sources which are surprisingly candid - much more so than the hagiographic material widely circulated today - and came to the conclusion that he was a man of insufficient moral standing to bear the mantle of prophethood - and that is a very gentle way of putting it. Rejectionists are, it seems, more present in places where reformed Islâm has been successful in dominating the political conversation; places like Iran⁴ and Egypt come to mind. Many of these people came to faith in

⁴ One example of someone describing this from Iran is in Krikor Markarian, 'Today's Iranian Revolution: How the Mullahs are Leading the Nation to Jesus' in *Mission Frontiers* Sep-Oct 2008. . Another example from Algeria is Bassam Madany, 'Algerians Alienated from Islam are Turning to Christ', Accessed 10 April 2009 on www.answering-islam.org/authors/madany/algerians.html.

See also Abu Daoud, 'Apostates of Islam' in *Saint Francis Magazine*, Vol. 3:4 (March 2008), p. 4: 'Every religion - however one wants to define that word - makes certain promises. Christ promised persecution in this world, substantial redemption among those called out (the Church) from that earthly kingdom, and eternal life in the Kingdom come. Islam promises, for the society that abides by God's will (the *shari'ah*), prosperity, peace, justice,

Christ while outside of their country of birth, or perhaps by media ministry (satellite, radio, etc).

But we can also identify a very different, and I am guessing numerically smaller, groups of communities. I call them accommodationists because there is, to differing degrees, a desire to accommodate, which in Latin means 'to cause to fit together', the Jesus of the Gospels with many aspects of the Islâmic *dîn*.⁵ There is a desire to continue, to differing degrees again, to abide by Islâmic practices: the Islamic fast over the Christian fast, women continuing to wear the *hijâb*, perhaps using the Qur'ân or parts of it in worship, keeping Islâmic names over taking Christian names, using Islamic forms and customs in worship and devotion and prayer, and so on. Generally these people do not have a negative experience of Islâm, and they probably do not have much exposure to Christianity. This would also be more common in areas or regions where there is either no Christian church, or where the churches are ethnically defined (Armenian, Assyrian, etc.), thus making the assimilation of non-co-ethnists difficult.

Before I get to the main point of this work, I need to say something about contextualization. It is an error to think that those who evangelized the rejectionists are not contextualizing the Gospel. Indeed, framing the Gospel as a way of being rescued from a decrepit and unjust civilization (Islâm) is itself a contextualization, and one that has not been entirely unsuccessful. In these days when Islâmic reform has had the chance to prove its merit in many different milieus (Iran, Afghanistan, and present Iraq), it has also opened itself to the very clear reality that none of these countries has delivered what they promised. One former missionary, when asked about why there has been an increase in the number of conversions from Islâm in the recent decades, explained:

and political domination. That is no small promise. Some Muslims have questioned that promise: given that there are dozens of Muslim-majority countries throughout the world, including many who make an explicit claim to abide by the *shari'ah*, how is it that these countries are generally characterized by (excepting oil and gas) economic inferiority, political corruption, lack of human rights, and a devastating level of governmental oppression?

⁵ Obviously I don't like using the word 'religion' in reference to Islâm. It is, in my view, an entirely deficient word which should never be used (without careful re-definition at least) to refer to Islâm.

My thoughts [...] surround the oft met assumption of Islam's adequacy which seems to have been at the centre of the political and ethnic discourse in recent years (mostly in the conflict of ideas over issues in the Middle East), has been open to reflection by Muslims.. This has led many to look again at what is their own experience of Islam, and whether Islam as it is presently constituted can bear the weight of what it says of itself.⁶

On the other hand, framing the Gospel (widely-defined) in a non-polemical way that appeals to other felt needs of the human being, like friendship with God, the assurance of forgiveness, the elevation of faith over ritual, etc., to reach those who do not view Islâm as a failed civilization is also contextualization - just a different kind. Thus, to say that one form of evangelization is contextualized is not quite right because the fragmentation of identity we see today is part of our context in the Middle East and *Dâr al-Islâm* in general. Appealing to that fragmentation need not be, *ipso facto*, cultural imperialism or non-contextual.

2 The status of the books in the life of the community

Both evangelical Christianity and orthodox Islâm treat their books in unique ways: there is some overlap, but there is also significant divergence. It is often times difficult for the Western mind to grasp how writing, reading, and comprehension relate very differently to the context of the Islâmîc world. Perhaps most centrally, the Qur'ân is not read to be understood: it is a form of divine speech; it is the pre-existent word of God present with him from all eternity, but instead of becoming incarnate in a man, it was made to descend to the Prophet of Islâm who, not being a literate man, recited it. Years later, as the first generation of Muslims was passing away it became necessary to collect the verses, or *âyât* (literally *signs* - the same word is used in the Arabic Bible when John writes of Jesus performing signs), and record them.

The content of the Qur'ân is also more uniform than is that of the Bible, consisting primarily of poetic summonses to obedience and warnings of punishment for those who resist (especially the earlier verses), and then of laws and rules touching on everything from dividing the spoils of

⁶ Name withheld per interviewees request.

war, to the treatment and procurement of slaves, inheritance laws, ritual and dietary laws, and so on⁷. The book is to be recited in Arabic and is, theologically speaking, incapable of being translated. That is, the Qur'ân cannot retain its identity upon translation. Only recently have translations of the Qur'ân been made widely available, though Christians had early translated it in Latin, and Luther himself sponsored the first German translation of the book⁸. A quick glance at any non-Arabic Qur'ân will usually indicate that it does not claim to be the Qur'ân but rather a 'translation' or 'translation of its meaning.' The consequences of this inability to be translated are manifold: on the level of interreligious dialogue it is often used to discard the opinion of anyone who does not know Arabic, because they cannot read the Qur'ân. On the level of education one ends up with the *madrasas* of Pakistan, where children who do not know Arabic spend years memorizing the entire book in Arabic. To the Western mind this may seem less than maximally productive, but that is to miss the point. To memorize the entire revelation of God and be able to recite it is a supreme achievement: the power of God flows in the very sounds and syllables, whether or not they are connected to the cognition of the hearers. I have at times asked a Muslim friend about the meaning of a verse or phrase in the Qur'ân (much of the grammar is infamously obscure). He would recite the verse from memory, but when asked about its meaning he would say something like, *you know I've never thought about what it means*.

The Qur'ân is also central to Islâmîc art: with its iconoclastic tendencies the use of images is frowned upon, so the words of the Qur'ân are written in Arabic calligraphy, and different places and times have produced different styles of calligraphy: this, coupled with creative use of geometrical design and colors, is at the heart of much Islâmîc art. The same is true with the call to prayer issued from the minaret, which from place to place is uniform in its words (and language - Arabic), but in its

⁷ The earlier verses - meaning those revealed in Makkah, before Muḥammad had acquired juridical and military power. The Madīnan verses, historically later than the Makkan verses, reflect the change in status of Muḥammad and thus contain more legal material. One might indeed say that in Makkah Islâm was a religion, but in Madīnah it became an empire.

⁸ Adam S. Francisco, 'Luther, Lutheranism, and the Challenge of Islam' in *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 71:3/4 (July/Oct 2007), p. 295.

intonation and style differs: there is here a balance between the local and the global.

The physical object - the book itself - is also something that is, one might say, sacramental - a visible and tangible expression of God's invisible majesty and splendor. So the Qur'ân is generally not placed on the floor or in one's pocket. One will also often find a miniature version of the Qur'ân - which may not actually contain the entire book - hanging from the rear-view mirror of taxis or buses throughout *Dâr al-Islâm*. Some Muslims in the UK have requested that religious texts be placed on the highest shelves in public libraries⁹; this is an appropriate gesture in the Muslim mind, while some non-Muslims mentioned that this would be counter-productive because it would just make the books harder to access. It may seem like a trivial matter, but it represents well two different approaches to the religious book: is it something that somehow conveys and signifies the presence of God, or is it something to be read and understood and analyzed?

Different forms of Christianity have different approaches to the Bible as a book. We will focus here on evangelicalism, because that is the form that has, so to speak, contributed its DNA to Islâmic Christianity. Evangelical Christianity prides itself on being 'Biblical', and uses the word extensively: there are Bible churches, there are nominal Christians and then there are 'Bible-believing Christians' or just 'believers'. It is hard to not see such language as being at least slightly derogatory towards other Christians, because the implication is that their churches are not Biblical (an oft-used word that is hardly ever actually defined) and that their Christians are deficient in their belief. Some evangelicals use such words with those beliefs in mind, but others do not; they are simply a matter of convention.

Evangelical piety is indeed centered around the Bible: a man should spend quiet time every day reading his bible, it should be underlined and marked so he can go back to it for future reference (an unthinkable thing to do for most Muslims). A woman brings her own Bible to church and

⁹ Lucy Cockroft, 'Bible moved to library top shelf over inequality fears' at www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsttopics/religion/4687077/Bible-put-on-top-shelf-in-move-to-appease-Muslims.html, accessed March 28, 2009]. The article contains the following observation: 'Some critics have expressed concern that the books will now just be treated as objects to revere rather than books to read.'

does not use the pew Bible or is not just content herself with listening to the reading. The sermon, which is supposedly tied to the Biblical reading, can be quite lengthy, especially when compared to the ten minute homilies found in Catholic and Orthodox churches. (I should point out that, ironically, a Catholic mass or the Sacred Liturgy with all its readings - Psalm, OT, Gospel, Epistle - invariably has more actual reading from the Bible than does a service at an evangelical church, an Anglican or Lutheran evangelical parish being an exception perhaps.) The most successful form of evangelical art has not been architecture or painting, but rather Contemporary Christian Music (CCM). In terms of musical dynamics it is almost identical to secular popular music. While not always explicit, Biblical themes present throughout.

The function of the Bible in terms of a source of information is varied, depending on what strain of evangelicalism one is speaking of. One can find everything from scholarship of the highest quality to uninformed cherry picking of verses to 'prove' a pre-conceived notion. While the Bible is ostensibly the only source of authority for the evangelical Christian (related but not always identical to Calvin's *sola scriptura*), it should be acknowledged that it is often times an unspoken tradition that is authoritative, and the Bible has a secondary role of somehow propping up that tradition. An example of this that should be fairly clear to everyone at this point in history was the use of the Bible to support slavery by some Christians during the American Civil War. Nor does evangelicalism have one coherent hermeneutic; so while all evangelicals agree that the Bible is the supreme authority over the Christian and the church, there is no way to arrive at a consensus regarding what precisely the Bible teaches.

Nor is there any way to discern an essential core of doctrine that must be agreed upon without making appeal to historical formulae (like the Nicene Creed or the Articles of Religion) which are, by their very definition, traditions of the church which communicate how it read the Bible at a given point in history. Evangelicals for the most part tend to be at least uncomfortable, and sometimes openly hostile, to the concept of any sort of binding tradition.¹⁰ All of this has resulted in a community that to some degree resembles the *ummah*: decentralized and pluriform, often

¹⁰ The exception, very rarely discussed, is the tradition of the early church of the New Testament canon - that is, when it determined that certain writings were divinely inspired.

times divisive, somewhat intimidated by modernity, but certain of its unique role in God's beneficent plan for the world.

But the evangelical Christian does seek, in his own way, to understand the Bible. The goal is not to simply understand the historical background and linguistic nuances of the book, but to know the Bible and live it in the context of a personal relationship with God. The young lady who has marked her Bible well shows her community by that physical object (the book) that she has been with God through thick and thin, and just as the pages of the book are tattered and worn, so her faith has, by God's grace, weathered the dangers, toils, and snares of life. Is it perhaps the case that evangelicalism, having largely defined itself in contradistinction to the *iconophilia* and *sacramentalism* of Catholicism (and Orthodoxy), had to then focus those energies on what was left, resulting in a crypto-sacramental attitude towards the book - the one thing that remained after the altars were stripped and the icons banished?

Before discussing the question of hermeneutics I want to make a point about translation, because whatever the similarities between evangelicalism and Islâm in terms of how they treat their books, this difference is central and indicates a fundamental difference between Islâm and Christianity. Christianity is, one might say, incapable of not being translated; the doctrine of the incarnation is in itself a theology of translation, that the *Kalimat Allâh* is most his word when it is being spoken to humans *in the flesh*. Andrew Wall has shown¹¹ how essential translation was to the early spread of Christianity which co-opted the Septuagint, thus permitting the incorporation of large numbers of gentiles who otherwise would not have had access to the Hebrew Scriptures. Or we might recall that the Cyrillic alphabet itself is the fruit of missionary work to the Slavs - it was developed by Saint Cyril who upon finding that they did not have an alphabet developed one, and this was a key step towards their conversion. Examples could be multiplied extensively¹².

¹¹ Andrew F. Walls, *The Christian Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1996), p. 30ff.

¹² Calvin Schenk (1999) has gone so far as to suggest that Christianity in North Africa, which gave the church great figures like Tertullian and Cyprian, did not survive because it did not translate the Bible into the original, indigenous languages of the region (Punic and the Berber languages), but remained reliant on the recently imported, urban language of Latin. See Calvin E. Shenk, 'The Demise of the Church in North Africa and Nubia and its

This impetus towards translation coupled with the hunger for practicality/relevance, which is like the holy grail of evangelicals, has resulted in a bewildering assortment of translations of the Bible, often with comments in the margins with everything from grammatical and historical information, to quotes, to eschatological observations, to practical ways of applying a verse to one's life. So one can purchase the Bible with commentary for mothers, high school students, college students, families, and so on. And while the text of the Bible does not change, there are many translations available, some better for scholarship, some better for people who don't speak English as their first language, some better for devotional reading, and so on. All of this is immensely confusing to many Muslims who can point to one Qur'ân which is not translated and is the same over all the face of the earth. Between the commentaries and different translations, the awareness that these Bibles are all translations of the same texts in the original languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek) is often lost on the Muslim.

There is also a difference in the concept of what a holy book should read like: how it should sound. As mentioned above the Qur'ân is primarily a series of warnings and laws, so the variegated contents of the Bible are sometimes confusing to the Muslim. What is the reason for including miscellaneous historical documents like the censuses and genealogies, along with erotic poetry, narratives, correspondence between leaders and churches, and finally confusing visions that are, unlike the Qur'ân which claims it is written in 'clear Arabic', famously difficult to interpret and understand? Most Muslims believe that 'the Qur'an is not the word of God in a metaphorical sense but it literally so; it is the actual speech of God...'¹³ How different that is from what we find in the Christian Gospels: it is confounding that the message of God which was made to descend to his servant Jesus was recorded by four different people. The whole situation does not befit the majesty of God's message in the minds of many Muslims, and Muslim missionaries are not afraid to raise these points.

Survival in Egypt and Ethiopia: A Question of Contextualization?' in *Missiology*, Vol. 21:2 (April 1993), pp. 131-154.

¹³ Abdullah Saeed, 'The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures' in *Muslim World*, Vol. 92:3/4 (Fall 2002), p. 431.

It would be erroneous to think that all Muslims are content with their book. Indeed, a key reason put forth by Muslims who come to the Christ of the Gospels is that they have found something in the Bible that they never met in the Qur'ân. The Qur'ân does have narrative material but it is pretty scant, with little character development - quite different from what we find in the Bible where characters like Abraham, Moses, David, Jeremiah, Jesus, Peter, and Paul are accompanied through many years of their lives with stories of both successes and failures, and sometimes their sins; that is another thing that is problematic to the Muslim mind which understands that God bestows immunity to sin upon his prophets, from the time of their call onwards.¹⁴ Thus a book that (according to those presenting it, i.e., evangelicals) calls for humble but critical reflection, and with its very human portrayal of the difficulty of attempting to live a faithful life, appears to meet a felt need in the lives of some Muslims who do not encounter such a book in the Qur'ân - or at least the Qur'ân as it is read and believed on in their communities.

In sum, for both communities the book has *ritual value*; it has 'come to symbolize some aspect of human experience'.¹⁵ In both cases it is, at least, the nature of the relationship: in Islâm that of subservience and slavery (not too strong a word), and in evangelicalism that of personalness and comfortableness and intimacy.

3 A Hermeneutic of Reappropriation

3.1 On Hermeneutics

I wish to now direct our attention to the question of hermeneutics, or the science¹⁶ of interpretation. I have opted to speak of how MBC's and

¹⁴ A strong tradition in Islam, but one that finds no support in the Qur'ân where prophets (Adam, Moses, Muhammad, but not Jesus, curiously) are regularly commanded to repent of their sins. Most notably there is Q 47:19, which is often subjected to mistranslation so that what is very clear in Arabic is not so clear in English. Pickthall is correct in his translation: 'So know (O Muhammad) that there is no God save Allah, and *ask forgiveness for thy sin* and for believing men and believing women. Allah knoweth (both) your place of turmoil and your place of rest.'

¹⁵ Fiona Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 247.

¹⁶ The word *science* being understood according to its Latin provenance, of course.

those working with them revisit and sometimes reinterpret texts within both the Qur'ân and the Bible. There is at times a certain tolerance; for example, in my conversations, interviews and research I have not found that there is any sense of contradiction among accommodationists regarding the Qur'anic statement that Jesus is 'a spirit from him [God]',¹⁷ and the accepted Christian doctrine that the Holy Spirit is in fact that one who, in overshadowing the Virgin, conceives Messiah in her womb. Therefore, it is important to stipulate *ab initio* that, while systematizations of religious texts and meanings by specialists, both within Islâm and Christianity, tend to at least attempt a totalizing system of hermeneutics, that is, one that will account for all variations and possibilities, that is not the case here.

We are not dealing, for the most part, with trained scholars whose interest is the derivation of a comprehensive constellation of meanings, symbols, and practices that will somehow encompass all Qur'anic and Biblical material. Rather we find a concern that is, I propose, closer to that of the early church¹⁸ which felt the need to defend itself; on the one hand Jews who accused them of bastardizing their Scriptures and misinterpreting Messianic references, and on the other hand pagans who decried what they variously perceived as political subversion, cannibalism, puerile superstition, and atheism¹⁹. In one word, then, the motive is apologetic.

A complete doctoral thesis could probably be written on the topic of the hermeneutical movements in Islâmic Christianity. From the point of view of the rejectionist stream of Islâmic Christianity, we find something more or less similar to the traditional polemic of Bible vs Qur'ân, with one side trying to disprove the validity of the other's book. There is a long tradition of this sort of writing,²⁰ and while it remains impor-

¹⁷ Q 4:171.

¹⁸ I am speaking specifically of the period after the destruction of the Temple (70 CE) whereupon the followers of Messiah became estranged from the larger Jewish community; thus they lost the freedom of religion previously afforded them as Jews, i.e. part of a tolerated *ethnic* religion, and prior to the Edict of Milan (313) whereupon Christianity was legalized in the Roman Empire.

¹⁹ See Stuart G. Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* (London: SPCK, 2000, 2nd edition), Ch. 5, for a quick read on the early church's ministry of apologetics.

²⁰ See for example Pfander's famous (or infamous) *Mizân al-Haqq* (The Balance of Truth) - one of the earliest and most translated works in this tradition. On the other hand, the first

tant today to a significant degree in both Christian and Islâmic missionary circles, the more fascinating and less-documented area of study is among the accommodationists. To reconcile the Qur'ân and the Bible may seem challenging, yet it is essential for accommodationists, both for the purpose of bringing new people into the fold, but also for maintaining a connection to their Islâmic identity and heritage - however unconventional it may be. The following examples are testimonies to the fluidity and dynamism of *diyanât*.

3.2 *Instances of Reappropriation*

The grammatical, linguistic and contextual explications are my own work, but the proposed reappropriations are not - rather their origin is either in MBC's or the missionaries who work with them. It can be very difficult to figure out precisely where these reappropriations originated, but the important feature is that they are being actively used in MBC's today. I will also, from time to time, provide information in footnotes from contemporary scholars, for the sake of comparison. (To the chagrin of a Western scholar,²¹ there is little or no textual paper trail here.) A good place to start is perhaps the central verse that Muslims quote to deny what is, according to Christians, the central event in all of history: the crucifixion (and thus the resurrection) of Jesus Christ²². The verse in question is Q 4:157, which deserves to be quoted in its fullness, in three translations, with the original:

YUSUF ALI: That they said (in boast), 'We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah'; - but they killed him not, nor crucified him,

great work in this area - Lull's *The Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men* - was not polemical in nature, but rather irenic - surprising, given the period when he was writing.

²¹ And Western scholarship is notoriously centered on *scripturae*—meaning written things - and this has not always served it well.

²² Compare the following material to Lull's apologetic: 'The Saracens claim that Jesus Christ did not die. And do you know why? Because they think they are rendering Him honor by saying that He did not die. But they do not understand the honor that is His in being the hope and consolation of every man, no matter how poor or guilty he may be...' *The Book of the Gentile*, Book III, Article 10, in Ramon Lull, *The Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men* in *Doctor Illuminatus: A Ramon Lull Reader* ed. and trans. Anthony Bonner (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1985). *Nota bene* how different they are in approach.

St Francis Magazine is published by Interserve and Arab Vision

but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not [...]

PICKTHAL: And because of their saying: We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, Allah's messenger - they slew him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so unto them; and lo! those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain.

SHAKIR: And their saying: Surely we have killed the Messiah, Isa son of Mariam, the messenger of Allah; and they did not kill him nor did they crucify him, but it appeared to them so (like Isa) and most surely those who differ therein are only in a doubt about it; they have no knowledge respecting it, but only follow a conjecture, and they killed him not for sure.

Even within the history of Islâmic scholarship we find examples of scholars who did not interpret this verse in a way that denied the historical fact of the crucifixion of Christ.²³ That is, there is a tradition within Islâm that permits the Muslim to believe in the historicity of the crucifixion of Jesus. But the fact of the matter is that the vast majority of Muslims around the world today follow the tradition that interprets this verse as meaning that someone else was substituted in the place of Jesus, and that person was made to look like Jesus. This is what Ayoub calls a *substitutionist interpretation*,²⁴ and in describing the work of many Qur'ânic scholars writes, 'For the most part, their purpose has been to answer the question, "Who was killed and crucified if Jesus was saved by divine intervention?"' In their eagerness to confirm the denial of the death and crucifixion of Christ at the hands of his enemies, commentators have generally interpreted the words *shubbiha lahum* to mean that

²³ See Mahmoud M. Ayoub, 'Towards an Islamic Christology: An Image of Jesus in Early Shi'a Muslim Literature' in *Muslim World*, Vol. 66:3, (July 1976), pp. 163-187, for a helpful survey of how this has been approached through the centuries, including summaries of the thought of several important scholars on this issue. . One example is the famous Fakh al-Dîn al-Râzî (d. 1209) who did not accept the substitutionist theory. Ayoub himself understands the object of the verb 'slew' as the truth, which the Arabic permits. That is, Jesus as a prophet is an embodiment of truth, and whether or not he was in fact killed, the truth was not slain.

²⁴ Ayoub, 'Towards an Islamic Christology', p. 96.

another was made to bear his likeness (*shabuh*) and die in his stead.²⁵ That last statement—*another was made to bear his likeness and die in his stead*—is the heart of the substitutionist theory which is by far the predominant interpretation among Muslims today.

As Ayoub pointed out, much of the difficulty centers around the obscure verb *shubbiha* which is in the passive tense and therefore has no subject, and the apologias of Islâmic Christianity have in some instances started with this fact. The verb's second of the trilateral roots²⁶, the 'b', is doubled²⁷ by means of the *shaddah*, which in this case makes it causative. Thus the simple form, *huwa shabaha*, simply means 'he looked like' or 'he resembled' this or that person.²⁸ The fact that the word in the Qur'ân is causative and passive makes its interpretation more difficult. The verb, *shabbaha*, then, in the past tense - which is the primary case in Arabic - means 'to make equal or similar'²⁹ but in the passive form can also mean 'to be doubtful, dubious, uncertain, obscure' when used with the preposition '*alâ*'. So if we use the first meaning in the passive (which is rarely used in Arabic, incidentally) we can offer one of the two following translations for the single word *shubbiha*: *he was caused to resemble* or *it was caused to resemble*.

The following two words are *lahum* which mean 'to them' and here there is no question of who this is referring to - the Jews.³⁰ From Q 4:153 we find that the occasion of this confrontation between Muhammad and the Jews is their request for a sign to verify his claim that he was a prophet. The result is a lengthy catalogue of the sins of the Jews and their subsequent castigations by God. The key twist in this novel accommodationist reappropriation is to simply concede everything the verse says, but to focus on 'to them' and the Arabic pronoun of *them*. That is, the Jews did not crucify or slay the Messiah, though they

²⁵ Ibid., p. 95.

²⁶ Sh-b-h.

²⁷ Called *geminaton*: an example would be the *k* sound when one says *book case* in English.

²⁸ This usage is found in colloquial Arabic in the Transjordan region. The classical usage would be the fourth form *ashbaha* or *yushbih*.

²⁹ Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, Ed. J. Milton Cowan (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1961, 1980), p. 453.

³⁰ This view is laid out in a short, unpublished paper by one Ali Hadi Al-Nouri entitled, 'The Passion of the Christ: Should a Muslim view it?'

thought they did. In other words, a careful reading does not imply that Christ was not crucified at all, which is grammatically true. This form of apologetic comes across quite clearly in one Islâmic Arabic translation of the Gospels where the translator has labeled the crucifixion narrative *salabûhu wa qatalûhu al-Rumân* which uses, intentionally no doubt, the identical verbal forms of this verse, but with the affirmation that it was the Romans (*al-Rumân*) who did it. The meaning of the polysemous *shubbiha lahum* then neatly falls into place (it is *made to fit* - accommodated). The Jews had boasted of crucifying the son of Mary, but in fact it was an empty boast; in their self-aggrandizement they deceived themselves, for whatever role they had in the instigation of the crucifixion, the Gospels clearly attribute the physical historical act to the Roman authorities.³¹

But that is not the only way, according to Islâmic Christianity, to coax Q 4:157 into compliance with the Gospels. Other approaches focus, perhaps more questionably, on the manner of causation. A murder, which is purported here as the boast of the Jews, is carried out against one's will, but we find in the Gospels a crucifixion that has a different status: a priestly sacrifice, a free-will 'atoning sacrifice' (1 John 2:2), if not indeed a sacrifice *of* free will in the supreme act of *islâm* (submission). Thus another explanation is that, indeed, they did not kill him or sacrifice him, but rather of Jesus' own initiative and as an act of his own will, the Son of Mary sacrificed himself, and gave his life 'as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45).³² This is another accommodation: a way that is used within Islâmic Christianity to make the Gospel and the Qur'an fit together.

³¹ But compare this use of language to Acts 3:14-15 where we find Stephen denouncing the Sanhedrin with the following words: 'It was you who accused the Holy and Upright One, you who demanded that a murderer should be released to you while you killed the prince of life.' (NJB)

³² One finds here support from conventional academia. Robinson, writing in the 'Jesus' entry of the *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an* says of the traditional substitutionist position, 'It is questionable whether the Qur'anic data provides sufficiently solid foundations to bear the weight of the construction.' Neal Robinson, Neal, 'Crucifixion' *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*. Ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Washington DC: Brill, 2009), Accessed 07 March 2009 via www.brillonline.nl.

One other approach should be mentioned, which appeals to God himself as the effective - if hidden - cause of every human act.³³ This notion, obviously, conflicts with most Christian understandings of free will, which tend to couch evil human actions within God's permissive will - he does not cause them to happen, therefore he is not responsible for them, rather he allows them to happen. The apologia may seem unrealistic, but it indeed has its basis in the Qur'an itself (Q 8:17):

PICKTHAL: Ye (Muslims) slew them not, but Allah slew them. And thou (Muhammad) threwest not when thou didst throw, but Allah threw, that He might test the believers by a fair test from Him. Lo! Allah is Hearer, Knower.

The context or reason of descent³⁴ (*sabab al-inzâl*) here is not germane to our discussion. What is germane is the divine claim that the actions whereby a military victory was secured were in fact his own deeds - Allah slew them, Allah threw them. Applying the same thinking to the cross of Christ we find a deeper logic revealed: whatever the Jews *thought* they had accomplished it was in fact God's own act - they did not kill him nor crucify him - God did. Perhaps this implication of direct and intentional involvement of the hand of God in Messiah's crucifixion will make some Christians flinch, but such are the curious paths one wanders when reconciling two books which have for most of history seemed utterly irreconcilable. It also shows us that there are times when IC is willing to very substantially discard or modify Christian concepts - this is a two way street in terms of influence.

In the hermeneutic of reappropriation we find other strategies at play as well. For example, obscure verses from the Qur'an are sometimes re-

³³ An important feature of the Islamic understanding of free will and divine justice which became predominant during the Mu'tazilite controversies, wherein the Ash'arite party was victorious. 'Generally it can be said that in the Qur'an, in hadith, and in Islamic theology God's control over human acts and intentions over humans has been emphasized at the expense of human free will.' See Wim Raven, 'Reward and Punishment' *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*. Ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Washington DC: Brill), Accessed 07 March 2009 via www.brillonline.nl.

³⁴ That is, the historical context and occasion of the verse - what historical circumstances caused God to send this or that verse to Muhammad through the angel.

vived to reinforce a point³⁵ - sometimes with a traditional Islâmic interpretation, or as in the following example, coupled with a grammatical critique. We have, for example, Q 3:55, which variously reads:

YUSUF ALI: Behold! Allah said: 'O Jesus! I will take thee and raise thee to Myself and clear thee (of the falsehoods) of those who blaspheme; I will make those who follow thee superior to those who reject faith, to the Day of Resurrection: Then shall ye all return unto me, and I will judge between you of the matters wherein ye dispute.'

RASHAD KHALIFA: Thus, GOD said, 'O Jesus, I am terminating your life, raising you to Me, and ridding you of the disbelievers. I will exalt those who follow you above those who disbelieve, till the Day of Resurrection. Then to Me is the ultimate destiny of all of you, then I will judge among you regarding your disputes.'

Here we find ourselves confronted with another obscure Arabic term, rendered in the two translations above: *I will take thee* and *I am terminating your life*. There is a single Arabic word here, *mutawaffika*. The trilateral root is waw-fa-ya and in its first form it means, 'to be perfect, integral, complete, unabridged [...] to pay (a debt)'.³⁶ The Qur'ânic word here is based on the fifth form, *tawaffa*, but it is an *ism fâ'il*, which here denotes a being that carries out the action. The word *tawaffa* is used in both colloquial variations of Arabic as well as classical (unlike *shubbiha* above, used only in classical Arabic), and it means to pass away, that is, to die. (Etymologically the link to the concept of repayment is that one's soul returns to God, God is repaid, so to speak, because he created the soul and now it returns to him.) So the word *mutawaffi* means *one who causes someone to die*, which coheres well with the Khalifa translation. The attached pronoun at the end of the word *ka* is for the singular male, because in these verses we have God addressing Jesus, revealing that God will cause Jesus to pass away.

³⁵ This is analogous to what was done by the early Christian community, and we see this occurring in the NT itself when a fairly obscure figure like Melchizedek, who is mentioned only in Genesis and then in a single verse of the Psalter (110:4), is called upon by the author of Hebrews to establish Jesus' authority to offer a sacrifice, though he is not a Levite, much less a son of Aaron.

³⁶ Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, p. 1086.

There are two traditional orthodox Islâmic approaches to this verse because it must be harmonized with the tradition stipulating that Jesus did not die. One is exemplified in the first translation above, which is to submit the regular meaning of *tawaffa* to considerable adjustment, making it mean that God will receive Jesus to himself in his ascension as one receives the repayment of a debt. The second is to discard the chronological order: I will cause you to die, but before that, I will raise you up to me. This fits the normal Islâmic eschatology which postulates that Jesus was taken to God (raise thee to Myself), but that he will return in the future, live a normal human life, get married, have children, and then die. The former (I will cause you to die) will happen in the distant future, the latter (I will raise you to me) has happened in the past.

An Islâmic Christian reading simply appeals to the customary meaning of *tawaffa* - he died - which, it is claimed, agrees entirely with the Gospel account. God caused Jesus to pass away on the cross, and then he raised him up in the Ascension (or perhaps in his resurrection). The two difficulties above are gone; one must not force the word *tawaffa* to mean something it does not normally mean, and one can explain the order of the words by appealing to chronology, a normal mode of human communication.³⁷

We find another example of reappropriation in Q 19:33. When discussing the interpretation of Q 4:157 (They did not kill him...) above, we saw that there were minority voices within the orthodox tradition of Qur'ânic interpretation who would allow for an historical crucifixion. We encounter something similar in the Aḥmadiyyah interpretation of Q 19:33, except that here agreement is found with a group that is considered by most Muslims to be heretical:

YUSUF ALI: So peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the day that I shall be raised up to life (again)!

SHAKIR: And peace on me on the day I was born, and on the day I die, and on the day I am raised to life.

³⁷ As for the opinion of academia, we find the admission that this interpretation (take you up to me) is viable if not likely: 'When God is the subject [of *tawaffa*] it can mean to receive souls in their sleep [...] but it more frequently means "cause to die"' See Robinson, Neal, 'Crucifixion'.

The traditional reading necessitates Jesus looking back to his day of birth and forward to death in the distant future after his return. The sect of Ahmadiyyah Islâm, considered heterodox or heretical by most Muslims, insists that there was a real crucifixion that did not succeed in killing him; he escaped and later died in India where his tomb can still be visited.³⁸ Islâmic Christianity will agree with aspects of their interpretation.

It should be pointed out that the Ali takes liberty with the translation. The Qur'ân does not contain the word 'shall' or 'will' before the verb for 'be raised to life' (*ub'athu*), though the language does contain such a word (*sawfa*). Shakir is correct in his use of the present passive. This verse is used in the context of Islâmic Christianity to back up the claim that there has been a bifurcation of the actual teaching of the Qur'ân and the orthodox interpretation of it. We also are able to identify a third characteristic of this re-reading of the Qur'ân in the light of the Gospels: the adoption or revival of heretical, but not novel, readings of the Qur'ân.

I have to this point dealt primarily with verses having to do with Jesus and his death, crucifixion, and resurrection. The other key bone of contention historically has been the doctrine of the Trinity, and there is one verse quoted often, Q 4:171:

SHAKIR: O followers of the Book! Do not exceed the limits in your religion, and do not speak (lies) against Allah, but (speak) the truth; the Messiah, Isa son of Marium is only a messenger of Allah and His Word which He communicated to Marium and a spirit from Him; believe therefore in Allah and His messengers, and say not, Three. Desist, it is better for you; Allah is only one Allah; far be It from His glory that He should have a son, whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth is His, and Allah is sufficient for a Protector.

In this single verse we have, it is alleged, a denial of the Sonship of Christ *and* the Trinity. What are some of the answers proposed by people within Islâmic Christianity? The answer, succinctly, is by parrying

³⁸ See Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (Oxford: One World Press, 1956, 2001), p. 224ff for an interesting discussion of the Ahmadiyyah view. He contends it is born out of a desire to see the eschatological role of Jesus diminished.

the thrust. For elsewhere in the Qur'ân we find what must be meant by the 'three' (Q 5:116):

PICKTHAL: And when Allah saith: O Jesus, son of Mary! Didst thou say unto mankind: Take me and my mother for two gods beside Allah?

The objection is parried: when we read *say not three* in Q 4:171, it is obviously referring to the 'trinity' of Allah, Jesus and Mary mentioned in Q 5:116. Christians do not believe in any such trinity, therefore the command to 'desist' is utterly irrelevant to the question of the validity of Trinitarian thought. The Qur'ân has nothing to say about the Christian doctrine of the consubstantiality of the one triune God.

3.3 Reappropriation: A Definition

Aspects of these reappropriations may seem scandalous to some, so it is wise to recall the fairly radical re-interpretations of Hebrew Scriptures by early Christians and, indeed, Muslim revision of the status of the Judeo-Christian books that compose the Bible. Christians aggressively reinterpreted several passages, giving prophetic meaning to verses that did not clearly claim to have any such future referent. '[T]he foundation upon which early Christian interpretation rested was Christ',³⁹ and so they aggressively *isogeted* Jesus Christ into passages about the Torah, the monarchy, Israel, and the priesthood, all the while claiming that Jesus had not abolished, but fulfilled those Scriptures. If we do not realize how daring these moves were at the time, yet how successful they were in the long term, we may lose sight of the capacity for new interpretations to gain currency over time.

And while this practice of isogesis is certainly part of the hermeneutic of reappropriation, it remains its own hermeneutical method. It is largely piecemeal and unsystematized - as I mentioned - not arising from some grand theory of how to interpret the entirety of the Qur'ân and the Bible, but rather from a need to defend one's own beliefs while also going on the offence and challenging what are considered to be erroneous readings of sacred texts.

³⁹ William C. Weinrich, 'Patristic Exegesis as Ecclesial and Sacramental' in *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 64:1 (Jan 2000), p. 23.

In spite of this, certain patterns emerge as one looks at multiple instances of reappropriation - even, as is the case here - when they have emerged in different places and times and by different groups who are not necessarily in contact with each other. That pattern is sufficient to propose a preliminary skeleton of what a hermeneutics of reappropriation looks like.

The Islâmic approach was very different from how Christians dealt with previous scriptures. It made no claim that the revelation of the Qur'ân was meant to complete previous revelations. The logic is summarized here: 'Biblical Scriptures do not square with the Qur'an; [...] their true original form did so square; [...] therefore, corruption has occurred'.⁴⁰ This is the traditional Islâmic view of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. It is supported by a list of verses from the Qur'ân, all of which have been subjected to reinterpretation by Islâmic Christianity; the result is that one can argue from the Qur'ân for the validity of the previous Scriptures, and that indeed, such is the logical and most reasonable reading. We will, shortly, take a look at these verses from the Qur'ân and see how Muslim Christians react to them.

I hope that it is now clear why I have chosen the word *reappropriation* to refer to this pattern of hermeneutics. It is because what the word means etymologically: to make something one's own again. On the one hand we do not have here the Islâmic tools of *tahrîf* and *naskh* to deal with the textual tensions, yet I feel the historical discontinuity means that we cannot simply lump this hermeneutic in with that of the various authors of what became the New Testament - namely a hermeneutic of fulfillment. Reappropriation is, then, an un-systematized hermeneutic whereby a religious text posterior to the life of Jesus is re-read and re-interpreted in the light of that event, seeking to reconcile that text with those of the New Testament. I am no lover of novelty or the coining of new terms, and the suggestion of some *tertia quid* is not made without hesitation.

But now that I have said that the hermeneutic of Islâmic Christianity (of the accommodationist variety) is significantly dissimilar from that of traditional Islâm, it behooves us to investigate the manner of the difference and the accompanying apologia offered

⁴⁰ Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, p. 254.

3.4 *tahrif and naskh (Corruption and Abrogation)*

It is therefore necessary at this juncture to examine how voices in Islâmic Christianity deal with the charges of corruption and abrogation. As mentioned, the nascent Christian community did not approach the Hebrew Scriptures through these lenses, but rather that of unearthing hidden meanings⁴¹ and seeking the completion of all things in the light of the recent advent and waited-for return of Messiah. Islâm, however, did not approach prior Scriptures in the same way.

The contradictions between the Kur'anic and Biblical stories, and the denial of both Jews and Christians that Muhammad was predicted in their Holy Scriptures, gave rise to the Kur'anic accusation of the falsification of these last by Jews and Christians respectively [see TAHRIF]. Also, according to Muslim theologians, the *Tawrat* was abrogated and superseded first by the *Indjil* and then by the Kur'an [see NASKH]⁴²

Generally then, Muslims consider Christian and Jewish Scriptures to be corrupted versions of the originals, and this charge of *tahrif*⁴³ is, according to Islâmic orthodoxy, based on the Qur'ân. Moreover the Islâmic proposition that these texts have been corrupted is not open to historical verification or falsification since it is purportedly divinely revealed. Whatever probability history can provide us with regarding the connection of the historical Jesus with the teachings found in the four gospels, it cannot begin to compare with the unshakeable certainty afforded us by direct, clear revelation. As if this situation were not already rather grave, Islâm also has, in most of its forms, a theory of abrogation

⁴¹ The meaning of the Greek word *mysterion*, which is translated into Arabic as *sirr*, is, more or less, *secret*. We see then that traditional Arab Christianity (and Eastern Orthodoxy, generally speaking) has retained a vestige of this concept in its own manner of speaking of sacraments. This is something which the Western church, using the Latin *sacramentum* which originally referred to a secular military vow, did not preserve in the same way, or perhaps did not preserve at all. Could this be related to why Western Christianity (which of course includes evangelicalism, Protestantism, and Roman Catholicism) slid sometimes into individualism and emotionalism while Eastern Orthodoxy has often flirted with overly heterotopic ritualism?

⁴² Hava Lazarus-Yafch, 'Tawrat', in the *Encyclopedia Islamica*, Ed. P. Bearman et alia (Washington DC: Brill), Accessed 07 March 2009 via www.brillonline.nl

⁴³ From the root h-r-f, the word is the gerund (*masdar*) of the second form.

(*naskh*). A verse in the Qur'ân can abrogate an earlier verse, as occurred with the consumption of alcohol.⁴⁴ This possibility extends beyond Islâm to the earlier religions of the People of the Book as well: 'The justification for the theory of abrogation derives from the common idea, sanctioned by consensus⁴⁵, that the religion of Islâm abrogated many, and sometimes all, of the laws upheld by earlier religions'.⁴⁶

Consequentially, the Muslim scholar who will in some way allow the legitimacy of the Jewish and Christian writings (which we will discuss promptly) can surmise that their teachings are all *mansûkha*—abrogated. Note the difference from the theory of fulfillment utilized by the early Christians: 'The Muslims, unlike the Christians, did not retain the Hebrew Bible as part of the canon, regarding it as superseded. Whereas for Christians the Old Testament was supplemented by their dispensation, for Muslims it was replaced—an altogether different situation.'⁴⁷ How can one then suppose that reconciliation is possible between the two bodies of scripture, given that the Islâmic hermeneutical tools of *tahrîf* and *naskh* more or less hollow out any claim that might add to or challenge the Qur'ânic picture? It is with this historical and hermeneutical background in mind that we can now turn to the *apologia* that we find operating in the world of accommodationist MBC's.

The answers come to us from two directions. One is to examine the grammar of the Qur'ânic verses which allegedly propound *tahrîf*. The other direction is to criticize *tahrîf* and *naskh* from a theological point of view - what does it say about God that he would simply abrogate previous teachings - teachings held to be true for centuries? Or similarly, what kind of God would allow for millions of Christians and Jews throughout history to believe in a corrupted text? More specifically, a

⁴⁴ Within the Qur'ân itself we see a movement from alcohol being permitted, to being forbidden before prayers, to being entirely proscribed.

⁴⁵ Incidentally, Hallaq is using the word *consensus* here in a technical term. Consensus ('*ijmâ'*) is also a fundamental element of Islamic hermeneutics (and jurisprudence). It is, in my opinion, too early to see what Islamic Christianity will do with the concept, which one might roughly translate in religious terms, as *catholicity*. That word is from the Greek (probably): *kata holos*—according to or throughout the whole, the entirety.

⁴⁶ Wael B. Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An introduction to Sunni usul al-fiqh*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 68.

⁴⁷ Bernard Lewis, *From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting the Middle East* (London: Phoenix, 2004), p. 66.

wholesale nullification of the Bible via *tahrîf* may lead the honest scholar to the possibility that the Qur'ân itself has been corrupted, or indeed that it could be abrogated: or to the possibility that claims that it will not be abrogated but is the final revelation could likewise be abrogated - such is the divine prerogative. But these questions can be multiplied *ad infinitum*, and I am mostly concerned with the hermeneutical question - that of dealing with the text, for both Christianity and Islâm are textual *di-yanât* and it is here that we can encounter a measure of dynamism. Much like the questions above - the Trinity, the crucifixion, etc. - we find an element of novelty, and another of reviving historic minority positions of Islâmic scholars, some simply obscure, and other heterodox.

So, ignoring for the moment the theological implications of *tahrîf*, let us examine some of their textual reappropriations. It is well to start with some of the individual verses from Qur'ân regarding the topic of *tahrîf*:

SHAKIR: Most surely there is a party amongst those who distort the Book with their tongue that you may consider it to be (a part) of the Book, and they say, It is from Allah, while it is not from Allah, and they tell a lie against Allah whilst they know.⁴⁸

Here the charge is one of *verbal* change, not a change or corruption in the text. Thus this could include misrepresenting the true content or doctrine of the text.

SHAKIR: Do you then hope that they would believe in you, and a party from among them indeed used to hear the Word of Allah, then altered it after they had understood it, and they know (this).⁴⁹

The context is apparently a diatribe against the Jews of Moses' day (Q 2:67 ff.), but here we find that only 'a party among them' changed the words, and again there is no mention of a text, so it is not clear that any text was changed or corrupted at all. That a party of the Jews in Moses' day misrepresented his commands is given, but the text, one might say, remains intact and reliable. (Also note how the disappointment of the

⁴⁸ Q 3:78

⁴⁹ Q 2:75

Prophet of Islâm comes across quite clearly regarding the disbelief of the Jews of his day regarding his claim to prophethood.)

The theme of a corrupted *interpretation* then becomes a dominant element in the Muslim Christian apologetic. Likewise in Q 4:46 and Q 5:13 we find the curious accusation that certain Jews have taken verses out of their context. In Q 5:13 we have an explicit use of the verb *yūḥarrifūna* - they corrupt⁵⁰. While some translators have opted to translate the Arabic *mawadhî'a*⁵¹ as according to the idea that 'they corrupt the word from its place,' we also find another possibility, suggested by Pickthall:

PICKTHAL: And because of their breaking their covenant, we have cursed them and made hard their hearts. They change words from their context and forget a part of that whereof they were admonished. Thou wilt not cease to discover treachery from all save a few of them. But bear with them and pardon them. Lo! Allah loveth the kindly.

If *context* is the right translation (other translations have 'place'), then there is no need to suggest that the text has been corrupted. To this point the apologetic of Islâmic Christianity has been able to deflect every allegation of actual *textual* corruption. This concern though, is not new. I don't know if we have here an intentional revival of certain scholarly positions from the past, or something unrelated but similar. In any case, there certainly are orthodox Islâmic scholars throughout history who have suggested that the actual text was preserved, and that it was either the reading of the Torah that was corrupted or its interpretation. That position, today, is only held by a rather minute minority of Islâmic scholars⁵².

So much for defenses used in Islâmic Christianity regarding the Torah. But the Gospel, or *Injil*, is in an even better position. Indeed, what-

⁵⁰ Or perhaps, *they are corrupting*.

⁵¹ A plural, form I, *ism maf'ûl*, based on the triliteral root wa-ḡa- 'a.

⁵² An excellent paper on the topic written by a Muslim scholar is, 'The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures', by Abdullah Saeed. A quote: 'In no verse in the Qur'an is there a denigrating remark about the scriptures of the Jews and the Christians, instead there is respect and reverence. Any disparaging remarks were about the People of the Book, individuals or groups, and their actions.' Saeed, 'The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures', p. 429.

ever charges of corruption we can find about the Torah, we find none at all about the Gospel. On the contrary, Muhammad is told that the Christians must in fact live by it: 'Let the people of the Gospel judge by what Allah hath revealed therein. If any do fail to judge by (the light of) what Allah hath revealed, they are (no better than) those who rebel' (Q 5:47, Yusuf Ali). This seems like a confirmation that the Gospel being used by Christians in Arabia in the 7th century was not corrupted - otherwise why would God command that the Christians should follow it? Moreover, Muhammad himself is told that he should resort to the Jewish and Christian communities if he is in doubt regarding anything: 'If thou wert in doubt as to what We have revealed unto thee, then ask those who have been reading the Book from before thee: the Truth hath indeed come to thee from thy Lord: so be in no wise of those in doubt.' (Q 10:94, Yusuf Ali)⁵³

The Islâmic Christian apologetic then poses the question: if the texts are corrupted then why would the Prophet be told that these communities read *al-kitâb* (the book)? In conclusion, the validity of the books, and most certainly the *Injil* which is nowhere impugned at all, must be regarded as being preserved. For those revelations were and are the word of God and, 'There is no changing the words of Allah - that is the supreme triumph'. (Q 10:64, Pickthal)

What Islâmic Christianity (of the accommodationist variety) here seems to be alleging is clear: that only by discarding twelve or so centuries of Islâmic tradition regarding the invalidity of the non-Qur'ânic texts can one actually honor the true meaning of the Qur'ân. The gravity of this claim should not be lost on us.

3.5 Categories of Reappropriation

I have presented several examples from different sources, in multiple contexts, of how what I have called reappropriation occurs. And in these examples I discern a few (perhaps vague) categories. They are not new and they are not unique to the hermeneutics of the communities in ques-

⁵³ Another instance of this is in Q 5:68: 'Say: "O People of the Book! ye have no ground to stand upon unless ye stand fast by the Law, the Gospel, and all the revelation that has come to you from your Lord." It is the revelation that cometh to thee from thy Lord, that increaseth in most of them their obstinate rebellion and blasphemy.' (Yusuf Ali)

tion, and I believe that investigators of other religious milieus would also be able to discern analogous elements in textual negotiation.

First we have what can be termed grammatical renegotiation. The example is the first one presented of the prodigious *shubbiha lahum*. It can be identified as the careful and perhaps creative revisiting of the actual grammar of the verse, pitting that against the received hermeneutical tradition to appropriate a different meaning. This strategy is also deployed in the *tahrif* controversy: by specifying what exactly has been corrupted (the context, the pronunciation) the validity of the text is supposedly preserved. (Is it possible we see this principal operating in the Pauline writings as well, as in Galatians 3:16 where he emphasizes that 'Abraham's seed' is in the singular, and thus should be understood as referring to the Messiah as an individual person?)

Secondly, we have what might be called the renegotiation of textual preference. This practice is no stranger to the venerable debate between, for instance, Catholics and Protestants, the former preferring to start from the Gospels in enunciating a theory of justification, the later preferring to begin with certain Pauline texts - namely Romans and Galatians. In Islâmic Christianity we find this taking place on several occasions, many of which I have not mentioned here. They tend to focus on the uniqueness of Jesus - that he was born of a virgin⁵⁴, that he shared the prerogative of giving life to things with God⁵⁵, that he alone among humans was sinless⁵⁶, and so on. Emphasizing these verses above those which speak of the special role of the Prophet is a key characteristic of Islâmic Christianity⁵⁷. What is involved here is not a reinterpretation of the verses at all, but simply an elevation of certain verses over others, and a sense of urgency in adequately explaining their meaning.

The verse of *mutawaffika* is such a verse: it has not been historically central to Islâmic Christology, but here it is made to be so. But in this case it is accompanied by a third category: that of retrieval, meaning retrieving a past position which may have simply been in the minority or in

⁵⁴ Q 3:47, Q 21:91.

⁵⁵ Q 3:49.

⁵⁶ Q 3:46, Q 19:19.

⁵⁷ Indeed, the rather spectacular claims the Qur'ân makes about Jesus have been cited by a number of converts as they explain their decision to make a commitment to the Messiah of the Gospels, or at least what led them to (sometimes with difficulty) procure a Bible to learn more about him.

fact heterodox or even heretical. In this verse we find the mechanism of retrieval in action because Islâmic Christianity is reviving the minority position of certain Islâmic scholars, notably from the Aḥmadiyyah tradition. This is an instance of retrieval, even though it is not likely that the link to the Aḥmadiyyah tradition is intentional, or even done with any awareness.

Fourthly, we encounter what we might call concession. In martial arts parrying is not the same as blocking: rather than counter a force with an equal or greater force, one simply deflects it so it can do no harm, and that apologetic movement is characteristic of concession. This is what we encounter in the verse with *say not three*. Rather than revisit the grammatical structure of the verse, or counterbalance its significance by some other phrase in the Qur'ân—as in the previous examples—in this instance we simply find a concession: yes, say not three—and a parry: but that has nothing to do with the Trinity at all. Clearly, this is also not an instance of retrieval; there is no example from the history of the interpretation of the Qur'ân to which one can appeal in this instance.

I should, however, note that among the accommodationist MBB's which I have contacted I have not encountered any sort of detailed theology of the Trinity. At most, one can identify the usage of Qur'anic terms (Allâh, the Word of Allâh, and the Spirit of Allâh) rather than the traditional Christian formula (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), but that hardly constitutes a theology of the Trinity. But that having been said, while accommodationists have not, to my knowledge, really tackled the rather complex issues of the early Christological debates, there does seem to be a rather vague concern with protecting his divinity - however that concept is defined, or even if it remains undefined, as it often does. And this move of concession does that, especially when coupled with the movements mentioned above.

Another example of this is 'he neither begets nor was he begotten', (Q 112:3) which is often shrugged off by Islâmic Christianity as referring to physical procreation: Christianity does indeed use the language of begottenness, but not that God had sex with Mary, which is purportedly the concern in that verse. Thus the meaning of the statement is, 'God does not [sexually] beget, nor was he [sexually] begotten', which is entirely in concordance with the New Testament, and certainly does not contradict the statement that, 'the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we

have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father's only son, full of grace and truth'. (Jn 1:14 NRSV)

4 Conclusion

One missiologist, writing about what he perceived to be the options of what he calls Messianic Muslims, mused on the options available to them in dealing with the Qur'ân and proposed three options: 'Messianic teachers cannot for long uphold two books with conflicting worldviews. They must either reinterpret the Qur'an to be consistent with the Bible, as a few have done, or limit their usage of it to texts which support Biblical teachings, or simply ignore it.'⁵⁸ In this article I have surveyed some of the ways that some Accommodationist Muslim Christians ('a few') have indeed endeavored to 'reinterpret the Qur'ân to be consistent with the Bible', though as I have pointed out, it is a two-way street and the Qur'ânic worldview influences how the Bible is read as well. I have proposed that we can identify a body of strategies used in this endeavor, I have called it reappropriation, and have suggested four broad categories of strategies used to carry out this reappropriation: grammatical renegotiation, textual preference, retrieval, and concession.

Related Works and Bibliography

IJFM: *International Journal of Frontier Missions*

IBMR: *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*

Abu Daoud, 'Apostates of Islam' in *Saint Francis Magazine*, Vol. 3:4, (March 2008), pp 1-8. See www.stfrancismagazine.info

Al-Nouri, Ali Hadi, 'The Passion of the Christ: Should a Muslim View it?' Unpublished.

⁵⁸ Rick Brown on www.strategicnetwork.org, accessed 26 May 2009.

Ayoub, Mahmoud M., 'Towards an Islamic Christology: An Image of Jesus in Early Shi'i Muslim Literature' in *Muslim World*, Vol. 66:3 (July 1976), pp 163-187.

---- 'Towards an Islamic Christology II: The Death of Jesus, Reality or Delusion' in *Muslim World*, Vol. 70:2 (April 1980), pp 91-121.

Bowie, Fiona, *The Anthropology of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

Brown, Rick, 'Biblical Muslims' in *IJFM*, Vol. 24:2 (Summer 2007), pp 65-74.

----'Brother Jacob and Master Isaac: How One Insider Movement Began' in *IJFM* 24:1 (Spring 2007), pp 41-42.

Cragg, Kenneth, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991).

---- *The Call of the Minaret* (Oxford: One World Press, 1956, 2001).

Francisco, Adam S., 'Luther, Lutheranism, and the Challenge of Islam' in *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 71:3/4 (July/Oct 2007).

Hall, Stuart G., *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church, Second Edition* (London: SPCK, 2005).

Hallaq, Wael B., *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An introduction to Sunni usul al-fiqh* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Lazarus-Yafeh, Hava, 'Tawrat', in the *Encyclopedia Islamica*, Ed. P. Bearman et alia (Washington DC: Brill), Accessed 07 March 2009 via www.brillonline.nl.

Lewis, Bernard, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: Modern Library, 2003).

---- *From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting the Middle East* (London: Phoenix, 2004)

Llull, Ramon, *The Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men in Doctor Illuminatus: A Ramon Llull Reader* ed. and trans. Anthony Bonner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

Madany, Bassam, 'Algerians Alienated from Islam are Turning to Christ', on www.answering-islam.org/authors/madany/algerians.html. Accessed 10 April 2009

Markarian, Krikor, 'Today's Iranian Revolution: How the Mullahs are Leading the Nation to Jesus' in *Mission Frontiers* (Sep-Oct 2008).

Massey, Joshua, 'God's Amazing Diversity in Drawing Muslims to Christ' in *IJFM*, Vol. 17:1 (Spring 2000).

----- Part II: Living Like Jesus, a Torah-Observant Jew: Delighting in God's Law for Incarnational Witness to Muslims' in *IJFM* Vol. 21:2 (Summer 2004).

Raven, Wim, 'Reward and Punishment', in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, Ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Washington DC: Brill) Accessed 07 March 2009 via www.brillonline.nl.

Robinson, Neal, 'Crucifixion', in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, Ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Washington DC: Brill) Accessed 07 March 2009 via www.brillonline.nl.

----- 'Jesus', in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, Ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Washington DC: Brill) Accessed 07 March 2009 via www.brillonline.nl.

Saeed, Abdullah, 'The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures' in *Muslim World*, Vol. 92:3/4 (Fall 2002), pp 419-436.

Shenk, Calvin E., 'The Demise of the Church in North Africa and Nubia and its Survival in Egypt and Ethiopia: A Question of Contextualization?' in *Missiology*, Vol. 21:2 (April 1993), pp 131-154.

Schineller, Peter, S.J., 'Inculturation: A Difficult and Delicate Task' in *IBMR* Vol. 20:3 (July 1996).

Walls, Andrew F., *The Christian Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1996).

Wehr, Hans, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. Ed. J. Milton Cowan (Beirut: Libraire du Liban 1961, 1980).

Weinrich, William C., 'Patristic Exegesis as Ecclesial and Sacramental' in *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 64:1 (Jan 2000), pp 21-38.