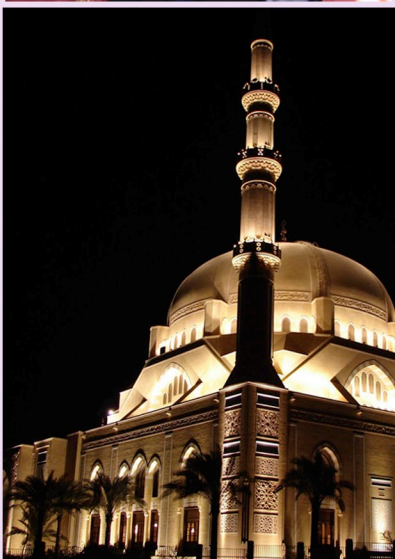




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## FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Dear friends

This is the June 2009 issue of St Francis Magazine; we hope that the articles in this issue will be of help to you in your studies and in your work. We are encouraged by the number of people using our magazine! This issue contains some very interesting articles again.

Duane Alexander Miller writes about how Muslims who have become followers of Jesus Christ, sometimes adopt new hermeneutical methods for reading the Qur'an. In a second article he wonders whether it is justified to say that there are presently 'cracks' in the foundations of Islam.

J. Scott Bridger discusses Kenneth Cragg's call for Muslims to engage the Biblical Christ.

Phil Bourne reflects on the concept of creation in Muhyi'ad-dīn Ibn al-'Arabī.

Joey Shaw discusses how Butrus al-Bustânî and the American missionaries played a role in the Advent of the *Nahdah*.

John Stringer introduces the theme of the Qur'ānic view of patterns in history. Does Islam have a *historiography*?

As from now, we will not only offer you each separate article as a pdf file, but we also offer the complete issue (all articles) in one pdf file. This makes life easier for those of you who download all of our articles.

We hope you enjoy these writings – and that you will feel encouraged to interact with us. Maybe you want to write your own articles for St Francis Magazine?

John Stringer  
editor@stfrancismagazine.info

# **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 13<sup>th</sup> century, why is it that only now in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 Islâmic 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 occurs<sup>1</sup>.

### ***1.2 Terms and Vocabulary: Islamic Christianity and MBC's***

Islâmîc 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 Islâmîc 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 Islâmîc 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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'ân 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*<sup>2</sup> 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 means<sup>3</sup> - 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'ân or Muḥammad or how they

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<sup>2</sup> Joshua Massey and Rick Brown both use this term.

<sup>3</sup> The Arabic word *masîḥ* 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](http://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 Iran<sup>4</sup> and Egypt come to mind. Many of these people came to faith in

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<sup>4</sup> 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](http://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*.<sup>5</sup> 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:

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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?”

<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 Islâmic 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

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<sup>6</sup> Name withheld per interviewees request.



war, to the treatment and procurement of slaves, inheritance laws, ritual and dietary laws, and so on<sup>7</sup>. 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 book<sup>8</sup>. 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 Islâmic 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 Islâmic 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

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<sup>7</sup> 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 Islām was a religion, but in Madīnah it became an empire.

<sup>8</sup> 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 libraries<sup>9</sup>; 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

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<sup>9</sup> Lucy Cockroft, 'Bible moved to library top shelf over inequality fears' at [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/religion/4687077/Bible-put-on-top-shelf-in-move-to-appease-Muslims.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/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.<sup>10</sup> All of this has resulted in a community that to some degree resembles the *ummah*: decentralized and pluriform, often

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<sup>10</sup> 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 shown<sup>11</sup> 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 extensively<sup>12</sup>.

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

<sup>12</sup> 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...' <sup>13</sup> 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.

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

<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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'.<sup>15</sup> 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 science<sup>16</sup> of interpretation. I have opted to speak of how MBC's and

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<sup>14</sup> A strong tradition in Islam, but one that finds no support in the Qur'ân where prophets (Adam, Moses, Muḥammad, 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.'

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

<sup>16</sup> 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'ânic statement that Jesus is 'a spirit from him [God]',<sup>17</sup> 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'ânic and Biblical material. Rather we find a concern that is, I propose, closer to that of the early church<sup>18</sup> 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 atheism<sup>19</sup>. 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,<sup>20</sup> and while it remains impor-

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<sup>17</sup> Q 4:171.

<sup>18</sup> 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.

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

<sup>20</sup> 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,<sup>21</sup> 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 Christ<sup>22</sup>. 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,

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great work in this area - Llull'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.

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

<sup>22</sup> Compare the following material to Llull'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 Llull, *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). *Nota bene* how different they are in approach.

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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.<sup>23</sup> 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*,<sup>24</sup> 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

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<sup>23</sup> 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.

<sup>24</sup> Ayoub, 'Towards an Islamic Christology', p. 96.

another was made to bear his likeness (*shabuh*) and die in his stead.<sup>25</sup> 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 roots<sup>26</sup>, the 'b', is doubled<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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'<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> 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

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>26</sup> Sh-b-h.

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

<sup>28</sup> This usage is found in colloquial Arabic in the Transjordan region. The classical usage would be the fourth form *ashbaha* or *yushbihi*.

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

<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup>

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).<sup>32</sup> This is another accommodation: a way that is used within Islâmic Christianity to make the Gospel and the Qur'an fit together.

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<sup>31</sup> 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)

<sup>32</sup> 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](http://www.brillonline.nl).

One other approach should be mentioned, which appeals to God himself as the effective - if hidden - cause of every human act.<sup>33</sup> 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'ân itself (Q 8:17):

PICKTHAL: Ye (Muslims) slew them not, but Allah slew them. And thou (Muhammad) throwest 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 descent<sup>34</sup> (*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'ân are sometimes re-

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<sup>33</sup> 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](http://www.brillonline.nl).

<sup>34</sup> 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 point<sup>35</sup> - 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)'.<sup>36</sup> 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.

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<sup>35</sup> 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.

<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup>

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.

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<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup> 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

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<sup>38</sup> 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',<sup>39</sup> 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.

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<sup>39</sup> 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'.<sup>40</sup> 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

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<sup>40</sup> Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, p. 254.

### 3.4 *tahrîf and naskh (Corruption and Abrogation)*

It is therefore necessary at this juncture to examine how voices in Islâmîc 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 meanings<sup>41</sup> 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]<sup>42</sup>

Generally then, Muslims consider Christian and Jewish Scriptures to be corrupted versions of the originals, and this charge of *tahrîf*<sup>43</sup> is, according to Islâmîc orthodoxy, based on the Qur'ân. Moreover the Islâmîc 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

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<sup>41</sup> 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?

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

<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup> 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 consensus<sup>45</sup>, that the religion of Islâm abrogated many, and sometimes all, of the laws upheld by earlier religions'.<sup>46</sup>

Consequently, 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.'<sup>47</sup> 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

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

<sup>45</sup> 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.

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

<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup>

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).<sup>49</sup>

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

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<sup>48</sup> Q 3:78

<sup>49</sup> 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 *yūḥarrifûna* - they corrupt<sup>50</sup>. While some translators have opted to translate the Arabic *mawadhî'a*<sup>51</sup> 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 scholars<sup>52</sup>.

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

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<sup>50</sup> Or perhaps, *they are corrupting*.

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

<sup>52</sup> 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 7<sup>th</sup> 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)<sup>53</sup>

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-

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<sup>53</sup> 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 virgin<sup>54</sup>, that he shared the prerogative of giving life to things with God<sup>55</sup>, that he alone among humans was sinless<sup>56</sup>, and so on. Emphasizing these verses above those which speak of the special role of the Prophet is a key characteristic of Islâmic Christianity<sup>57</sup>. 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 reviving a past position which may have simply been in the minority or in

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<sup>54</sup> Q 3:47, Q 21:91.

<sup>55</sup> Q 3:49.

<sup>56</sup> Q 3:46, Q 19:19.

<sup>57</sup> 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'ânic 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.'<sup>58</sup> 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.

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## TAKE UP AND READ: KENNETH CRAGG'S CALL FOR MUSLIMS TO ENGAGE THE BIBLICAL CHRIST<sup>1</sup>

BY J. SCOTT BRIDGER

### 1 Introduction

'It is imperative that we strive to think ourselves into the interior life of Islam and to appreciate the inwardness of its external problems. Such a purpose calls for a steady effort and imaginative sensitivity.'<sup>2</sup> These words by the eminent Christian Arabist and interpreter of Islâm, Kenneth Cragg, set a high standard for Christian engagement with Islâm. But evangelicals must not shirk from the task. Robert Yarbrough's call for evangelical Christology 'to articulate an orthodox understanding of Christ's person and work in a conceptual framework which relates not only to past, but just as importantly to present and immediately future ideological and social realities' remains a pressing need when considering the Qur'ânic Christ.<sup>3</sup> Islâm is the only world religion besides Christianity that has a distinct Christology stemming from what is taken to be revealed body of truth.<sup>4</sup> Muslims believe that the Jesus presented in the

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<sup>1</sup> Paper submitted to the faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of masters of theology in Systematic Theology at Trinity International University, Deerfield, Illinois, December 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), p. 182.

<sup>3</sup> Robert W. Yarbrough, *New Testament Christology and the Jesus of Islam* (Tacoma, Wash.: Evangelical Theological Society, 1990; Portland, Ore.: Theological Research Information Exchange, 1990), microfiche, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> There are many interpretations of Christ in almost every religion; however, to the writer's knowledge no other religion besides Islâm claims to formulate its view of Christ based upon a revealed body of truth distinct from the Bible. There are a variety of Christian heresies, such as Mormonism and Pentecostal Oneness, with distinct views of Christ; however, all of these believe the Scriptures have some semblance of authority. Some as far back as St. John of Damascus have argued that Islâm is a Christian heresy and not a separate religion. Despite Qur'ânic Christology's affinity with many unorthodox views of

Qur'ân and Islâmîc Tradition is both historically accurate and doctrinally orthodox. Their fundamental contention is that despite Jesus' being virgin-born and performing miracles, he is not divine. They attribute the assertions by Christians of Jesus' divinity to the intentional corruption of their Scriptures.

Muhammad's message of the absolute oneness of God (*tawhîd*) delivered to Muslims in the Qur'ân is believed to correct this corruption and present a call to Jews and Christians to return to the 'pure faith'. In a strange twist of history, the Muslim view of Christ encapsulates many of the challenges to biblical faith that evangelicals have been battling since the rise of critical scholarship on the Bible. 'Western evangelicals have for two centuries now existed in a climate where Jesus, it is insisted in influential circles, can only be seen in non-Trinitarian terms as a first-century Jewish prophet and teacher. This Jesus of post-Enlightenment historical-critical theology has obvious affinities with the Jesus of Islâm' as will be evident from this study.<sup>5</sup> Because the arguments against Christ's deity coming from liberal scholars are approximated in Islâm, evangelicals are uniquely equipped to face the challenges and present the biblical Christ to the Muslim world, calling them to repent and confess, 'my Lord and my God'.

Over the years Kenneth Cragg has presented a steady and thoroughgoing refutation of the Qur'ânîc understanding of Christ albeit in the most conciliatory idiom. The primary manner in which he has accomplished this is, in a nutshell, by calling Muslims to 'take up and read' the New Testament and engage the biblical Christ on his own terms – in biblical terms. The genius of Cragg is his methodology. By urging Christians to seek to understand Muslims and the Qur'ân on *their* own terms he has inconspicuously built a bridge for traffic to flow both ways and modeled the reciprocity he expects from Muslims sincerely interested in understanding Christ and the Bible. The product of his labor has been over 100 publications including several monographs addressing a number of the most contentious issues between Islâm and Christianity. His methodology is an excellent model for Western Christians engaged in in-

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Christ, both modern and ancient, Islâm's denial of the Bible's authority in matters pertaining to doctrine places Islâm squarely outside all that can be considered 'Christian'.

<sup>5</sup> Yarbrough, *New Testament Christology and the Jesus of Islam*, p. 15.

terfaith dialogue with Muslims and missions among Muslims, particularly for American.

In order to get a better understanding of Cragg's methodology for surmounting the formidable challenge of Islām and Islāmī Christology we need to first understand the contours of the Qur'ānic picture of Jesus. This paper will begin by outlining the basic fundamentals of Qur'ānic Christology, focusing on the denial of Christ's deity, and its roots in the accusation of scriptural corruption by Christians. Every attempt will be made to portray the Qur'ānic Christ in a manner faithful to Muslim beliefs. Emphasis here will be on Şûrah 5 in the Qur'ān. cursory attention will be paid to matters of historical importance, particularly as it relates to Islām's denial of Jesus' crucifixion and death. The second part of the paper will look specifically at Cragg's approach to Qur'ānic Christology and the prospects for getting past the charge of scriptural corruption in our dialogues and evangelistic encounters with Muslims.

## 2 The Qur'ānic Context

In order to get a complete picture of the Qur'ānic Jesus it would be beneficial to summarize briefly the content of what the Qur'ān says about Jesus' birth, life and crucifixion and then focus our attention on the Qur'ānic denial of Jesus' deity.

### 2.1 *Jesus in the Qur'an*

Upon searching the Qur'ān to ascertain its view of the identity of Jesus one's immediate impression is that there is a scarcity of information. Cragg points out that the Qur'ān lacks any direct quotations from the Gospels and no narrative descriptions of his ministry and teaching.<sup>6</sup> He goes on to state:

It is further surprising that within the limits of some ninety verses in all [of the Qur'ān] no less than sixty-four belong to the extended, and partly duplicate, nativity stories in Surahs 3 and 19. This leaves a bare twenty-six or so verses to present the rest and some reiteration here reduces the total still fur-

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<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), p. 25.

ther. It has often been observed that the New Testament Gospels are really passion narratives with extended introduction. It could well be said that the Jesus cycle in the Qur'an is nativity narrative with attenuated sequel.<sup>7</sup>

The Qur'anic depiction of the Annunciation has certain affinities with the account given in Luke 1.<sup>8</sup> The angel Gabriel, considered a prophet in Islām, comes to Mary and announces to her that she will give birth to a son and she is to name him Jesus. He also tells her that, due to her virginity, this birth will be a divine miracle (cf. Q :42-47). Şûrah 19:20-23 states:

She said: 'How shall I have a son, seeing that no man has touched me, and I am not unchaste?' He said: 'So it will be, thy Lord saith, 'That is easy for Me: and We wish to appoint him as a Sign unto men and a Mercy from Us': it is matter so decreed.' So she conceived him, and she retired with him to a remote place. And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree: she cried in her anguish, 'Ah! Would that I had died before this! Would that I had been a thing forgotten and out of sight!'

It appears that the Qur'anic account has been influenced by various apocryphal renderings of Jesus' birth, which tell of Mary being nourished by a palm tree. Also, Jesus' speaking from the cradle to defend his mother when she is falsely accused of immorality might also be taken from an apocryphal account (Q 19:28-33).<sup>9</sup>

What is most problematic for Muslims is not his conception by the Holy Spirit nor his mother's virginity, but the title given to him at his birth as recorded in the New Testament, 'the Son of God' (cf. Q 19:35). It is for this reason that Muslims and the Qur'ân continually refer to him as '*Isâ ibnu Maryam*, Jesus, son of Mary, in order to emphasis that despite his being virgin-born, he was not related to God but was the son of his mother Mary. Undoubtedly, Muḥammad thought that by calling Je-

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 25-26.

<sup>8</sup> William J. McConnell, *The Qur'anic Depiction of Jesus* (Wheaton, Ill: Evangelical Theological Society, 1988; Portland, Ore.: Theological Research Information Exchange, 1988), microfiche, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.; cf. William St. Clair Tisdall, *The Sources of Islam* (New Dehli: Amarko Book Agency, 1973) for more information on various sources which have influenced the Qur'ân.



sus the Son of God Christians were intimating that there was some sort of biological relationship between Mary and God.

Regarding the teaching and message of Jesus, the Qur'ân holds that prophets and messengers have been sent to all nations throughout history (cf. Q 10:48). Those who were given a distinct message (*risâlah*) or book (*kitâb*), such as Moses (the Torah), Jesus (the Gospel), and Muhammad (the Qur'ân), are given the title of messenger (*rasûl* – taken from the verb 'to send', *rasala*). Those who simply acted as bearers of good news and forewarners of judgment, without being given any type of divinely inspired book, are called prophets (*nabî*, pl. *anbiya'*) in Islâm (cf. Q 6:48). In the Qur'ân's view, all messengers are prophets but not all prophets are messengers. Thus, in this technical sense, Jesus is just like Muḥammad; a messenger in a long line of other prophets and messengers sent by God to warn people and teach them his law.

The primary message that Jesus brought was the same as those who came before him. It consisted of obedience and submission (*islâm*) to God. He is said to have told the children of Israel to worship God and him alone (cf. Q 5:117). This is the fundamental message of all prophets and messengers from Islâm's point of view. McConnell summarizes the Qur'ân's view of Jesus' teaching:

These remnants of Jesus' teaching preserved in the Qur'an...reaffirm the central themes of Muhammad's creed: the unity of God and the human duty to respond in obedience, signified by proper worship, prayer, and almsgiving. Any other elements of Jesus' preaching that Muhammad may have been aware of were superfluous to his purpose in depicting him.<sup>10</sup>

Jesus is also purported to have predicted the coming of Muḥammad. Şûrah 61:6 states, 'O Children of Israel! I am the Messenger of Allah sent to you, confirming the Law which came before me, and giving glad tidings of a Messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Aḥmad.' Many see a prediction of Muḥammad's coming in this verse by Jesus. The verb root from which both the name Muḥammad and Aḥmad are formed is the same *ḥamida*. It can be roughly translated as 'to praise' or 'to bless'. Thus, the name Muḥammad comes from the passive participle of the emphatic form of this word meaning 'the one who is praised' or

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<sup>10</sup> McConnell, *The Qur'anic Depiction of Jesus*, p. 10.

‘the one who is blessed’. Aḥmad could mean something similar, though it is in the comparative form – ‘more blessed than...’.<sup>11</sup> Muslim apologists have tried to link this verse with Jesus’ prediction of the coming of the Holy Spirit in John 14:16; 15:26; 16:7. They say that the term translated ‘comforter’ (*parakletos*) is a corruption of the word ‘the praised one’ in Greek (*periklutos*). Since there is no textual evidence for this theory Muslims generally hold that Christians have corrupted their Scriptures so as to conceal any allusions to Muḥammad’s coming. This charge will be treated in detail below.

As with other prophets, Jesus is purported to have performed miracles as a sign that his message is from God (cf. Q 2:87; Q 43:63). One of those miracles was the fashioning of birds from clay (Q 3:49). This account is similar to that found in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas.<sup>12</sup> Another possible miracle found in the Qur’ān which parallels the New Testament account is the feeding of the 5000 (or 4000). Jesus’ disciples ask him to provide food and after praying to God, the food is provided (Q 5:112-115). The purpose of miracles in the Qur’ān is always to provide proof to those to whom the messenger is sent in order that they may believe the message is truly from God. When they do not believe they are justly condemned (cf. Q 5:115). Interestingly, none of those miracles which record Jesus’ raising the dead or healing those born blind is recorded in the Qur’ān.

Finally, the Qur’ānic denial of Christ’s crucifixion and subsequent resurrection is well known. Sūrah 4:157-158 states:

They said in boast, ‘We killed the Christ, Jesus, the son of Maryam, the Messenger of Allah’; but they killed him not, nor crucified him, *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. Nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself; and Allah is exalted in power, wise.

The italicized portion above is the focus of most of the difficulty in ascertaining the meaning of this passage. The subject is undoubtedly the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 11. McConnell cites Watt’s suggestion that it be translated with an adjectival connotation, ‘the one whose name is more worthy of praise’.

<sup>12</sup> McConnell, *The Qur’anic Depiction of Jesus*, p. 13.

Jews as is determined by the context. The Arabic *shubbiha* (*lahum*) is translated by Cragg as ‘...they were under an illusion that they had (i.e. ‘crucified him’). The preposition with the attached pronoun, *lahum*, ‘to them’, is straightforward enough. However, the problem is in determining the subject of the passive verb *shubbiha*, ‘made to seem’ or ‘made to appear’. What was ‘made to seem to them’? Cragg elaborates:

Either ‘he [i.e. Jesus] was resembled to them’, or ‘it [crucifixion] was made to seem so to them’. On that hidden pronoun turns the decision whether we opt for a substitute sufferer, not the real Jesus, or whether we opt for an only ‘apparent’ crucifixion for Jesus himself?<sup>13</sup>

Various exegetes and scholars have taken a multitude of approaches to this issue in Islām; however, for the Christian the end result is the same. Muslims deny Jesus’ vicarious death on the cross for sin and his triumph over death by resurrecting three days later. He was raised, yes, but not from the dead in the Muslim’s view. God lifted him up to himself prior to death in order to protect him from his enemies. At the heart of Islām’s denial of the crucifixion is the idea that such a ghastly death is not befitting a prophet of God. If Jesus were truly a prophet of God, so it is reasoned, he would not have suffered such a degrading death at the hands of his enemies. Such a defeat would be tantamount to a miscarriage of God’s sovereign power in protecting his chosen one. *Istaghfir Allāh!* God protect us from such thoughts! After all, the proof that Muhammad is a prophet and Islām is the true religion of God is evidenced by the defeat of all those who stood in Islām’s path as it spread westward from the Arabian peninsula to Spain and eastward to the Indus River. The notion that Jesus’ crucifixion is tantamount to defeat, and his ‘rescue’ by God from the Jews is vindication of his message, will be explored further when we look at Cragg’s treatment of this issue.

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<sup>13</sup> Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, pp. 170-71.

## 2.2 The Qur'anic Denial of Jesus' Deity

Şûrah 5 was most likely one of the last *Şawar* written,<sup>14</sup> and as Shehadeh points out, it 'includes some of the most polemical attacks against biblical Christology and Trinitarianism' in the Qur'ân. He goes on to state that 'Surah 5...exposes much of the unbiblical theology that forms the bedrock of Islâm's idea about Christology and the Trinity'.<sup>15</sup> There are three main sets of assertions in this Şûrah all of which lead to an explicit denial of Jesus' deity (Q 5:17; Q 72-77; Q 116-19). We will look at the context of the first denial (Q 5:12-26) in detail due to its comprehensive nature, drawing in highlights from the other two denials, and then summarize the Qur'anic teaching of these passages and its implications. Şûrah 5:17 states:

In blasphemy indeed are those that say that Allah is Christ the son of Maryam. Say: 'Who then hath the least power against Allah, if His Will were to destroy Christ the son of Maryam, his mother, and all – everyone that is on the earth? For to Allah belongeth the dominion of the heavens and the earth, and all that is between. He createth what He pleaseth. For Allah hath power over all things.'

The denial of Christ's deity in v 17 is situated in the context of vs 12-26 where there are two themes that are either repeated or expanded in the other two denials of Christ's deity. The first theme is the unfaithfulness of the children of Israel and the Christians in breaking the covenants God made with them. Verse 12 states that God had promised to be with the children of Israel *if* they would be faithful in prayer, almsgiving, and believing the message of his prophets. However, they breached their covenant with God (*naqđihim mithâqahum*) and as a result God cursed them and caused their hearts to grow hard (v 13). Verse 14 makes a similar claim about the *Naşârâ*, Christians. There the Christians are charged with forgetting the message that was sent to them. For this rea-

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<sup>14</sup> For more information regarding the dating of certain Şûrahs, see W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Quran* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1953).

<sup>15</sup> Imad N. Shehadeh, 'Reasons for Islam's Rejection of Biblical Christology', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (July-September 2004), p. 275.

son God has caused there to be enmity and strife among them which will last until the end. Shehadeh comments on this verse:

For breaking their covenant Christians are said to have been punished by experiencing constant feuds among themselves down through the centuries. These feuds are said to be reflected in the Christological and Trinitarian controversies leading to church councils and also in the strife between the many denominations, and they are said to continue as a punishment until the day of judgment.<sup>16</sup>

In vs 60-64, leading up to the second denial of Christ's deity, this theme is intensified. Jews and Christians are those who have rejected Islâm and the Qur'ân. As such, they have incurred the curse and wrath of God. In so doing, God has transformed some of them into apes and pigs. Their covenant-unfaithfulness and evil deeds are proof that their faith is illegitimate. The charge of covenant-unfaithfulness is repeated again in vs 20-26 where Israel's failure to possess the land in the days of Moses is viewed as a result of their unbelief, and in v 70 just prior to the second denial of Christ's deity (vs 72-77).

What is notable about the charge of unfaithfulness is the absence of any notion of unconditional grace. At the heart of the Qur'anic treatment of covenants between God and man is the notion that all of God's dealings with humans are conditioned upon their works. The only covenant mentioned in the Qur'ân between God and the children of Israel is the Mosaic covenant. Shehadeh observes:

While the Bible does present conditional elements in Israel's relationship to God, the Qur'an is void of any signs of grace to the unworthy. Surah 5 as well as the entire Qur'an makes no mention of God's unconditional covenants with Israel, namely the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3, 7; 15:1-21; 17:1-8), the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7:4-17), and the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34).<sup>17</sup>

Law-keeping is foundational to the Islâmic system of religion. Disobedience is equated with infidelity. The Arabic word for grace (*ni'mah*)

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 280.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 279.

does appear in the Qur'ân and is the same word used to translate 'grace' in the Arabic New Testament; however, it is generally understood to mean temporal 'favor' and does not have a soteriological connotation. Therefore, the first denial of Christ's deity is situated in a context where the biblical notion of grace is wholly absent.

The second theme of vs 12-16 is that of the corruption of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures and the correction wrought by Muhammad and the Qur'ân. Verse 13 charges the children of Israel with changing the words of the message that was sent to them: 'They change the words from their context...' (*yuḥarrifûna al-kalimah 'an muwâd'ihî*). They are also charged with forgetting part of the message given to them, a similar charge against the Christians in v 14. The verb used here for 'corruption' or 'changing' is the intensive form of the word *ḥarafâ*. This same root forms the word for 'letter' (*ḥarfun*). Al-Jalalayn makes it clear that the object of the 'changing' in v 13 is the Torah, *tawrât*.<sup>18</sup> The verb 'to change' (*yuḥarrifûna*) is understood to mean 'changing' or 'exchanging' the words of the Torah for other words. This form of 'corruption' of the Jewish or Christians Scriptures is commonly known as *taḥrîf lafzî*, which is generally understood to mean 'changing the text'. We will deal with the various notions attached to the Qur'ânic concept of *taḥrîf* or 'corruption' momentarily. In this verse, the precise meaning implied by the changing or exchanging the words of the Torah is not clear; however, the broader context reveals that it had something to do with changing or hiding those verses that were thought to refer to Muḥammad's coming (cf. v 15). This feature is made more evident in the context of the second denial of Christ's deity (vs 72-77). In vs 47-48 Christians, referred to as People of the Gospel (*Ahl al-Injîl*), are urged to evaluate their book so as to discern the truth. The truth in this context is that Muḥammad is a prophet and the Qur'ân is God's revelation to them. Shehadeh summarizes Al-Razi's commentary on this passage by saying:

Al-Razi mentions three things Christians are responsible to do. (1) Christians are to judge and see what signs and predictions there are in the New Testament that speak of Muhammad. (2) Christians are to accept only those

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<sup>18</sup> Jalâl al-Dîn Muḥammad bin al-Malhî and Jalal Jalâl al-Dîn Abî Bakr al-Suyûtî, *The Commentary of the Jalalayn* (Beirut: Dar Ehia Al-Turâth al-'Arabî, 1999), p. 109.

teachings in the New Testament that have not been abrogated by the Qur'an. (3) Christians are warned against altering or corrupting their Scriptures.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, to the extent that Christians or Jews reject any prediction of Muḥammad's coming in their Scriptures, they are charged with changing or corrupting those Scriptures. The Qur'ān is viewed as the ultimate judge of all previous Scriptures (v 45b). Furthermore, the Qur'ān contains the true teachings of the Torah and Gospel (v 65-68) which speak about Muḥammad (cf. v 15).

After the charges of covenant unfaithfulness by the children of Israel and the Christians in vs 12-14, and changing the words of the Torah in v 13, a direct address is given in vs 15-16 to the People of the Book, a title which refers to both Jews and Christians collectively. Here Muḥammad and the Qur'ān are presented as coming to correct and clarify the previous Scriptures. It states, 'O People of the Book! There hath come to you Our Messenger, revealing to you much that ye used to hide in the Book and passing over much. There hath come to you from Allah a light and a perspicuous Book'. The promise of this 'new' book is that it will guide all those who seek God and lead them into a straight path. Thus, there is a clear call to the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) to forsake their covenant-unfaithfulness and their corrupted Scriptures and follow the one true path, the one that was revealed by Muhammad and the Qur'ān.

The definition of *tahrīf* is, 'corruption of a document, whereby the original sense is altered. It may happen in various ways: by direct alteration of the written text; by arbitrary alterations in reading aloud a text which is itself correct; by omission or interpolation; or by a wrong exposition of the true sense'.<sup>20</sup> Regarding the nature and understanding of *tahrīf* among Muslim scholars throughout the ages, Saeed notes three broad understandings:

There are three broad approaches to this among Muslims: (a) the scriptures of Jews and Christians of which the Qur'an approves as uncorrupted are only

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<sup>19</sup> Imad N. Shehadeh, 'Additional Reasons for Islam's Rejection of Biblical Christology', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (October-December 2004), p. 399.

<sup>20</sup> H.A.R. Gibb and J.H. Kramers, 'Tahrif', *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), p. 560, quoted by Abdullah Saeed, 'The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures', *Muslim World* vol. 92 (Fall 2002), p. 421.

those that were actually revealed to Moses (*Tawrat* or Torah) and Jesus (*Injil* or Gospel), not those that existed with the Jews and Christians at the time of the Prophet Muhammad or exist today; (b) significant parts of the scriptures that exist today are distorted and corrupted and it is difficult to know which these are; (c) there are no uncorrupted scriptures of Jews and Christians remaining today – those that the Qur'an refers to as *Tawrat* or *Injil* have been obliterated.<sup>21</sup>

When approaching this issue Muslims differentiate between the timing of the supposed corruption and the nature of this corruption. Explanations regarding the timing of the corruption vary widely from the time they were given to the prophets (Moses and Jesus) to some intervening time before the arrival of Muhammad. There is generally no consensus among Muslim scholars as to when this corruption took place.

Views on the nature of the corruption have also varied. Traditionally, there have been two broad understandings of the meaning of *tahrîf* related to Jewish and Christian Scriptures as indicated in the definition above. The first accuses Jews of changing the actual text of their Scripture. This is known as *tahrîf lafzi*. The second notion of corruption is the false interpretation of their texts *tahrîf ma'nawî*. Usually this entails the intentional hiding or concealing (*katam*) of the true meaning of certain texts in the Torah or *Injil* (Gospel) which, in the Qur'anic context, are usually taken to refer to the supposed prediction of Muhammad's coming. This is why God sent Muhammad and the Qur'an to protect the revelation given in the previous Scriptures. The Qur'an is, therefore, considered all-sufficient in determining matters related to the identity of Christ. For this reason Muslims see no need to read the New Testament.

This notion of the corruption of Jewish and Christian Scriptures is a feature in the contexts of the first two denials of Jesus' deity but plays a more prominent role in the second denial. It is not a feature in the third denial. We will explore the difficulties Muslims face in holding this view in the second part. For now it should be emphasized that the Muslim belief in the sufficiency of the Qur'an and the corruption of all previous Scriptures given to Jews and Christians accounts for the reason why they

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<sup>21</sup> Saeed, 'The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures', p. 419.



generally see no need to read or engage in a study of either the Hebrew Bible or Greek New Testament.

Stylistically, Shehadeh sees a chiasmic structure in vs 12-26 with the denial of Jesus' deity being the central argument. The two themes mentioned above, the unfaithfulness of Jews and Christians in breaking their covenants and the corruption of their Scriptures, form the two repeated prongs of the chiasm:

- A. Jews and Christians breaking their covenants with God (vs. 12-14)
- B. Muhammad and the Qur'ân correct corrupted Scriptures (v. 15-16)
- C. The denial of Christ's deity (v. 17)
- B'. Muhammad revealed the truth to the unfavored People of the Book (vs. 18-19)
- A'. Israel's failure to possess the land was due to their lack of faith (vs. 20-26)<sup>22</sup>

As we have seen, the first denial of Christ's deity is situated in a context where Christians have corrupted their Scriptures and broken their covenant with God, thereby losing any favor they had with him. The central contention here is that Christ's deity (v 17) is that it is blasphemous and evil to claim God is Christ and that if God had wanted he could have destroyed both Mary and Jesus, thereby vindicating his righteous power.<sup>23</sup> The second denial (vs 72-77) is similar to the first with the idea of scriptural corruption being most prominent in the context leading up to this denial. Here, a denunciation of those who believe in a Trinity is included (v 73). Additionally, Jesus himself in v 72 is purported to have urged the children of Israel to worship God alone and not ascribe partners to him (*shirk*). This could possibly be a reference to the Trinity; however, given the context in which Muḥammad was preaching it is more than likely a reference to polytheism in general. This feature is repeated in the third denial (v 117). Commenting on these verses, She-

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<sup>22</sup> Shehadeh, 'Reasons for Islam's Rejection of Biblical Christology', p. 226.

<sup>23</sup> Technically speaking, Christians agree with the idea that 'God is not Christ'. It is more appropriate to state that Christ is God, the Second Person of the Trinity, not that God (the Trinity) is Christ. This is a form of modalism. However, Muslims reject all notions of Christ's deity, however conceived, on the grounds that oneness cannot include any form of variation or differentiation. God is monadic unity in Islām.

hadeh notes that there are four reasons behind why Muslims reject the deity of Christ:

First, it is said that Christ denied ever claiming deity. God asked Jesus whether He called people to worship Him and His mother, but this was not asked in order to glean information but to deny the claim. Jesus is presented as responding in fear, so that He did not defend Himself but relegated all knowledge to God. Second, God is said to know that Christ never claimed deity. Third, Christ is said to have taught His disciples that God is His Lord (v. 75). Fourth, it is said that if Christians deny the deity of Christ they will have great eternal rewards.<sup>24</sup>

It is beyond the scope of the present paper to investigate all the varying conceptions of the Trinity the Qur'ân rejects; however, it should be noted at this juncture that the weight of the Qur'ânic data is generally understood as rejecting various forms of tri-theism which Christians were accused of believing. Associated with this is the Qur'ân's rejection of Christ's Sonship as somehow being derivative of a physical union between God and Mary. Despite the fact that all such notions are rejected by the New Testament and later orthodox creeds, the charge of scriptural corruption and the denial of the biblical notion of grace continue to influence Muslim perceptions of Christ and the Bible. Overcoming these misperceptions is the subject of the next section.

### **3 Evangelical Engagement of Islam: Cragg's Approach**

#### ***3.1 Need to understand Muslims and the Qur'an***

For Cragg, understanding the Muslim mindset and the Qur'ân is obligatory if Christians are going to effectively communicate the gospel and overcome the barriers the Qur'ânic Christ presents. He says, 'It is imperative...that Christians strive to enter as fully as possible into the Qur'anic world, with the painstaking ambition to know it from within.'<sup>25</sup> No corners can be cut in this endeavor and certain tools are a necessity. Therefore, we will begin this section by briefly addressing Cragg's view

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<sup>24</sup> Shehadeh, 'Additional Reasons for Islam's Rejection of Biblical Christology', p. 411.

<sup>25</sup> Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, p. 174.

on the importance of acquiring the proper tools in order to understand the Arab mind. Following this, Cragg's approach to Islâmic Christology will be presented by exploring his treatment of the problems and issues raised in the first part of the paper. The focus there will be on Cragg's treatment of the doctrine of corruption, *tahrîf*, and the deity of Jesus.

### ***3.2 Proper Accoutrements***

Thinking ourselves 'into the interior life of Islam', as the opening quote by Cragg states, has one purpose: to make Christ known where he is not known. In order to be understood we must seek to understand. This is the essence of Cragg's methodology; theory and praxis are held in tandem. He states:

Christians are ambassadors of a person-to-person relationship. They are debtors to their fellow mortals. They must surpass the limits of merely academic knowledge. More than students, they must learn to be in some measure participants. As bearers of 'the Word made flesh' they must strive to enter into the daily existence of Muslims, as believers, adherents, contemporaries. This is a prerequisite of being understood.<sup>26</sup>

Cragg's call is to a contextualized life which seeks, as much as is possible, to understand the Muslim worldview from the inside out. Doing so, Cragg argues, will engender the type of reciprocity needed for Muslims to engage the biblical Christ on his own terms.

In order to accomplish this lofty goal Cragg suggests that individuals become deeply acquainted with the Arabic language and its history of literature and poetry.<sup>27</sup> The modern missionary church has produced a number of notable missionary Arabists whose works on Arabic grammar and Islâmic religion remain invaluable for those seeking to acquaint

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> The assumption here is that one is working in an Arab Muslim context. However, the same principle would apply if one were working with Muslims in Pakistan, Turkey, or Indonesia. In those cases a good knowledge of Urdu, Turkish, or Indonesian would be necessary. Interestingly enough, for those involved in evangelism among Muslims in Israel, a good understanding of Hebrew is needed!

themselves with Islâmic civilization.<sup>28</sup> Producing and equipping individuals devoted to the task of making Christ known to Muslims is the perennial task of each generation and it begins with study. We have a tremendous need for ‘consecrated scholarship which knows that dictionaries and diction, vocabulary and syntax, have much to do with the faith of “the Word made flesh”. Fascinating fields of study and achievement are open to those who can find their way from the kingdom of God to a grammar and back again to the kingdom.’<sup>29</sup>

For those involved in missions among Muslims, Cragg’s advice for studying Arabic is apropos. Those who have done so have inevitably discovered the difficulty in acquiring one of the only surviving languages from antiquity. But the notorious difficulty of Arabic should not be overstated. Given time its mastery is promised to provide an entrance into the Arab mind. Cragg acknowledges that there are abundant opportunities for those who are unable to master Arabic. Indeed, teaching English provided one of his first ministry opportunities while in Lebanon. Nevertheless, he is uncompromising in his assessment of the importance of Arabic if Christ is to be communicated to the Arab mind:

Was it unguarded enthusiasm that prompted the idea that every Christian ministrant to Islam should aspire to be an Arabist? For the theological aspects of our relationship, that ideal is imperative. To discover the Qur’an in its untranslatable character and to feel the pulse of Arabic literature from Al-Mas’udi to Taufiq al-Hakim is an ambition no missionary should dare to abandon.<sup>30</sup>

For Cragg, the message of the Gospel itself lies in the balance:

Christians who intend serious communication cannot absolve themselves of the duty to enter into and to apprehend this [Arabic] literature. As long as their own expression, whether in preaching, in conversation, or in print, remains non-Arabic and Western, they are to that extent failing to articulate the universal Christ.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Cragg gives a short history of some of these missionaries and their works; *The Call of the Minaret*, p. 183ff.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Communicating Christ effectively is the goal, and language and cultural acquisition is one of the primary ways for Cragg that this is accomplished. Endeavors to train and equip individuals engaged in dialogue and missionary endeavors should be ever mindful of this necessity. In the end it is Cragg's hope that this will provide opportunities for Muslims to encounter the biblical Christ for the first time when they meet his disciples who are ready and prepared 'to give a reason for the hope that they have' in a manner that can be grasped by the Arab mind.

### ***3.3 Scriptural Corruption: Tahrif***

One of the barriers in the Muslim mind that casts doubt on the reliability of the Bible is the notion that all that is rightly considered 'Scripture' should conform to the form of the Qur'ân. For most orthodox Muslims, the Qur'ân is the eternal, uncreated word of God. It is pre-existent in a manner that accords with the Christian view regarding the pre-existence of the Son of God. When the time was right, God revealed this word to Muḥammad via the angel Gabriel. At no time does the Qur'ân mix or mingle with the mental understanding of the Prophet. Muḥammad alone received the message and delivered it to his followers who faithfully recorded the message and preserved it for posterity. This is, in fact, the Muslim view of all the prophets who received a written message including Jesus. 'All prophets are bearers of words, understood to be entrusted to them in complete form, not as a result of a divine enabling of their mental and spiritual powers, but as a verbal transmission from heaven.' Therefore, 'it is difficult to understand why there should be four Gospels, when the Gospel, or *Injil*, entrusted by God to Jesus the Prophet was a single book.'<sup>32</sup> For this reason it is assumed that the 'original' Gospel is lost and subsequent generations of Christians proceeded in corrupting and manufacturing what is now considered the Bible. This is why God sent Muḥammad and the Qur'ân; to preserve Jesus' original teaching and protect it from further corruption by Christians.

Complicating matters further is the fact that there are many shared but discrepant stories between the Qur'ân and the Bible including, among others, accounts of Adam, Abraham, Joseph and Moses. These

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 248.

discrepancies, in the Muslim's view, are not to be attributed to Muḥammad's sources of information but to the doctrine of corruption; *tahrīf*.

Understanding this background is essential in Cragg's mind when Christians attempt to present Jesus himself as the good news. Their task is to help Muslims 'conceive of a divine revelation that is primarily personal, not oracular; that proceeds by enabling, not overriding, the minds of its writer; and that gathers into its written "word" the comprehension of the hearing of the Word incarnate.'<sup>33</sup>

How do they do this? For some Muslims, a dogmatic insistence at this point will most likely not be overcome. Appeals to logic and the veracity of the text as we now have it will not avail. However, Cragg is optimistic that some within Islām can be drawn out 'into more objective and scientific attitudes toward the problem of interscriptural revelations.'<sup>34</sup> Indeed, there are signs that Cragg's optimism is not unfounded. Abdullah Saeed's article, cited earlier, suggests a reevaluation of the doctrine of corruption. The wholesale corruption of Jewish and Christian Scriptures as taught by many modern Muslim apologists is dismissed by him on both Qur'ānic grounds and as conceived within Islāmic Tradition. His main appeal is to verses like Sūrah 5:47 which seem to honor the Scriptures of Jews and Christians. He states:

Since the authorized scriptures of Jews and Christians remain very much today as they existed at the time of the Prophet, it is difficult to argue that the Qur'ānic references to *Tawrat* and *Injil* were only to the 'pure' *Tawrat* and *Injil* as existed in the time of Moses and Jesus, respectively. If the texts have remained more or less as they were in the seventh century CE, the reverence the Qur'an has shown them at the time should be retained even today. Many interpreters of the Qur'an, from Tabari to Razi to Ibn Taymiyya and even Qutb, appear to be inclined to share this view. The wholesale dismissive attitude held by many Muslims in the modern period towards the scriptures of Judaism and Christianity do not seem to have the support of either the Qur'an or the major figures of *tafsir* [Qur'ānic exegesis and commentary].<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Saeed, 'The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures', 434-35.

A strong case can be made for a Muslim reading of the Bible using both the Qur'ân and Islâmîc Tradition. Being equipped in Arabic can facilitate the use of such arguments, especially with religious Muslims. Saeed's comments present a hopeful picture for the future of Muslim scholarship on the Bible which until now has been sorely lacking.

The supposed prediction of Muḥammad's coming in the New Testament based upon Şûrah 61:6 is a somewhat more complicated issue. It is based on a faulty presupposition and has no textual basis in the Greek New Testament. Cragg concedes that it is plausible for someone familiar with Arabic consonantal words to suggest that parakletos be read as periklutos, with the 'e', 'i', and 'u' vowels replacing the 'a', 'a' and 'e' ones.<sup>36</sup> However, 'the Christian must cheerfully shoulder the task of distinguishing clearly between Muḥammad and the Holy Spirit, and of appreciating how it comes about that the Muslim can be so confidently confused on this point.'<sup>37</sup> Muslim insistence that the New Testament predicted Muḥammad's coming is in many ways related to the Christian view regarding Christ's prediction in the Old Testament. However, in the face of no textual evidence to support their view and the collapse of the traditional doctrine of the corruption of Jewish and Christian Scriptures, Muslims who desire to remain faithful to their tradition and to a high standard in their scholarship should look elsewhere for ways to relate Islâm to Judaism and Christianity.

For Muslims, the New Testament remains a 'treasure unexplored because it is thought of as possessed' in the Qur'ân.<sup>38</sup> Overcoming the charge of scriptural corruption is possible with patience and a commitment to objectivity, and it is a must if Muslims are to come to terms with the historical Jesus. 'Christians will best communicate the Jesus of their New Testament discipleship if they relate patiently and intelligently to the light in which Muslims see him.'<sup>39</sup> They can rest assured that once the Lord's word goes out, 'it will not return void.' Getting it out, however, in the case of Islâm is among the most formidable challenges.

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<sup>36</sup> Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 266.

<sup>37</sup> Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, p. 257.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 4.

### ***3.4 The Deity of Christ***

The lack of understanding of the biblical view of Jesus and Christianity throughout the Arab and Islâmic world can be attributed to ignorance more than anything else. Dispelling misunderstandings and superficial treatments of the Bible and Christianity in Muslim scholarship will take time and patience. Understanding the Muslim mind is only half the battle. Communicating Christ faithfully and accurately to this mind is the second half. 'We must learn to communicate at all costs what it is to us to recognize in Christ the incarnate Savior, and we must do so in terms that Muslims can understand.'<sup>40</sup>

Muslims reject the doctrine of the Incarnation primarily on the basis that it is unworthy of God. In Islâm, God is conceived as being wholly transcendent. Emphasis on God's immanence is usually reserved for the more mystical sects of Sufi Islâm. For orthodox Muslims, being born, eating, sleeping, and defecating are unbecoming for God. Where does the Christian begin?

Cragg suggests that Christians avoid trying to build bridges with Muslims by overemphasizing Jesus' humanity. Concentrating on the more 'palatable' elements in Jesus that Muslims can accept is to do injustice to the biblical witness and Jesus' own self-understanding. More than this, it disregards what the Muslim needs most and what can only be found in Christ.

Another path Cragg suggests Christians should avoid in approaching the Incarnation is by appealing to what they share with Muslims in their respective doctrines of God. The Incarnation is a doctrine of God. But how does the Christian reply to the charge that his Christology is tantamount to *shirk*, associating partners with God? In order to answer this, we must understand clearly what it is that the Qur'ân is rejecting:

What Christians mean by 'God in Christ' is not adoptionism. This...was a misreading which the early Church itself resisted and rejected. But it is a way of thinking which, in rebuking Christians, the Qur'an itself has re-

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<sup>40</sup> Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, p. 259.



quently in view. Its rejection of Christology is in fact a rejection of adoptionism which Christians also repudiate.<sup>41</sup>

The confusion can be seen in the verb used in Sûrah 19:35 to reject the notion that God ‘took (*ittakhadh*) unto himself a son’.. In some versions of the Qur’ân this verb is translated ‘to beget’. It is the same verb used to describe Israel’s ‘taking to themselves’ the golden calf as a god. The New Testament conception of the Incarnation is that of Christ’s descending or God’s ‘sending down’ (*tanzîl*) Christ and not God’s ‘taking up’ Christ. He existed prior to his Incarnation. The Qur’ân may have intended to reject the Trinity as conceived in the New Testament but it has only rejected a heresy condemned by Christians themselves.

The understanding of Jesus as the pre-existent Son of God is not a notion foreign to Muslims for there is an apt parallel in their doctrine of the uncreated Qur’ân. While the parallel has obvious difficulties when related to a *person* instead of a book, it can be utilized to show Muslims that the Christian view of Jesus’ ontological status is not something beyond their comprehension.

This brings up the issue of creedal formulations. Most Muslims, building on the assumption that the Bible has been corrupted, think that Christians formulated their creeds to safeguard their views on Jesus apart from the facts. Early Christian history is almost entirely unknown to Muslims and, therefore, the creeds are viewed with the utmost suspicion. This too requires patience and teaching:

It must be made clear that the Christian doctrine about Jesus is not an imposition upon the facts, but rather a conclusion from the facts. It must be our desire and prayer that Muslims so become acquainted with the real Christ that they come to understand why Christianity has explained him in terms of the historic creeds. The whole faith as to Christ must not be left to seem a mere dogmatism or a piece of doctrinal subtlety, but rather a reasonable and legitimate ground of explanation.<sup>42</sup>

In explaining the creeds, care must be taken to root the doctrines found there where the framers themselves found them – in the Scrip-

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<sup>41</sup> Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 203.

<sup>42</sup> Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, p. 260.

tures. Western Christians in particular tend to think in a systematized fashion that gives precedence to systematic theology over biblical theology. Muslims will inevitably be led to similar conclusions and formulations regarding Christ's deity if Christians are careful to make sure they derive their views from the Scriptures. 'We are to bring others to God in Christ, before we can justify to them what creedally we believe about him.'<sup>43</sup>

The primary task for the Christian is to acquaint the Muslim with the New Testament. Wisdom dictates that we begin by using selected passages that 'allow Muslims to make contact with Jesus without immediately provoking their resistance'.<sup>44</sup> The Sermon on the Mount is often suggested as a good starting place, as well as many of the parables. This is where the disciples themselves began:

Our aim will be to lead Muslims by the same path: to let them begin where the disciples began. The final explanation of the personality [of Jesus] can hardly antedate its discovery. No Muslim is more a monotheist than were Peter, James, and John in Nazareth. We shall not err if we suppose that the order of Muslim experience will be the same as theirs. 'What manner of man is this?' is a question Jesus is capable of compelling upon every generation, however predisposed it may be against the ultimate answer.<sup>45</sup>

The Holy Spirit can be trusted to bring Muslims to a realization that Jesus is 'the Christ, the Son of the Living God' when they read of him in the New Testament and encounter his work in the life of the Christian who is sharing with them. This is his work and it is his honor that is at stake.

For the Christian, revelation resides not only in a book but also in a person. The Muslim believes in revelation but it is always via intermediaries. 'God sends rather than comes.'<sup>46</sup> For God to become a human would mean something unbefitting of God and a breach of his sovereignty. However, in conceiving of God this way Muslims unknowingly are placing limits on God. The Incarnation must always be held out as a possibility for the Muslim if he does not want to be seen as impinging

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 286.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 263.

upon the divine nature and dictating what God can and cannot do. If it is a possibility, then it must be investigated.

At this point there is a merging between the Incarnation and the cross. Inevitably the question will be asked as to why Christians believe that God would become a man. The answer cannot be found in the Qur'ân. Sin in the Qur'ân is 'atoned' for by works of prayer, almsgiving, and *Jihâd*. Forgiveness is the prerogative of divine *fiat*. Therefore, the cross is not necessary because sin has not so corrupted man as to render him unforgivable. However, the Qur'ân does describe God as merciful and forgiving. Much of what motivates Muslim piety and good works, especially as seen in Sufi Islâm, is a yearning for what seems unobtainable.

Our task is to relate what we find in Christ to all those aspirations, to the Muslim yearning for what lies beyond law, to forgiveness, renewal and true piety. It may be said, in general, about the divine mercy, as Islam conceives it, that it remains unpredictable. It is bestowed freely and in relation to the practices of Muslim religion. But it does not come forth to embody itself in a redemptive enterprise, or to articulate itself in inclusive events where it may be known indubitably.<sup>47</sup>

The crux of the 'redemptive enterprise' in Christianity is the cross. Two issues lie at the heart of the Muslim rejection of Jesus' crucifixion. The first is the idea that such an evil done to one of God's great prophet's would reflect badly on God himself if it were allowed to have happened. Protecting and rescuing Jesus is the more honorable act. There is a sense here in which the Muslim's lack of understanding of Scripture and God's redemptive purposes in the world provides a fresh view that Christians seemingly take for granted. Was not Christ's crucifixion, in point of fact, evil? Was he not worthy of being spared such a heinous death? Christians can agree, in principle, with the Muslim here. However, the reality is that Jesus was not spared nor rescued. His death by crucifixion was, in fact, foretold and predetermined from the foundation of the world. What the Muslim is missing is the fact that human life is marred by tragedy. Sin is real and no one is immune. This is why Je-

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 264-65.

sus came; not only to suffer and bear our shame and guilt but to redeem evil. Cragg comments:

In the real world immunity and security do not everywhere avail. There is tragedy. There is suffering which has to be vicariously 'taken' and its inflictors forgiven...The element of evil in the resistance, though it may safeguard and defend effectively, does not positively redeem the evil it resists, nor of itself redeem the evil-doers... It may arrest a situation: it does not deeply restore it.<sup>48</sup>

Christ's work is a vindication of God's triumph over evil. God is more glorious in our eyes for doing that which he was not bound to do; come to earth and redeem us from our sins.

The second issue in the Muslim's denial of the crucifixion was mentioned earlier. It has to do with the low view of sin found in the Qur'ân and the ease with which God can mete out his forgiveness. Overcoming this challenge will entail further familiarity with Scripture, particularly the Old Testament. A correct understanding of God's holiness and sin as an affront to that holiness will be the natural result of studying the Torah and prophets. In doing so, the Muslim will become aware of man's responsibility for sin and inability to atone for that sin and, hence, his need for the God-Man.

## 4 Conclusion

Islâmic Christology presents several formidable challenges to biblical faith. The Muslim's rejection of Christ's deity is rooted in a misunderstanding of both the nature of God's revelation in Christ and the Bible as well as his rejection of the biblical notion of grace. Overcoming these misunderstandings will entail challenging the Muslim's view that the Scriptures have been corrupted. With patience, time and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, Christians can and should equip themselves to sustain a long-term engagement of Islâm at all levels, particularly their view of Christ. By approaching Islâm and Muslims in a conciliatory manner as modeled by Kenneth Cragg the hope is that many

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<sup>48</sup> Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 179.

Muslims will reciprocate and venture to engage the biblical Christ on his own terms. When this occurs, Christians can trust that the Lord will not allow his word to return void.

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## REFLECTIONS ON THE CONCEPT OF CREATION IN MUHYI'AD-DĪN IBN AL-'ARABĪ<sup>1</sup>

BY PHIL BOURNE

### 1 Introduction

The so-called 'pantheism' of Ibn al-'Arabī has so frequently been criticised by both Christian and Muslim theologians<sup>2</sup> that it may seem that further examination of this subject can only be a rehearsal of old arguments. It is not my intention in this article to examine the pros and cons of Ibn al-'Arabī's arguments. Rather I wish to ask how, given the enormous influence that Ibn al-'Arabī exerts on contemporary Sufism, we can interact with Sūfis today in such a way that we can together re-examine some of the fundamental assumptions we make about reality. Clearly, in doing this, we as Christians will of necessity call into question aspects of Ibn al-'Arabī's thinking. The grounds for doing this will be our contention that the Bible presents a view of reality which is fundamentally at odds with the mystic agenda and that this divergence stems from our differing perspective on the meaning and goal of creation.

The thinking of Ibn al-'Arabī continues to permeate modern day Sūfism to such an extent that even if some features of his thinking are repudiated, the whole of the mystical quest presupposes an understanding of creation that is not all that dissimilar to the one he proposes. In-

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<sup>1</sup> The title Muhyi'ad-dīn means Animator of Religion. I am aware that Western scholars usually refer to him as Ibn 'Arabī in order to distinguish him from Abū Bakr Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1148), but I have found that this confuses Arabic speakers who in correcting me reinstate the article.

<sup>2</sup> For example Aḥmad Sirhindi's explicitly rejects Ibn al-'Arabī's concept of 'Being'; see Muhammad Abdul Haq Ansari, *Sufism and Shari'ah* (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1986). Sirhindi seems to have become hung up on the term *waḥdah al-wajūd*: a term which Ibn al-'Arabī, himself, never used. Ibn Taymīya (d 728/1328) vigorously campaigned against the cult of Saints that emerged as a result of Ibn al-'Arabī's teachings on Sainthood. This stance has been a characteristic of many would-be reform movements to this day. (See: Michael Chodkiewicz, *The Meccan Revelations* (Pir Press, 1988, 2002 and 2004), pp. 8ff.

deed more sympathetic writers, from a wide range of religious traditions, consider his contribution as seminal in helping to create a level of cross-faith consensus on what mysticism is really all about. Certainly in his own day Ibn al-ʿArabī was able to provide a philosophical basis for Ṣūfism that brought East and West closer together in a way that had not been possible before. Others would want to build on that foundation. But is the foundation adequate, or are we building on sand?

## 2 Creation

So what then is Ibn al-ʿArabī's understanding of creation? This is a vast subject and one cannot do justice to all aspects of it in this short essay. But the following sets out its central features and shows how Ibn al-ʿArabī's understanding of creation also defines the nature of the mystic's quest.

Ibn al-ʿArabī was born in Andalusia (Spain) in 1165AD/560AH, into a wealthy, well-connected family. As a result he received a broad education and as a young man showed a leaning towards Sufism. He travelled widely in Spain and North Africa in search of knowledge and quickly gained a reputation for piety and learning. In 1201AD/598AH, as the result of a vision, he determined to leave the West and travel to the East never to return. His initial goal was Mecca. Here he had a number of significant spiritual encounters that deepened his understanding of his spiritual quest. It was as a result of a mystical experience while circumambulating the Ka'ba that he began to compose his encyclopedic work, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*,<sup>3</sup> a work that he insists was not the result of dialectical reasoning or even a summary of the state of contemporary scholarship - although there is hardly a branch of learning that he does not touch upon. Rather, he claimed, it was more akin to a revelation. He writes: 'As God is my witness, I swear that I have not written a single letter of this book other than by the effect of divine dictation, of a lordly

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<sup>3</sup> *al-futūḥāt al-makkiyyah* is usually translated as *The Meccan Revelations*, although alternatives have been suggested. Corbin, following a suggestion from Jāmī, translates the title as *The Spiritual Conquests of Mecca*. See Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination of the Sūfism of Ibn ʿArabī* (Princeton University Press, 1969, 199), p. 357 footnote 1.



projection of spiritual inspiration in my innermost heart. I say nothing I utter no judgement that does not come out of an inspiration from the Divine Spirit in my heart.<sup>4</sup>

After leaving Mecca he visited various parts of the Middle East, returning for a while to Mecca in 1207/604, 1210/607 and 1214/611. Eventually he settled in Damascus in 1223/620, where he died in 1240/638.

Ibn al-ʿArabī's understanding of the nature of reality, of creation, starts with the *Ḥadīth al-Qudsī*: 'I was a hidden Treasure and I yearned to be known. Then I created creatures in order to be known by them'.<sup>5</sup> God's sadness (*pathos*) and his desire to reveal himself becomes both the underlying motive for creation and the measure of its significance. The Sigh of God exhaled a cloud from which the rest of creation emerged.

Ibn al-ʿArabī, works within the dominant scientific paradigm of his day, gives equal weight to both the legacy of Platonism and the legacy of the Qur'ān. Science and most other branches of knowledge in 10<sup>th</sup> century Mediterranean world were either based on Platonism or Aristotelianism. In Spain, under the influence of Ibn Rushd, the tendency at that time was to move away from Plato and towards a purer Aristotelian approach - a movement reflected in Christian Europe in the work of Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274). Christian Europe was influenced by the translation of Arabic works into Latin.

Ibn al-ʿArabī quickly recognised that Aristotle would not serve his purposes in trying to produce a philosophical basis for Sufism, precluding as it does the world of mystery where spiritual encounter becomes a real encounter with the supernatural and also precluding the concept of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibn al-ʿArabī, *al-futūḥāt al-makkiyya*: III:101 cited *Meccan Revelations* II:6, and this is not the only statement of this sort. In fact Ibn al-ʿArabī compares the chaotic order of his own writings with that of the Qur'ān, where each piece is put in its appointed place whether contextually it makes sense or not. It supposes a less ordered, but perhaps more exciting world. (The first reference is to the Arabic Cairo text, published in four volumes, 1329AH/1911AD, the second to the translations and commentary in the two volumes from Chodkiewicz.)

<sup>5</sup> Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 114. A *Ḥadīth Qudsī* is a tradition from Muhammad where God speaks in the first person through Muhammad. Scholars have contested the genuineness of this particular *Ḥadīth*, pointing out that it does not occur in any of the standard collections. But it is so frequently cited by Sufis that one might be forgiven for thinking that its genuineness is undisputed.

the 'soul' as a fundamental complement to the intellect. But whereas Platonism presupposes some natural process whereby the universe creates itself through a series of emanations, Ibn al-'Arabī grounds his understanding in the ultimate will and desire of God. So creation becomes the expression of God's desire: a sympathy that feels with (*sym-pathos*) his creatures. This feeling-with is such that creation becomes an expression of Divine love, and that love re-expressed by His creatures becomes a reflection of His Divine Being.

But that is only part of the picture. Ibn al-'Arabī also viewed God, the Divine Essence, as totally other, beyond description and beyond comprehension. As Islāmic Orthodoxy was quick to point out, we, his creation, cannot know God, or describe him. He is unlike anything in his creation. But whereas Islāmic scholarship found itself unable to progress beyond statements of what God was not, Ibn al-'Arabī's Platonism enabled him to circumvent the dilemma. For creation is not something out there, distinct from the Divine Being,<sup>6</sup> but a series of Divine self-disclosures that stand between God and the created world as we know it. These disclosures are not a series of Emanations<sup>7</sup> - extension of being - as in Platonism, but a series of epiphanies: revelations of some aspect of the Divine Essence. What the mystic contemplates and worships as God is not the Divine Essence itself, but that aspect of the Divine being in whose image he is created. These are the Divine Names. In this way Ibn al-'Arabī remains within orthodox Islām, but transcends its limitations: we cannot know God but we can know him through his Names. This

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<sup>6</sup> Although it is not central to our discussion here, I should perhaps point out that Ibn al-'Arabī divided Being into that which necessarily exists, that which potentially exists and that whose existence is impossible. The only Necessarily existent Being is God himself, the Divine Essence. Impossible Being does not exist at all, while Potential Being is the created world, which has come into existence through the desire and action of God alone. One should perhaps add here also, that Ibn al-'Arabī believed in a continuous creation - the whole Universe is continuously created from instant to instant by the will and desire of God. Consequently there is no continuity between one moment and the next and potentially one can be transported instantly from one place to another or from one time to another. This allowed for a great deal of flexibility in what was possible in terms of dreams, visions and experiences.

<sup>7</sup> But Ibn al-'Arabī does not shy away from using the terms *fayyad*, and *sadar*: to emanate, which were the technical terms used by the Arab philosophers. But his preference is *tajallī*, self-disclosure or self-uncovering.

seeming paradox becomes the ground on which a mystical experience of God becomes a reality.

Ibn al-ʿArabī describes reality as a series of nested levels which put a distance between God, in his Divine Ipseity<sup>8</sup>, and his creation. The way in which he described this structure is not always consistent in every detail, and perhaps it is not essential that it should be. But the general form is as follows: First, the Divine longing results in the emergence of the 'Names', each name reflecting a different and unique aspect of the Divine Essence. But these 'Names' also long to be known and this longing results in the epiphany of a further series of levels, or planes of Being, collectively known as the Presences: *al-Ḥaḍarāt*. In addition to the Names, these are the angelic world of spirits, the world of individual souls, the world of ideas and images and the visible sensible world of material bodies<sup>9</sup>.

This approach has the advantage of maintaining the distance between the Divine Essence and the material world in which we live. It also maintains the distinctions intrinsic to Platonism, where spirit and soul were of a higher order than the material world. It also provides an explanation of the psychic world of dreams and mental images. Things we imagine have real existence in the world of ideas. So the visions of the mystics are real and not mere fancies. The pursuit of such visions is part of the process of our drawing near, returning to our true origin, in the Divine Essence.

Here we get to the heart of mysticism. For the goal of the mystic is to fathom the depths and heights of creation and to discover one's role and purpose in it all. We return to the *Ḥadīth al-Qudsī* with which we began. If God's desire is to be known, how does he accomplish this? To put it simply - perhaps too simply to do Ibn al-ʿArabī justice - God knows himself in the knowledge that the disciple has of God. Such a disciple cannot know all of God: the Divine Essence remains unknowable. In fact such knowledge would overwhelm even the greatest mystic. But each individual knows God in that aspect of Him which is revealed in the Name from which he was created.

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<sup>8</sup> Self-hood.

<sup>9</sup> See Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 224. In the Meccan Revelations, Ibn al-ʿArabī speaks of the five planes of being, including the Divine, undifferentiated essence as the first. See Chodkiewicz, *The Meccan Revelations* I, p. 128ff.

This is not quite the same as pantheism: that everything is God. There is a subtle difference. Ibn al-ʿArabī is careful in his descriptions of the mystical experience to always keep a distance between creature and creator, the Lord and his vassal. In the mutual communion, communication between God and his disciple, there is a role that is appropriate for the creature and a role that is appropriate for God. The disciple knows God through His self-disclosure and God knows himself through the disciple's response to that self-disclosure. Because we are not working on the level of ontology, the distinction between the Lord and his vassal remains intact.

This is important when we come to the pinnacle of mystic devotion which Corbin describes in some detail his chapter on the 'Method of Theophanic Prayer'<sup>10</sup>. One can think of the Theophanic Prayer as a liturgy with responses based on *Ṣūrat al-Fātiḥa*. The disciple prays and God responds; each in turn responds to the prayer of the other. Also, each in turn takes on the role of leader and respondent, reflecting a reversal in the created order. Ibn al-ʿArabī arrives at this surprising result by reflecting on the polyvalence of the word *al-muṣallī*, which is both the 'one who prays' and the 'one who follows after'.<sup>11</sup>

This is not the merging of our being with the being of God: each remains distinct. But the role of God and the role of the disciple do become confused: so much so that the disciple appears to be taking the role of God and God the role of the disciple. Corbin expresses it as follows:

Thus when God is the *muṣallī*, 'He who prays' and who 'comes last' He manifests Himself to us under His Name of 'the Last' (*al-ākhir*), that is to say, the Revealed (*al-Zāhir*), since his manifestation depends on the existence of the faithful to whom and for whom He is manifested. The 'God who prays toward us' is precisely the manifested God ... He is the God whom the faithful *creates* in his heart, either by his meditations and reflections or by the particular faith to which he adheres and conforms. To this aspect therefore belongs the God who is designated technically as the 'God created in the faiths', that is, the God who determines and individualizes

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<sup>10</sup> Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 246.

<sup>11</sup> Ambiguity seems to be stock-in-trade for practicing mystics. The term *walī*, friend is itself ambiguous, in that it is both a name of God - Q 45<sup>19</sup> and the name used for the mystic. See Michael Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ʿArabī* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 21ff for this and similar terms.

Himself according to the capacity of the receptacle which receives Him and whose soul is the *maẓhar*, the epiphany, of one or another of His Names.... In this sense the 'God who prays toward us' 'is later than' our being; He is posterior to it, dependent on it; He is the God who our *theophany* (*ma'lūhiya*) establishes as *theos*, because the Worshipped presupposes the existence of the worshipper to who He shows Himself.... In this sense He is therefore the 'Last', the 'Manifested'. Here the divine Names 'the First' and 'the Hidden' are appropriated to the faithful.

But when we are the *muṣallī*, 'we who pray', the Name 'the Last' befits us; it is we who are posterior to Him, we who are later than He. In this case, we are for Him those whom He manifests (because the 'Hidden Treasure' has wished to be known, to know himself in beings.) Then it is He who precedes us, who is the First. But the admirable part of all this that it is precisely the beings who the 'Hidden Treasure' manifests to concrete beings from the world of Mystery who manifest Him in the multiple forms of belief, in the infinite multiplicity of His divine Names. It is the Hidden who *is* Manifested, the First who *is* the Last.<sup>12</sup>

In this sense each becomes creator and created. Each creates, understood in a theophanic sense; the vassal creating his Lord in his own image, the God of the faiths, his own personal Lord, which in turn is the form in which God created him. It is the realisation - making real - of the form of God so that God can know himself both in the disciple and in the disciple's knowledge of Him.

The quotation above, I believe, leads us to the heart of what Ibn al-'Arabī's means by 'creation as theophany'. What is important is not the form of this creation, but the fact that it is the revelation of the Divine Essence, a revelation in which the Divine Essence can know himself. In this way God accomplishes his object, knowing himself through the disciple and so bringing the cycle of creation to its dénouement, its fulfilment: God knows that he knows himself in and through the disciple. This then becomes the goal and purpose of all mystical experience: a realisation of God's objective for his creation, expressed in the true worship of the One Divine Being.

In the light of this, what do Christians have to say to Sūfis? I would suggest a great deal. I have been reading recently Tom Wright's book,

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<sup>12</sup> Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, pp. 265ff.

*Surprised by Hope* in which he again stresses the physicality of creation and argues for a similar, but transformed, physical existence after the Resurrection. In a number of places he is critical of the way in which Western Christianity has continued to read the Bible through 'Platonic' glasses, suggesting that our future will be a disembodied future; that the essence of our being is what we have traditionally described as 'our soul'. Only our soul will survive death.

Wright points out that the New Testament will have none of this. In a number of places the New Testament writers stress that the meaning and significance of redemption find their significance in the 'redemption of our bodies' - Rom 8<sup>23</sup> - and our physical resurrection to new life - Eph 4<sup>30</sup>. Resurrection here of course should be understood as something essentially physical: transcending our current limitation, but still none the less physical. In the final drama in Revelation, we are not caught up into heaven, but rather heaven descends so that the dwelling of God will be with man - see Rev 21. The passage about Christians meeting their Lord in the air at the second coming is just the reception committee - Jesus is coming back to earth and they will accompany him on that return. It is not my intention here to re-argue Wrights thesis here, but it seems to me that it makes eminent sense of the biblical data.

God created this world, this Universe, this Space-Time Continuum, not with the view to dispensing with it at some later time, but in order that his purposes for it might be brought to fruition. Part of that purpose was to people the earth with people who would be his companions in the creation process. In a very real sense, God, as Christians understand him, wants both to be known and to know. His relationship with his creation is not simply a by-product of his desire to be known. We actually do have something to offer God that would not have existed without the creation.

This contrasts sharply with the 'goals' as set forth in Ibn al-'Arabī. For Ibn al-'Arabī the eschaton (*al-ākhirah*) is not simply a series of future events, but the 'ever-present divine framework and context, at once Source and ultimate spiritual destiny of man's life in this 'nearer and lower world: *al-dunyā*.' For that life, truly perceived, is nothing else but man's 'return' to a full and awakened awareness of his primordial real-

ity....'<sup>13</sup> In other words, what is on offer is merely a version of the myth of the eternal return. Our goal as individuals is to be reunited with our Lord. 'God said: "The whole affair is returned to Him." (Q 11) So since you know that, return to Him willingly and you will not be returned to Him by compulsion. For there is no escaping your return to Him, and you will surely have to return to Him.'<sup>14</sup> This returning should not be understood in any ontological sense; through our devotion we fulfil our purpose in God's creation. Put in contemporary terms: we have significance.

According to Ibn al-'Arabī, for the Ṣūfī who has travelled far enough upon the spiritual path death is not a gateway to anything: he has already passed into that state of communion with God that he will ultimately share in eternity. So while the Qur'ān places significant emphasis on the Resurrection, it seems only to have significance for those whose 'capacity for God' was not realised in this life. Here they receive their reward though their association with Muhammad, or whatever 'god' they worshipped. This is not to say there is not some tangible existence in a 'place' called paradise, but what attraction this has for beings who are used to expressing themselves in and through their bodies is hard to imagine. It was an issue that Ibn al-'Arabī partly addressed in his response to Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's seventy-first question, 'Every individual's share in [the vision of] his Lord is according to the extent of his knowledge and the extent of what he believes among the ranks of beliefs, their differences and their greater or lesser number.'<sup>15</sup> We are what we are and there we shall remain.

### 3 Beauty and brokenness

An important aspect of Ibn al-'Arabī's spiritual quest is his perception that God is beautiful and revealed in beauty. This is perhaps most clearly seen in that section of the *al-futūḥāt al-makkiyyah* which Corbin

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<sup>13</sup> James Morris in *Meccan Revelations* I, p. 94.

<sup>14</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-futūḥāt al-makkiyyah*: II:86 lines 19-21, translation in *Meccan Revelations* I:124.

<sup>15</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-futūḥāt al-makkiyyah*: III:223 from lines 8-10, translation in *Meccan Revelations* I:105.

describes as the Sophianic Poem<sup>16</sup>. This poem, entitled the *Interpreter of Ardent Desires*, reflect Ibn al-ʿArabī's feeling aroused by Nizām, daughter of Zāhir ibn Rustam, in whose home he found a welcome while residing in Mecca. At one level this appears to simply be love poetry - and there were certainly some amongst his contemporaries who interpreted it in that way - but in a commentary Ibn al-ʿArabī subsequently wrote on these verses, he transposes them into the register of his desire for God. Whatever his natural feelings for the girl, she becomes the voice of God to him in pursuit of his spiritual quest. Corbin compares her role to that of the figure of Beatrice in Dante's *Divine Comedy*<sup>17</sup>. On the supposition that Mystical love is the union of natural love and spiritual love, the physical object of desire can become a door to the divine. Ibn al-ʿArabī makes this explicit in the final chapter of *Faṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*: "from which it follows that a mystic obtains the highest theophanic vision in contemplating the Image of feminine being, because it is in the Image of the Creative Feminine that contemplation can apprehend the highest manifestation of God, namely creative divinity"<sup>18</sup>.

Such an idea would scandalise Christian ascetics - one can imagine them scampering back to their desert hermitages in horror. But the issue is not so much whether spiritual love and natural love are congruent, but whether from a Biblical point of view we are only to love the lovely?

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<sup>16</sup> Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, pp. 136ff.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 52. Chodkiewicz is suspicious of Miguel Asin Palacios' thesis that Dante was influenced by Ibn al-ʿArabī, a thesis to which Corbin seems to concur, although he would argue the link need only be phenomenological; there need not be any 'actual' borrowing. One needs to be a little cautious when reading Corbin's beautiful and compelling prose. One cannot always be certain when Ibn al-ʿArabī is speaking and when Corbin is drawing us into some extended hypothesis based on Ibn al-ʿArabī. His continued use of the term *Fedeli d'amore* for Sūfis is confusing: the term properly belongs to Dante and his companions.

<sup>18</sup> Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 159 citing *Faṣūṣ al-Ḥikma* I:217. See the translation of part of the final chapter in Titus Burckhardt: *The Wisdom of the Prophets* (Beshara Publications, 1975), pp. 116ff, where Ibn al-ʿArabī reflects on Muhammad's love of Perfume, Women and Prayer. Corbin's mention of the 'Creative Feminine' raises another aspect of creativity. I don't intend to explore here in any detail, but perhaps in this regard Corbin was too influenced by the writings of Carl Jung, whose ideas of the Psyche are these days regarded somewhat *passé*.



The *Faṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* says that ‘God inspired in the Prophet love of only the good in everything, and there is, essentially, only good’.<sup>19</sup>

But is this a truly Christian perspective? Is creation as we experience it only good, only beautiful? It brings us back to the question of evil and the source of imperfection.

God in the Bible declares that his material creation is ‘good’. The source of imperfection lies in the spiritual realm, in the rebellion of Satan, and it is that ‘spirit’ that must be defeated if God’s good creation is to be what he intended it to be. Although Islām shares a Biblical notion of creation - something that came into existence at some ‘time’ in the past - its lack of a coherent understanding of ‘the fall’ leaves it at a loss to explain the imperfections of our present existence. Generally Islām attributes this to forgetfulness, or ignorance. Ibn al-‘Arabī, in true Platonic fashion, associated it with remoteness from the Divine Being. Although Ibn al-‘Arabī recognises the existence of Satan and has a good deal to say about his ruses, particularly in relationship to the scholars, *al-‘ulamā*<sup>20</sup>, the activities of a mere angel do not seem to have any significant impact on God’s purposes. It will all just resolve itself in the end.

But because, according to the Bible, the source of imperfection is not in the physical world, we do not need to dispense with the created order in order to regain ‘paradise’. The return is not a return to a disembodied existence in some place called ‘heaven’, to a spiritual existence which is our real destiny, but a reordering of the present world in a way that accords with God’s purposes. This is where Tom Wright is so helpful. The Bible speaks of a new heaven and a new earth, of heaven coming down to earth in such a way that where God is - heaven - also becomes where man is - earth. The reality is very much a physical one. In this case, our part in God’s purposes is to work towards the renewal of that reality here and now, and not imagine that we must escape into some spiritual state in order to draw near to God. Rather our working to redeem - repair God’s creation - contributes towards God’s purposes for the world.

I can well imagine that many a Sufi mystic would dismiss such a notion out of hand. But the evidence for it, as Tom Wright again and again

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<sup>19</sup> Burkhardt, *Wisdom of the Prophets*, p. 126.

<sup>20</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-futūḥāt al-makkiyya*: III:67-71, in *Meccan Revelations* II:77ff.

stresses, is the real physical resurrection of Jesus - the first fruits of our future.

In some respects this essay is only a first draft. To interact with, and comment on so vast a body of writings as that authored by Ibn al-ʿArabī is an almost impossible undertaking. I could have multiplied passages and themes and still not have exhausted the small amount of his work that has been done in English. But his writings invite discussion and I have made a beginning at some sort of reply. Although I disagree profoundly with Ibn al-ʿArabī's view of creation, it does not mean that I do not appreciate the beauty of his writings and the depth of his thinking. But beauty and depth alone are not a measure of true knowledge.

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## **BUTRUS AL-BUSTANI AND THE AMERICAN MISSIONARIES**

Towards a Harmony of Understanding  
of the Advent of the *Nahḍah*

BY JOEY SHAW

### **1 Introduction**

At the broadest level, the focus of this paper is the advent of the *Nahḍah*, the Arab intellectual renaissance. I wish to illuminate aspects of the advent of the Arab *Nahḍah* by way of analysis of the interaction of the American Protestant missionaries with one of the leading Syrian Arab intellectuals of the mid-nineteenth century, Buṭrus al-Bustânî. From this concentrated analysis, broader conclusions will be drawn about the early *Nahḍah* in addition to American missionaries' contribution to the interface of Syria with modernity.

Bustânî is the analytical focus here for several reasons: first, he was the most influential secular Syrian intellectual of his time who espoused, for that time, liberal ideas. Of Bustânî, Henry Jessup, a leading American missionary in Syria for a span of fifty three years, notes, 'He was the most learned, industrious, and successful as well as the most influential man of modern Syria'.<sup>1</sup> Second, of the various liberal Arab intellectuals of the mid-nineteen century, Bustânî was unquestionably the most intimately connected with the American Protestant missionary apparatus; evidence to this fact will be presented later. Thus, the life and ideas of Bustânî provide us with the best opportunity to understand this interaction between the protestant missionaries and the advent of the *Nahḍah*. Third, despite the fact that there are presently no extant translations of Bustânî's works into English, the analytical groundwork regarding his

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Harris Jessup, *Fifty-three years in Syria* Vol. 2 (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910), p. 483.

life and ideas has been, at least, *minimally* laid.<sup>2</sup> This first wave of scholarship on Bustânî opens the door for moving past initial surveys of al-Bustani's ideas to more conjectural treatment of his ideas in relationship to other phenomena, such as the western missionary movement. In this paper, therefore, I seek conceptual harmony between the liberal ideas of Bustânî and the ideas and ideology of the western missionaries in Syria. My argument is that Bustânî *must* be understood vis-à-vis his extended relationship with the missionary apparatus.

## 2 Relationship between missionaries and the *Nahḍah*

My hypothesis, correlating the missionary apparatus with Bustânî and his ideas, is not so easily accepted. The actual nature of this relationship between the American missionaries and the *Nahḍah* is hotly disputed. The first western scholar that attempted to define this relationship was George Antonius. In his work *The Arab Awakening* he portrayed the western missionaries as direct instigators of the *Nahḍah*. This is evident from the first sentence of his book: 'The story of the Arab national movement opens in Syria in 1847, with the foundation in Beirut of a modest literary society under American patronage.'<sup>3</sup> On the other extreme lies Abdul Latif Tibawi who has sought to deconstruct Antonius's view by way of arguing that the missionaries and their programs, such as their schools, their printing presses, and their distribution of books in the

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<sup>2</sup> 'Minimally' is purposefully emphasized. As stated, to my knowledge, none of Bustânî's works, including books, speeches, and articles, have been translated into English. Scholarship in English on Bustânî is limited to mere mentions at worst to chapters or subchapters, or scholarly articles at best. Most of the existing substantial treatments of Bustânî in English are referenced in my notes. There are no book length biographies of Bustani, or analyses of his ideas, in English. The most recent in Arabic is Yūsuf Q. Khūrī, *Rajul sābiq li-'aṣrihi: al-mu'allim Buṭrus al-Bustānī, 1819-1883* (Bayrūt: Bīsān, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> George Antonius, *The Arab awakening; the Story of the Arab National Movement* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1965), p. 13. Other blatant ascriptions of responsibility of the missionaries to the initiation of the *Nahḍah* can be found in chapter three, 'The Start: 1847-1968', pp. 35-60.

region were ultimately religious, rather than *Naḥḍāwī*, in nature, no matter what their appearance.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, he argues that these missionaries failed to bring anything substantially new: 'Exit therefore the claim of any foreign missionary agency having discovered or 'rediscovered' the Arabic literary heritage.'<sup>5</sup> Albert Hourani remains ambiguous in his seminal work, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939*, as to the influence of the missionaries, noting that they 'created or strengthened'<sup>6</sup> the Arab *Naḥḍāwī* intellectuals. Hourani ascribes most credit for the advent of the *Naḥḍah* to the Arab Christian intellectuals: 'It was from such families – [Nasif al-]Yaziji, [Faris al-]Shidyaq, [Butrus al-]Bustani – that there came, in the early nineteenth century, the founders of the literary renaissance of the Arabs.'<sup>7</sup> Lastly, Fruma Zachs argues that the impact of the missionaries was not necessarily related to the rise of Arab nationalism; rather the missionaries were influential in the formation of a Syrian identity. In this way, she seeks a middle point between the extremes of Antonius and Tibawi in arguing that both the missionary apparatus and the Arab Christians should be analyzed together in an effort to completely understand the earlier years of the *Naḥḍah*:

Hence, the relationships between the American missionaries and the Christian-Arab intellectuals was not a dichotomy between actor and acted upon but rather a complex matrix of interactions, cross cultural exchanges wherein both sides were active. The encounter between these missionaries and the Christian-Arab intellectuals should be treated dialectically, emphasizing the dynamic role not only of the missionaries, but also of that of the Christian Arabs. The missionaries were another catalyst contributing the process of building this Syrian identity. Yet, the final touch was to be that of the local Christian-Arab intellectuals.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Abdul Latif Tibawi, 'Some Misconceptions about the *Naḥḍah*', in *Middle East Forum* 47, No. 3-4 (Autumn and Winter 1971), pp. 15-22.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (Issued under the auspices of the Royal Institute of International Affairs. London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> Fruma Zachs, *The making of a Syrian Identity: Intellectuals and Merchants in Nineteenth Century Beirut* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 154.

Zachs's position is my point of departure in this present analysis. Closely related to this debate as to importance of the missionaries and the Arab Christians *vis-à-vis* the *Nahḍah* is that of when the *Nahḍah* began. The idea is that isolating the beginning of the *Nahḍah* will bring into focus the significant players within the movement. Scholars, once again, have diverging viewpoints on this; for instance, Zachs notes briefly that Bustânî's famous 1859 lecture *Khuṭbah fī Ādāb al-ʿArab* (A Lecture on the Culture of the Arabs) marks the beginning of the *Nahḍah*.<sup>9</sup> For Antonius, the beginning was the 1847 formation of *al-Jamʿiyyah al-Sūriyyah li-Iktisāb al-ʿUlūm wal-Funūn* (The Syrian Society for the Acquisition of the Sciences and the Arts).<sup>10</sup> Without unnecessarily entering into this debate, it is sufficient for this analysis to note that both the missionaries and Arab liberal intellectuals such as al-Bustânî were influential in the earlier years of the *Nahḍah*.

### 3 Role of Butrus al-Bustani

Butrus al-Bustânî was born into a Maronite family in 1819. He graduated from the most impressive school in Syria at the time,<sup>11</sup> the monastic seminary of ʿAyn Waraqaḥ, where he studied liberal arts, Arabic, Syriac, Latin, Italian, and religion. Shortly thereafter (‘about the year 1840’<sup>12</sup>), he moved to Beirut, converted to Protestantism, began working at the Protestant Seminary, and fortuitously met Eli Smith, one of the pioneers of the American Presbyterian Mission in Syria (the order of these events is unclear).

Another pioneering Presbyterian missionary, Henry Jessup, notes that upon converting, ‘He entered the house of Dr. Eli Smith for protection. For two years he was a prisoner, not venturing outside the gates lest he be shot by spies of the Maronite patriarch.’<sup>13</sup> Thus, as will be important

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>10</sup> Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Butrus Abu-Manneh, ‘The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism: The Ideas of Butrus Al-Bustani’, in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 11, No. 3 (May 1980), p. 289.

<sup>12</sup> Jessup, *Fifty-three years*, Vol. 2, pp. 483-484.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

in the analysis below, Bustânî was personally acquainted with the hard realities of confessional solidarity from the very moment of his conversion to Protestantism. For the next 22 years he, along with other influential converts such as Aḥmad Faris al-Shidyâq, Mikhâ'il Mishâqah, and Nâsif al-Yâziji worked intimately with the American Protestant missionary apparatus in Syria, mostly in Beirut. From 1848 to 1857, along with al-Yâziji, Bustânî aided Eli Smith, his close friend and patron, in translating the Bible into Arabic. After the death in 1857 of Smith, Bustânî seems to have distanced himself from the American missionary apparatus at least in terms of official vocation; the degree of this distance is debatable and will be addressed below.

In terms of his activity and intellectualism, Bustânî's life may be broken up into two parts. In the first of these, he was intensely engaged with the missionary apparatus. He was, as one missionary put it, 'an energetic and promising young man, who is zealous for the truth, so far as he understands it, apt to learn and apt to teach'.<sup>14</sup> He helped Smith in translating the Bible into Arabic; he led morning and evening prayers;<sup>15</sup> he taught in the missionary schools;<sup>16</sup> he went on evangelical outings with the missionaries;<sup>17</sup> and he served with them, as when he helped them serve bread during the 1860 crises in Beirut.<sup>18</sup> Apparently, Bustânî was being trained to become a full time minister of the gospel, an end which was never realized.<sup>19</sup>

Two events were to mark the transition between the first and second phases of Bustânî's life: the death of Eli Smith and the sectarian violence of 1860 in Syria.

After the death of Smith, Bustânî ceased working on the Bible translation project, opening the door for the most intellectually prolific years of his life, from 1857 through the end of his life in 1883. As an example,

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<sup>14</sup> Kamal Salibi and Yusuf K. Khoury (eds), *The Missionary Herald; Reports from Ottoman Syria, 1819-1870* Vol. 3 (London: NABU Publications, 1995), p. 392.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 411.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 335.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 391.

<sup>19</sup> The decision to not appoint Bustânî as a minister of the gospel apparently deeply affected him, along with his patron, Eli Smith. For a succinct discussion of this, see Abdul Latif Tibawi, *American Interests in Syria, 1800-1901; A Study of Educational, Literary, and Religious Work* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), pp. 131-133.

in just two years, he produced the following works: he edited the three parts of Ṭannūs ibn Yūsuf Shidyāq's, *Akhbār al-A'yān fī Jabal Lubnān* (1859), as well as *Dīwān al-Mutanabbi* (1860); other works of his were *Khuṭbah fī Ādāb al-'Lughah al-'Arabiyyah* (1859), *Nubdhat Tawārīkh min Dīwān ash-Shaikh Nīṣīf al-Yāziji* (1859), *Qisṣat As'ad al-Shidyāq: munāẓarah wa-ḥiwār multahib ḥawla ḥurrīyat al-ḍamīr* (1860), and *Kitābah ilā an-Nisā' fī Bilād ash-Sharq* (1860). From September 1860 through April of 1861, in response to the sectarian violence of 1860 in Syria, he published eleven very patriotic broad-sheets, or bulletins, which he called *waṭaniyyāt*. These broad sheets, entitled *Nafīr Sūriyyah* (Trumpet of Syria), were Bustānī's personal admonitions of the 'sons of the nation' (*abnā' al-waṭan*) for peace, unity, inter-confessional solidarity, and human rights. *Nafīr Sūriyyah* is addressed more fully below.<sup>20</sup>

Bustānī's two most monumental works were also representative of his passion for a revival of the Arabic language: in 1869 he finished the massive *Muḥīt al-Muḥīt: qāmūs muṭawwal lil-lughah al-'Arabīyah*, a complete Arabic dictionary along with *Quṭr al-muḥīt: qamus lughawī muyassar*, an abridged dictionary. The Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II took notice of the importance of this dictionary and 'upon receiving copies of his dictionary, sent him a present of two hundred and fifty pounds sterling and a decoration of third class of the *Medjidiyyah*'.<sup>21</sup> Other literary accomplishments were the founding of a landmark new journal, *al-Jinān* (1870-1883), and a newspaper, *al-Janna*. According to Jessup, he also, 'published works on bookkeeping, Arabic grammar, and translated into Arabic the Pilgrim's Progress, D'Aubigné's Reformation, Edward's History of Redemption, and Robinson Crusoe'.<sup>22</sup>

Beginning in 1875, through to his death, on May 1, 1883, he devoted his time and energy to constructing what might be considered his second great literary work after *Muḥīt al-Muḥīt*, namely, *Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif*, an encyclopedia comprising the most modern knowledge and a display of the most eloquent Arabic. Originally planned as twelve volumes, he had

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<sup>20</sup> Due to limitations in access to original sources, such as Bustānī's newspapers, this paper has focused mainly on his earlier works. That said, Bustānī's later works do not seem to come into contradiction with his earlier works; rather, he is able to remove himself more from inter-confessional conflict, specifically that waged in 1860, and develop his thoughts further by means of his newspaper and journal.

<sup>21</sup> Jessup, *Fifty-three years*, vol. 2, p. 484.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 485.



finished six volumes before his death. Four more were completed by his sons. He was found at his death, according to Jessup, 'pen in hand, surrounded by his books and manuscripts'.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4 Bustani and Syrian patriotism

Bustânî is most often associated with Syrian patriotism, or what some have called, 'Arab proto-nationalism'.<sup>24</sup> In the broadest terms, Bustânî called for the end of religious solidarity ('*usbah dîniyyah*) and the unification of the people in patriotic solidarity ('*usbah waṭaniyyah*) under the banner of 'Syria'. This should not be confused with revolutionary statism; for Bustânî's patriotism did not find conflict with his concomitant Ottomanism. This was, it seems, for at least two reasons: first, his belief in the 'power of union'<sup>25</sup> undergirded even his attitude toward the Ottoman state, especially during the Tanzimat reforms.<sup>26</sup> 'Therefore, it is the duty of each eastern[er] to say that I like to preserve the present [political] situation and avoid all causes of split (*inshiqāq*) in order to remain [a member] of a great nation called the Ottoman nation ('*umma*), which even though composed of many racial groups (*ajnās*) is one in [common] interests.'<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, as Abu-Manneh argues effectively in his work, 'Bustani's vision was of Ottomanism as the progenitor of Syrian patriotism'.<sup>28</sup> Unifying patriotic solidarity by way of a cultural, literary, and language revival was, therefore, the answer to the problem of Arab decay (*inhiṭāt*). Only in this way can the people achieve substantial peace and progress.

Bustânî's notion of patriotism is best understood in the context in which his ideas developed; namely, a Beirut that was concomitantly rid-

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> For instance, see Fruma Zachs, 'Toward a Proto-Nationalist Concept of Syria? Revisiting the American Presbyterian Missionaries in the Nineteenth Century Levant', in *Die Welt des Islams* 41, No. 2 (July 2001), pp. 145-173.

<sup>25</sup> Abu-Manneh, 'The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism', p. 298.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> *Al-Jinān*, 5 (1874), p. 111 as quoted in Abu-Manneh, 'The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism', p. 298.

<sup>28</sup> Abu-Manneh, 'The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism', p. 296.

den with sectarianism and budding as an Ottoman provincial capital<sup>29</sup> which, ultimately and most graphically, manifested itself in the violence of 1860. The violence of 1860 was fundamentally sectarian, mostly pitting the Maronites against the Druze. Though, this was not a religious war; rather, as Linda Schatkowski-Schilcher notes, 'One thing should be clear: we have here an outbreak of social, socio-economic, socio-psychological and political conflict but not of a religious war.'<sup>30</sup> Another scholar framed this inter-communal violence as part of the process of ascendancy of Beirut *vis-à-vis* 'the mountain'.<sup>31</sup> In fact, it is true that Beirut found itself at the political and social center of the 1860 conflicts.<sup>32</sup> The violence of 1860 apparently had an emphatic influence on the ideas of Bustânî; in essence, confessional violence, which came to its peak in 1860, led Bustânî to realize that inter-confessional unity was not only the path to peace and deliverance<sup>33</sup> from those 'worst evils'<sup>34</sup> of sectarianism and fanaticism, but also the requisite for the progress of the people. In other words, Bustânî sought to redirect the loyalty of the people from confessional communalism towards patriotic solidarity under the nation.

It should be noted that these ideas are significantly more developed than the perspective of the American Presbyterian missionary. While the missionaries were fascinated by the notion of 'Syria', it was mostly territorial – a fascination of the Biblical land of 'Syria'. The missionaries saw themselves as bringing the ideology that was an *ultimate* unifier,

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<sup>29</sup> Jens Hanssen, *Fin de Siecle Beirut: the Making of an Ottoman Provincial Capital* (Oxford historical monographs. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

<sup>30</sup> Linda Schatkowski-Schilcher, *Families in Politics, Damascene Factions and Estates of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Berliner Islamstudien, Bd. 2, Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1985), p. 100, noted within footnote 11 of Zachs, 'Toward a Proto-Nationalist Concept of Syria?' p. 150. On the 1860 conflict, also see Leila Fawaz, *An Occasion for War: Civil Conflict in Lebanon and Damascus in 1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>31</sup> Fawaz, 'The City and the Mountain: Beirut's Political Radius in the Nineteenth Century as Revealed in the Crisis of 1860', pp. 489-495.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 492-494.

<sup>33</sup> I am using this word, 'deliverance', very purposely. Bustânî's use of deliverance terminology, such as his references to Satan, is very interesting and deserves more Western scholarly analysis.

<sup>34</sup> Abu-Manneh, 'The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism', p. 288.

namely, the Christian gospel.<sup>35</sup> A letter from the Protestant Mission in Beirut to America, dated March 20, 1848, succinctly states this sentiment:

And with our hopes founded upon the sure promises of God, we preach the gospel to high and low, if perchance we may bring the people around us to repentance and true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.... We are, indeed, of different sects, Greeks, Greek Catholics, Latins, Maronites and Armenians; but we have abandoned all animosities and jealousies existing between these sects, wishing them no more to be mentioned among us, inasmuch as we have become members of one body in Christ. For in him nothing of the kind exists; he having abolished the whole, and required that all believers in him should be one in faith and love.<sup>36</sup>

The gospel therefore surpasses territorial or ethnic affiliation as it opens the door for a supernatural solidarity. While Bustânî subscribed to the same theology, it is likely that he recognized that practical unity might be more effectively achieved under a more parochial ideology than the gospel; indeed, Bustânî was aware of the extremely slow growth of the mission. His call, therefore, was for solidarity of the people under the banner, not of God, but of the nation and cultural identity. In an editorial in *al-Jinān*, 1870, he states, 'We must adopt one nationality. It is that which prevailed in our fatherland after all the others and of which we adopted its language and customs – that is Arabic nationality.'<sup>37</sup>

At the height of the violence, in September 1860, Bustânî put forward his first pamphlet within the *Nafīr Sūriyyah* series. His opening words speak volumes about the intentions of Bustânî: *Yā abnā' al-waṭan* (Oh, sons of the nation). Hence, his pamphlets are fundamentally pleas to the Syrian Arabs, his Arab brothers, to cease sectarian violence in favor of unity under a common love of the nation, or fatherland (*ḥubb al-waṭan*). His appeal is humanistic in one sense: in his first pamphlet he cries out, 'You (*antum*) drink one water, and you breath one air, and the language that you speak is one. Your land on which you walk and your welfare,

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<sup>35</sup> 'For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him.' (Romans 10:12)

<sup>36</sup> Salibi and Khoury, *The Missionary Herald*, Vol. 4, p. 51.

<sup>37</sup> *Al-Jinān*, 1 (1870), p. 674, as quoted in Abu-Manneh, 'The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism,' p. 293.

your customs are one.’<sup>38</sup> Bustânî refers to himself as *muḥibb lil-waṭan* (one whose love is towards the nation, or more succinctly, patriot). In another more profoundly *Naḥḍāwī* sense, he argues that sectarianism has yielded nothing for society except decay (*inhīṭāt*):

How often have we heard you (*antum*) talking about this ruinous event (*khirbah*), the third of its kind in a span of less than twenty years? You have tried civil war time after time. You have weighed its pros and cons. But what have you gained? Have any of you become a king, an advisor (*mushīr*), or a minister (*wazīr*)? Have you risen in status and position? Have you increased your reputation or wealth? What has been the consequence of violence? Widowhood, orphanhood, and poverty? Degradation (*safrilah*), earthly and spiritual destruction, and humiliation? Belittlement of native sons in the eyes of rational men (*‘uqalā’*) and foreigners? . . .

Now then, isn't it more suitable to your welfare that you exchange your blind prejudice - which is nothing but a kind name for excessive self-love - with love for the nation and interconfessional friendship (*mawadda*)? The success of the country (*najāḥ al-bilād*) is achieved only through concord and unity. With them, you can vex reviled Satan, extend the carpet of valor (*bisāṭ al-murū’a*), remember past harmony (*ulfa*).<sup>39</sup>

This note on of cultural decay is very similar to the missionaries’ view, namely, that Syria was a dark land in the mire of stagnation. Ussama Makdisi recounts one missionary declaring, ‘Alas, how dark are these beautiful mountains’.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Al- Bustânî, *Naḥḍ Sūriyyah*, Issue I, pp. 10-11.

<sup>39</sup> *Naḥḍ Sūriyyah*, Issue V, pp. 27-28, as translated by Stephen Paul Sheehi, ‘Inscribing the Arab Self: Buṭrus al-Bustānī and Paradigms of Subjective Reform’, in *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 27, No. 1 (May, 2000), pp 7-24.

<sup>40</sup> Benton to Azariah Benton, June 8, 1855, Box 11, Folder 2, William A. Benton Papers, Department of Special Collections, Joseph Regenstein Library, University of Chicago, noted in Ussama Makdisi, ‘Reclaiming the Land of the Bible: Missionaries, Secularism, and Evangelical Modernity’, in *The American Historical Review* 102, No. 3 (June, 1997), p. 687.

## 5 Decay and solutions

Missionary leader Henry Jessup's comments are illuminating of the missionaries' earlier notions of Syria:

Intellectually, the land was utter stagnation. With the exception of the Koran and its literature among the Moslems, and the ecclesiastical books among the Oriental Christians, there were no books.... But it was in general true that there were in the land neither books, readers nor schools, as such.... The Oriental mind seemed asleep. If the 'rest cure' which obliges the patient to lie prostrate for weeks in a state of mental vacuity and physical relaxation, often renews the mind and body, then the Syrian race, by their rest cure of ages, should have reached the acme of mental and physical preparation for a new era of vigor and growth.<sup>41</sup>

This intellectual decay was also, unsurprisingly, coupled by spiritual stagnation: 'As far as words are concerned they have religion enough. But they need to be taught the need of spiritual regeneration, and the reality of personal religious experience.'<sup>42</sup> The missionaries argued that 'stagnation' in Syria was a product of both intellectual and spiritual darkness. Thus, their desire was to bring spiritual awakening that would revive all aspects of society and bring about a 'New Phoenicia, a new Syria', that is 'better cultivated, better governed, with a wider diffusion of Christian truth, a noble sphere for women, happier homes for the people, and that [*sic.*] contentment which grow out of faith in God and man'.<sup>43</sup> According to the missionaries, part of the cause of this spiritual darkness was disunity. As already stated, Bustânî argued that disunity was the *main* cause of cultural stagnation. While his argument that decay permeates the land is clear in his work, what remains largely unknown is his view of religion, namely Islâm, in the land. I have found very little in terms of Bustânî's view of culture *vis-à-vis* religion other than the fact that he occasionally references the words and deeds of the Prophet Muḥammad.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Jessup, *Fifty-three years*, Vol. 1, p. 27.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Jessup, *Fifty-three years*, Vol. 2, p. 597.

<sup>44</sup> For instance, see *Nafṣ Sūriyya*, Issue VIII, p. 42.

In general, Bustânî's position in regards to society was secular: religion, while inherently good, breeds religious solidarity ('*usbah dîniyyah*) and decay when mixed with politics.<sup>45</sup> The secularism of Bustânî is a marker of the advent of the *Naḥḍah*. While Bustânî's religious views warrant another study altogether, it is sufficient to note the virtual harmony between the missionaries' and his views of stagnation.

Bustânî accused his people of their cultural decay. His self-criticism is a hallmark of the early years of the *Naḥḍah*. In fact, in reference to *Naḥr Sūriyyah*, Stephen Paul Sheehi states that Bustânî, 'can be credited as one of the earliest intellectuals who embarked on a coherent self-analysis of Syrian Arab culture and society'.<sup>46</sup> One of the most blatant statements of self blame in *Naḥr Sūriyyah* is in the ninth pamphlet: 'We only looked at one side of the entire problem and, with that, we chose the iniquitous side of the present problem...'<sup>47</sup> It is evident that the focus of the blame for the violence in 1860 fell on the Arabs, not on foreigners, the Ottomans, and so on. Bustânî associates all of the 'sons of the nation' with responsibility for poor situation in Syria; but at one point in *Naḥr Sūriyyah* he specifically targets his blame on the intelligentsia and the upper class: 'I am convinced that the blame, the loss, and the responsibility for such and such deeds fall, in the end, on the intelligentsia (*al-'uqalā'*) and the wealthy (*aṣḥāb al-'arḍ wa al-māl*) from among the sons of the nation.'<sup>48</sup>

This self-critique must be understood in light of the sectarian violence of 1860 and in relation to the broader Arab encounter with the West. Bustânî was personally 'shamed' and 'disgraced' at the cultural decay (*inḥiṭāṭ*) of the Arabs as manifested most visibly by the violence of his countrymen: 'Much of what we have seen is that the love of the nation bows his gaze down to the earth. [He is embarrassed] particularly in these days as foreigners have opened an investigation of the causes of the violence. [We bow our heads] not out of cowardice nor fear, but out of

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<sup>45</sup> Abu-Manneh, 'The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism', p. 296. Specifically, Abu-Manneh refers to an editorial in *Al-Jinān* in 1870 entitled, 'Ruḥ al-'Asr' (The Spirit of the Age), wherein Bustânî speaks to the problem of religious solidarity when mixed with politics.

<sup>46</sup> Sheehi, 'Inscribing the Arab Self', p. 9.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. Issue IX, p. 51.

shame and disgrace.’<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, as seen from this brief quote, Bustânî’s shame and disgrace at the violence arrive concomitant with ‘the foreigners’ (*al-ajānib*), which we can ascribe as the Westerner. Similar to other earlier *Naḥḍāwī* reformers, such as Rifa’a Badawî Rafî’ al-Taḥṭāwî (1801-1873) and Khayr al-Dīn Pasha (c. 1820-1890) who spent their formative years in the West, specifically, France, Bustânî spent his formative years under the heavy influence and tutelage of the West, via the western missionaries. He was well aware of the sentiments in the West towards the Ottoman Empire generally, and towards Syria more specifically. This caused, as Sheehi notes, a level of ‘anxiety caused by the simultaneous recognition of the West’s advancement, on the one hand, and their ill-intention and political opportunism, on the other hand.’<sup>50</sup> Also, we may only merely speculate as to the nature of the many conversations, undoubtedly on topics comparing America and Syria, between Bustânî and his close friends in the missionary apparatus. In the end, we may say that the American missionaries were indirectly involved in producing and/or promoting al-Bustani’s self-criticism which paved the way for the second and third *Naḥḍah*.

Bustânî not only submitted criticisms, he also proposed solutions. He called for the rise of patriotic solidarity by means of the flourishing of Arabic culture, specifically, literary Arabic (*al-fuṣṣḥah*). In fact, it was partly this passion for the language of the Arabs that led Bustânî, later in his life in 1876, to criticize the missionary schools, with which he had worked so closely, for teaching their own language and culture. He felt that they were teaching the Syrian pupils ‘nothing about their own’.<sup>51</sup> It should be noted that this is a peculiar criticism towards the missionaries and their schools; for their schools did practice, at intervals, teaching in Arabic, even if the form of education was, at points, only religious.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, we cannot say conclusively that Bustânî is critical here of the inherent purpose and intention of the schools; for he continued to co-

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., Issue VIII, p. 41, translated by Sheehi, ‘Inscribing the Arab Self’, p. 21.

<sup>50</sup> Sheehi, ‘Inscribing the Arab Self’, p. 21. Sheehi also notes that ‘shame is peppered throughout the text’. p. 21.

<sup>51</sup> *Al-Jinān*, 7 (1876), p. 594, as translated by Abu-Manneh, ‘The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism’, p. 290.

<sup>52</sup> As an example, the Syrian Protestant College was run in Arabic for a number of years. Also, prayers and Bible study were held in Arabic. See Jessup, *Fifty-three years*, Vol. 1, p. 167.

operate with the missionary educational institutions. It seems that he was critical of what these schools did *not* teach, rather than what they did. Additionally, it was actually the missionaries who took a renewed interest, thanks to their Biblical appreciation for the territory, in Syria as a quasi entity in itself.<sup>53</sup> Bustânî's famous lecture '*Khutbah fî Âdâb al-'Arabiyyah*' (1859) is the most concentrated of his works on the topic of reviving Arabic culture and language.<sup>54</sup>

This lecture also illuminates the deep influence that the missionaries, specifically Bustânî's close friend Eli Smith, had on Bustânî's thinking, as has been shown by Zachs. Zachs shows that many of his famous ideas in his 1859 lecture were essentially predated in Smith's 1842 lecture within *al-Jam'īyyah al-Sūriyyah li-Iktisāb al-'Ulūm wal-Funūn*; these ideas include the necessity of unity for the achievement of scientific progress, the nature of Arabic culture as a link between early sciences and modern sciences, and the revival of Arabic language and culture. Though, as Zachs concedes, Bustânî's ideology was far further developed and appropriate for his time than Smith's.<sup>55</sup>

Language revival was for Bustânî the anti-corollary of sectarianism and the very foundation of the people's identity: 'Syria must not become a Babel of languages . . . as it is a Babel of religions and sects.'<sup>56</sup> What is less emphatic in al-Bustani's position on language is a call to preserve authenticity. I have found only one point where he seems to address the question of authenticity. This was in his encyclopedia (*Muḥīt al-Muḥīt*) under his entry for *Ishtiqaq* (derivation). In that entry, he spends considerable effort elucidating the difference between *ishtiqaq* and *ṣarf* (turning away). Both, he notes, are ways in which language changes, but *ṣarf* is more emphatic than *ishtiqaq* in terms of how much the structure of a

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<sup>53</sup> Zachs, *The Making of a Syrian Identity*.

<sup>54</sup> As noted already, it is for Bustânî's boldness and innovation of thought in *Khutbah* that some, such as Fruma Zachs (see note 10), have noted that this speech marks the beginning of the *Naḥḍah*. This conclusion, though, seems all too simplistic to faithfully reflect the advent of the *Naḥḍah* – it was, in fact, a phenomenon in which, like all phenomena, is best understood without rigid constraints. That said, the importance of Bustânî's *Khutbah* is apparent in that it would garner such bold conclusions such as Zachs'.

<sup>55</sup> Zachs, *The Making of a Syrian Identity*, pp. 145-147.

<sup>56</sup> *Nafīr Sūriyyah*, Issue X, quoted in and translated by Abu-Manneh, 'The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism', p. 291.



word changes.<sup>57</sup> In any case, the transformation of language to meet the needs of the modern period was touted by Bustânî as a major means unto the reformation of the Arab people.

Bustânî's view of the nature of the East-West encounter is also revealing as to his intellectual relationship with the missionaries. In *Nafir Sûriyyah*, he portrays the 'sons of the nation' as a crucial link between the East and the West: 'The sons of the nations are convinced that they are not alone in the world, but rather they are a link in the sequence of the great world. This link is not [located] on the edges of the sequence, but rather, in the middle of it, before it, and at its political center and they are very important.'<sup>58</sup>

The connection between Bustânî's argument of the identity of the Syrian Arabs and his call for a new kind of patriotism is obvious in this passage. Additionally interesting in his choice of diction is that he *himself* served as a 'link' between East and West; as an Arabic specialist in the American mission and a public evangelical Christian, he was one of the most tangible connections between the western missionaries and the native Syrians. Interestingly, this is not the only case of Bustânî's daily reality manifesting his ideology: in keeping with his campaign for inter-confessional solidarity, his school, *al-Waṭaniyyah*, was not inherently linked to any denomination. It contained Protestant, Greek, Maronite, Greek Catholic, Druze, and Muslim students.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, this notion of a link, or bridge, with the rest of the world was more emphatic for the city of Beirut in particular.<sup>60</sup>

Bustânî also posits that the Syrian Arabs are not only a crucial link in the grand 'sequence', but they are caught in an ontological struggle with the West in terms of identity formation.<sup>61</sup> Upon the permanent arrival of the western Christian missionaries, the Arab Christians themselves were also involved in a struggle regarding identity formation. In her book on the origins and development of a 'Syrian' identity, Zachs argues that the Arab Christians were inevitably linked, at various degrees, with the

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<sup>57</sup> Buṭrus al-Bustânî, *Muḥīt al-Muḥīt* (1869) s.v. 'Ishtiqaq'.

<sup>58</sup> *Nafir Sûriyya*, Issue IX, p. 51.

<sup>59</sup> Salibi and Khoury, *The Missionary Herald*, Vol. 5, p. 91.

<sup>60</sup> Zachs, *The Making of a Syrian Identity*, pp. 67, 69.

<sup>61</sup> Using *Nafir Sûriyyah* as his object of analysis, Sheehi develops most fully this ontological struggle, what he called a 'inescapable Hegelian, master-slave, struggle with the West' See Sheehi, 'Inscribing the Arab Self', pp. 22, 24.

Western missionaries. While they welcomed their co-religionists, they realized that association with western Protestants would mean greater distance with their people. Thus, in the end, 'they saw themselves first and foremost as Arabs and only then as Westerners or even as Christians. In this sense, they preferred to become "proud Arabs" and not "imperfect Europeans"'.<sup>62</sup>

As for Western ideas and reforms, the Arab Christians, with Bustânî as their unofficial statesmen, rejected any blind or superficial imitation of the West.<sup>63</sup> In *Nafir Sûriyyah*, he states, 'As long as [those who superficially adopt the trappings of the Western civilization] mislead themselves and accept false dirhams with true dinar, they are patching used clothes with new rags.'<sup>64</sup> Instead of imitation, Bustânî and his Arab compatriots desired to 'reflect the culture and civilization of the East, evolving *vis-à-vis* the West'.<sup>65</sup> As a manifestation of this struggle, the Levantine Muslims were resistant to reforms that even appeared connected to European intervention.<sup>66</sup> This crucial positioning of the Syrian Arabs *vis-à-vis* the West also illuminates the reason behind Bustânî's shame at his own people's violent sectarianism. It is, in fact, their sectarianism that opens the door to 'harmful' Western intervention.<sup>67</sup> Curiously, while Bustânî was an associate of the western missionary apparatus, his aforementioned Ottomanism also served to provide a buffer against further western expansion. We may understand these apparent ideological contradictions by placing Bustânî within the context of his relationship with the missionaries.

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<sup>62</sup> Zachs, *The Making of a Syrian Identity*, p. .

<sup>63</sup> Sheehi, 'Inscribing the Arab Self', p. 20.

<sup>64</sup> *Nafir Sûriyyah*, Issue XI, p. 67, translated by Sheehi, 'Inscribing the Arab Self', p. 20.

<sup>65</sup> Zachs, *The Making of a Syrian Identity*, p. 71.

<sup>66</sup> Sabri Hafez, 'The Infrastructure of Cultural Transition', in *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse* (London: Saqi Books, 1993), p. 46.

<sup>67</sup> 'The transgression of boundaries of humanity and justice [by] the sons of the nation made necessary the intervention of a foreign hand in their country's affairs... We are firm in the conviction that intervention by a foreign hand in the politics of whatever nation... is harmful to the country even though it may provide some temporary benefit.' Translated by Sheehi, 'Inscribing the Arab Self', p. 9.

## 6 Always the evangelical educator

Some scholars have argued that Bustânî finally recognized the ‘colonial’ ambitions of the western missionary apparatus and therefore he significantly distanced, or even ‘disengaged’, himself from the apparatus after Eli Smith died.<sup>68</sup> This is a major overstatement for two reasons: first, unlike in other parts of the developing world, such as India, the American Protestant missionaries were not connected to state funded colonial campaigns.<sup>69</sup> Second, while he did cease helping Eli Smith translate the Bible, he never *significantly* distanced himself from the missionary apparatus in the aforementioned second part of his life. The evidence for my claim is as follows. These scholars point to the fact that Bustânî founded his own preparatory school, *al-Madrasah al-Waṭaniyyah*, where Arabic and Syrian patriotism were taught. But, in fact, English, French, and Turkish were also taught.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, the Bible was read at morning and evening prayers,<sup>71</sup> which signals that *al-Waṭaniyyah* was not an expression of Bustânî leaving the faith. The school must have had, in fact, an influence on the pupils; the 1864 Annual Report of the Presbyterian missionaries to their sending board in America notes the ‘interesting feature’ of the Beirut Protestant church, namely, that about thirty boys (out of about one hundred) from *al-Waṭaniyyah* were regularly attending the congregation.<sup>72</sup>

While Bustânî did not receive funding for this school from the missionaries,<sup>73</sup> this school was a filter into the Syrian Protestant College, which was started and administered chiefly by the American missionaries.<sup>74</sup> Bustânî also remained in leadership of the Beirut Protestant community. American missionary Jessup recalls Bustânî’s sustained, close involvement with the Evangelical Christians: ‘He was one of the original members of the Beirut church, and an elder for thirty-five years [from

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<sup>68</sup> For claims such as these, see Sheehi, ‘Inscribing the Arab Self’, and Abu-Manneh, ‘The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism’, p. 291.

<sup>69</sup> For different views on the exact connection between the missionaries and American expansionism, see Makdisi, ‘Reclaiming the Land of the Bible’, p. 681, footnote 4.

<sup>70</sup> Salibi and Khoury, *The Missionary Herald*, Vol. 5, pp. 91-92.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 91.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Zachs, *The Making of a Syrian Identity*, p. 154.

1848 until his death]. He was also for twenty years president of the Native Evangelical Society. For years he aided in the preaching and in the Sunday-school, and was looked to for addresses on all important occasions. In 1882, he preached twice.<sup>75</sup> Giving insight into the al-Bustani's personal life, Jessup notes that the Bustânî home was 'known as a model Christian home'.<sup>76</sup> It is, therefore, unapparent that Bustânî significantly disengaged from the missionary apparatus after the death of Eli Smith.

Associated with this question of Bustânî's distancing himself from the missionaries is the claim that the missionaries, though claiming to adhere to a supernatural unifying force, were actually merely another sect. Unlike the last claim, this notion has merit and analysis thereof provides insight into his campaign for interconfessional solidarity *vis-à-vis* his relationship with the missionaries. Butrus Abu-Manneh makes the sharpest of these claims in arguing that the 'missionaries sharpened this lack of homogeneity among those communities and within them'. This led, argues Abu-Manneh, Bustânî to 'disengage himself from missionary work' and devote the rest of his life to promoting unity.<sup>77</sup> While I have already shown that Abu-Manneh's argument that Bustânî 'disengaged himself' from the missionaries is overstated, his more important claim, that it was in fact the sectarianism of the missionaries that eventually led Bustânî to dedicate his life to campaigning for interconfessional solidarity, deserves analysis.

While superficial manifestations of sectarianism are to be expected with the arrival and growth of a new religious denomination, it does seem, even from the reports of the missionaries themselves, that the missionary apparatus was 'a new sect within a sectarian society'.<sup>78</sup> In their reporting, they speak of 'the Protestants', who are 'a small and hated minority'.<sup>79</sup> In at least one instance, they actually refer to themselves as 'an evangelical sect'.<sup>80</sup> Sectarian conflict was also manifested between the missionary apparatus and other sects, such as the Maronites.<sup>81</sup> Thus,

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<sup>75</sup> Jessup, *Fifty-three years*, Vol. 2, p. 485.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Abu-Manneh, 'The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism', p. 291.

<sup>78</sup> Tibawi, *American Interests in Syria*, p. 309.

<sup>79</sup> Salibi and Khoury, *The Missionary Herald*, Vol. 5, p. 95.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., Vol. 4, p. 50.

<sup>81</sup> For example, in one instance, there occurred an impromptu public 'discussion' between one leading Protestant and a Maronite Bishop who was, in fact, a relative of Bustânî. A

the claim that Bustânî witnessed the sectarian tendencies of the Protestants which subsequently influenced him to become a herald for inter-confessional solidarity holds merit.

But there were other influences on Bustânî in regards to the formation of his belief in the 'power of union' and, thus, his campaign for national unity. One of these influences ironically originated among the missionary leaders themselves in partnership with the native Evangelical Christians; this was, namely, the formation in 1842 and proceedings of *al-Jam'iyyah al-Sūriyyah li-Iktisāb al-'Ulūm wal-Funūn* (The Syrian Society for the Acquisition of the Sciences and the Arts). Among the founders were missionary leaders Cornelius Van Dyck and Eli Smith and native literati Bustânî and al-Yâziji. This was strictly a literary society, with clear intentions to remain free of religious controversy.<sup>82</sup> Over its five year span, they collected books and manuscripts in both Arabic and English and presented papers to each other with the aim of broadening each other's knowledge.<sup>83</sup>

Bustânî subsequently published a book with eighteen of the lectures from meetings of the society and called it *'Amāl al-Jam'iyyah al-Sūriyyah* (Works of the Syrian Society). A sample of lecture titles included in the book are, 'On the Pleasures of Knowledge and its Benefits', by Cornelius Van Dyck, 'The Origins of Natural Laws' and 'About the Flora', by Salim Nawfal, and 'The City of Beirut' and 'About Women's Education', by Bustânî. One of the more poignant and germane quotes from the series of lectures was from John Wortabet. In a lecture on educational development within Syria in the nineteenth century, he said, 'We have slept enough, if the dawn rises now, let us rise and awake with it. We have missed much and have much to accomplish before we achieve our goal and I wish I had a trumpet to startle this country [*bilād*], to awake its dweller.'<sup>84</sup> *Naḥḍâwî* characteristics are all too obvious in this quote and in this literary society.

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public 'rumpus' was the result of this open air 'discussion'. Salibi and Khoury, *The Missionary Herald*, Vol. 4, p. 293.

<sup>82</sup> Zachs, 'Toward a Proto-Nationalist Concept of Syria?', p. 160.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> John Wortabet, 'The Extant and Causes of Development of Education in Syria', *'Amāl al-Jam'iyyah al-Sūriyyah*, 1852, quoted in Zachs, 'Toward a Proto-Nationalist Concept of Syria?', pp. 166-167.

The influence of this society on Bustânî was great. He continued this literary society tradition. As an example, in 1867, he was involved with the teachers at his school, *al-Waṭaniyyah*, in the formation of *al-Jam'iyyah al-'ilmiyyah al-Sūriyyah* (The Syrian Scientific Society). This literary society, almost a replica of the 1842 Society, except with a much wider base of influence,<sup>85</sup> was fundamentally interconfessional in design and committed to the advancement of knowledge.<sup>86</sup>

## 7 Mission work in Syria was not sectarian

In regards to this research, the story of these literary societies tempers any propositions that the activities of the American missionaries and the native Protestants like Bustânî were strictly sectarian. While intimately aware of the inevitable sectarianism associated with the coming of a new religious denomination, Bustânî in partnership with the missionaries, observed, participated in, and promoted activities which engaged fully in line with his campaign for interconfessional solidarity. Moreover, these societies reveal that he was not only influenced in terms of ideas by the American missionaries, but he also influenced the missionary apparatus itself.

Bustânî's view of women gives evidence to the necessity of understanding Bustânî in light of the American missionaries and their thought. One of the main contributions of the American missionaries to the region was their promotion of education for girls. The missionaries regularly reported back to their American governing board on their progress in promoting female education – indicating the interest of their board in female education. The missionaries started and sustained schools for females which were successful and influential. It was the school established by Eli Smith that was the first to have a building for girls.<sup>87</sup> In one case, a mission report mentioned that a female school had 'suc-

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<sup>85</sup> Hanssen notes, 'Most of the members were Beirutis in their early twenties, but its network spanned from Istanbul to Damascus and Cairo.' See Hanssen, *Fin de Siecle Beirut*, p. 169.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, p. 39.

ceeded beyond all expectation'.<sup>88</sup> By 1860, nearly one fifth of their approximately 1000 school pupils were females.<sup>89</sup> By 1876, there were 819 girls in schools under the direction of the Syrian Presbyterian mission.<sup>90</sup>

Bustânî bore the mark of the missionaries' influence: his wife, who was a pupil of the wife of Eli Smith, was one of the few women in Syria who could read.<sup>91</sup> He also spoke ardently for women's rights:

Let us have strong hope that the sons of our nation will consider human decency (*al-âdâb*), and its subdivisions, wherein comes the truth. And let us hope that they delight to see [human decency] spread wide not only for men, but also for women, and that they regard the women as the mothers of the nations and civilizing them (*tamaddunhunna*) as the greatest blessing. This blessing is conditional on the civilizing (*tamaddun*) of the countries (*al-bilād*) and the success of the people, just as the lack of civilizing them [the women] is one of the greatest curses on the nation (*al-waṭan*). Up to this point, they [the sons of the nation] do not view their sisters as a part of the nation in regards to orientation (*al-mathhab*) and sexuality, rather in regards only to merit, preference, and 'national sisterhood' (*al-ikhwah al-waṭaniyyah*).<sup>92</sup>

Once again, we see Bustânî calling out to his people to liberate women, what he calls 'civilizing'. He desires that his countrymen honor women in light of their humanity and also their participation in the formation of the nation. In fact, to disregard women would be the greatest of curses on the progress of the nation. In this way, Bustânî connects his vision for Syrian patriotism with his progressive view on human rights. He argued this same theme in another lecture, 'About Women's Education', during the meeting of *al-Jam'iyyah al-Sūriyyah li-Iktisāb al-'Ulūm wal-Funūn*.<sup>93</sup>

It is in the light of the issue of education that we gain insight into the question of the relationship between the American missionaries and modernity in Syria. Did the missionaries 'bring' modernity? While that question is really the topic of another study altogether, we can say that

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<sup>88</sup> Salibi and Khoury, *The Missionary Herald*, Vol. 5, p. 92.

<sup>89</sup> Hafez, 'The Infrastructure of Cultural Transition', p. 53, and Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, p. 42.

<sup>90</sup> Jessup, *Fifty-three years*, Vol. 2, Appendix VI, p. 814.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 485.

<sup>92</sup> *Nafīr Sūriyya*, Issue IX, p. 50.

<sup>93</sup> Zachs, 'Toward a Proto-Nationalist Concept of Syria?', p. 166.

the missionaries significantly contributed to the early spread of modern education. They did this in a variety of ways: first, in cooperation with the native Protestants, such as Bustânî, they wrote textbooks for their schools. Second, they spread their liberal ideology of education which was in favor of female education, as evidenced by the influence of their ideology on Bustânî. Third, they incorporated in education their vision of an Arabic revival.

Ussama Makdisi essentially disregards the notion that the missionaries were simply, 'purveyors of modern medicine and print technology to natives who had neither'; instead, Makdisi argues that the missionaries brought 'evangelical modernity', which was a 'far more fragile process of staking out claims of cultural and historical belonging to the biblical land'.<sup>94</sup> Makdisi's argument, though, does not conflict with my argument that education is one way that the missionaries contributed to the interface of the region with modernity. In fact, what Makdisi calls 'evangelical modernity' was actually spread largely *by way of* informal and formal education, along with informal and formal intellectual gatherings, such as *al-Jam'iyyah al-Sūriyyah li-Iktisāb al-'Ulūm wal-Funūn*. What is important, which is brought out in Makdisi's work, is that the missionaries' chief contribution to modernity in the region was in the realm of ideas. The most emphatically influential of these ideas was the concept of Syria as a territory which had lost its biblical splendor due to cultural stagnation. It was, in fact, this very idea that Bustânî picked up and reinterpreted into a new ideology of Syrian patriotism.

It is said that in the 1840s Bustânî converted to Protestantism and in the 1850s he converted to Ottomanism.<sup>95</sup> It is better said that in the 1850s he *developed*, partly *out of* his relationship with the Protestants, his ideologies of Syrian patriotism, Ottomanism, and his passions for cultural revival and liberal reform. In other words, my research has shown that Bustânî did not convert away from Protestantism towards a more secular, intellectual agenda after the death of Eli Smith. In fact, his relationship with the missionary apparatus informed many aspects of his ideology. If the influence of the American mission is, therefore, indispensable in the thought of Bustânî, we hence return to the question of the exact relationship of the American missionaries with the Arab

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<sup>94</sup> Makdisi, 'Reclaiming the Land of the Bible', p. 681.

<sup>95</sup> Abu-Manneh, 'The Christians between Ottomanism and Syrian Nationalism', p. 89.



*Nahḍah*. While Bustânî manifests the climax of the missionaries' intellectual influence, he was merely one reformer in a broader, nascent liberal movement. Therefore, until more research brings to light evidence of equivalent missionary influence on Syrian intellectuals, we remain constrained mostly to Bustânî in our understanding of the impact of exchange between the friendship, culture and intellectualism of the missionaries with the native Syrian intellectuals; an exchange which was, as the former president of the American University in Beirut once remarked, 'one of the most influential movements during an important period of history'.<sup>96</sup>

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## A QUR'ĀNIC VIEW OF PATTERNS IN HISTORY

BY REV DR JOHN STRINGER

### 1 Introduction

This article aims to give an introduction to the theme of *historiography* in the Qur'ân and of how Muslims view history. The focus will be on how Islâm views patterns, or trends, in history. This will help us better understand the worldviews of those Muslims who endeavor to live their lives in accordance with the mind of the Qur'ân. I am aware of the 'lite' nature of this paper; it is mostly intended to introduce the theme.

We will approach this theme through the prism of three books by representative modern scholars of Islâm. These are *Stories of the Prophets from Adam to Muhammad* by the Egyptian Sunnî scholar Ahmed Bahgat, *Trends of History in the Qur'an*, by the Iraqi Shi'ite Ayatullah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, and *History of Muslim Historiography*, by the American Arabist Franz Rosenthal.<sup>1</sup>

### 2 Rosenthal and the historiography of the Qur'an

Rosenthal wrote a helpful introduction to our theme, as he begins his monumental book with a description of the historical sense in pre-

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmed Bahgat, *Stories of the Prophets from Adam to Muhammad* (Islamic Home Publishing and Distribution, Cairo, 1997). Bahgat's book contains the *imprimatur* of al-Azhar's General Department for Research, Writing and Translation. Ayatullah Baqir al-Sadr, *Trends of History in the Qur'an* (Al-Khoei Foundation, Karachi, 1990, 1991). Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (1935-1980) was an Iraqi Shi'a scholar. He wrote books such as *Iqtisâdunâ* (Our Economics), the first clear exposition of Islamic economics in the modern context. He was also the first to introduce the thematic approach to Qur'anic exegesis that sought to understand the Qur'ân's philosophies on societal issues facing the modern Muslim community. In 1977, he was sentenced to life in prison following uprisings in Najaf, but was released two years later due to his immense popularity. Upon his release however, he was put under house arrest. In 1980, after writing in the defense of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Sadr was once again imprisoned, tortured, and executed by the regime of Saddam Hussein. Franz Rosenthal, *History of Muslim Historiography* (E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1968). Rosenthal taught Near Eastern languages at Yale University in New Haven (CT) in the USA.

Islamic Arabia. The two major forms of literary expression in pre-Islamic Arabia were the literature of great battles and that of genealogy. Some of that material might have been written down at times, but none of the preserved material would seem even remotely to be based upon written sources.<sup>2</sup>

The battle-day narratives were only fully accepted as historical literature by Arab historians in the 13<sup>th</sup> century; before that, these stories were seen as belonging to the realm of philology and *belle lettres*. They contained historical elements, but they 'entirely lack continuity. They are not viewed under the aspect of historical cause and effect, and they are essentially timeless'.<sup>3</sup>

Pre-Islamic genealogy among the Arabs was even less significant than the battle-day narratives as a form of historical expression, although they are indicative of some form of historical sense. Only in unusual cases did the pre-Islamic traditions of genealogies contain references to historical events. After the coming of Islam, the existent genealogies became more important, as this new religion created an interest in the genealogies of all peoples at all times. This enabled 'genealogy to activate its historical potential', according to Rosenthal.<sup>4</sup>

The Christians and Jews who lived in Arabia had their own Scriptural stories, but they probably did not have a better-developed historical mind than the pagan Arabs who surrounded them. 'Still, they held the key which in the person of Muḥammad opened for the Muslims the way to a historical view of life.'<sup>5</sup>

The religious views of Muḥammad contained important historical elements. He proclaimed that in the future, all people would be judged by Allāh for the deeds done in their lives. And that he stood in a long line of prophets who had been sent to different peoples throughout history. According to Rosenthal:

The stimulus which Muḥammad's historical ideas could give, and later on, actually did give to the occupation with history could not have been any

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<sup>2</sup> Rosenthal *History of Muslim Historiography*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

stronger. The actions of individuals, the events of the past, the circumstances of all peoples of the earth had now become matters of religious importance.<sup>6</sup>

A practical incentive for Muslims to study history was the abundance of pseudo-historical data in the Qur'ân. Much of that information was historically erroneous, but the Prophet of Islâm certainly planted the seeds for a wide interest in history among his followers.<sup>7</sup>

### **3 Bahgat: Life of Muhammad as yardstick**

The Qur'ân itself present us with a clear sense of history. The belief that mankind lives in between creation and judgment, reflects a linear view of history. This linearity is expressed most clearly in Islâm's view of the role of prophets throughout history.

Ahmed Bahgat focuses on this role of prophets and the Qur'ânic view of those prophets. The problem Bahgat faced in writing these prophets' lives based on the Qur'ân, was that 'the Qur'an is not a history book. The incidents of the stories are not chronologically written.'<sup>8</sup> This does not mean that from what the Qur'ân says about the prophets, no general view of history can be distilled.

Muḥammad was send by Allâh as a prophet 'when the light of monotheism was extinguished in the east and the west, and the intellect was lost in stark darkness'.<sup>9</sup> Bahgat describes that Christianity 'had lost the language of love, pagan elements had infiltrated into some of their sects, and monotheism was inflicted with untold infidelity. The Jews had abandoned the legacy of Moses and reverted to the worship of the golden calf, and each of the sought private wealth. Paganism invaded the world, the intellect was stifled, Allah was forgotten and generations surrendered to the imposters.'<sup>10</sup>

Muslims consider Muḥammad to be the supreme and the last prophet; prophets before him had been send 'according to the need of their times',

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Bahgat, *Stories of the Prophets from Adam to Muhammad*, p. ix.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 414.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 421-2.

but Muḥammad was sent as a mercy 'for the whole universe', and as the very last prophet until the Day of Judgment.<sup>11</sup> Before the advent of Muḥammad 'humankind had not reached maturity in its surrender to Allah nor maturity in character', according to Bahgat.

The history of mankind is therefore divided in 'before Muḥammad' and 'after Muḥammad'. More precisely, the emigration (*Hijrah*) of Muḥammad to Madīnah became the dividing line in history. The *Annum Hegira* (AH) is decisive in world history, Muslims believe.

The fact that Muḥammad is seen as wholly different from all previous prophets does not mean that there is no parallelism between his mission and that of his predecessors. His life is the yardstick for the description of all prophets in the Qur'ān, possibly because Muḥammad himself tried to prove his credibility by showing the Arabs that all prophets before him paralleled the ups and downs in his life and mission.

The message of these prophets was similar to that of Muḥammad.<sup>12</sup> They were sent to 'prove the revelation and message of Allah or to illustrate that religion in its entirety from Adam to Muhammad comes from Allah. That all believers form one nation with Allah as their Lord and Master. That all revealed religions from the time of Adam until the time of Muhammad have one source. All the prophets brought the same message: 'there is no deity worthy of worship except Allah, Who has no partner'. The approaches the prophets used in calling people to Allah are the same. However, the prophets differed in their speech and language when addressing their respective communities.<sup>13</sup>

Bahgat says that in his writing of the stories of the prophets, their 'infallibility [...] was my main concern the whole time.' He rejected the 'myths and fables of the Old Testament', obviously as these stories showed the prophets as fallible human beings.<sup>14</sup> Prophets are 'the purest of human beings'.<sup>15</sup> Allāh selected them as 'He knew their past actions and knew that they were the purest and best. He knew that they were the best of mind and heart.'<sup>16</sup> The prophets were perfect, says Bahgat:

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 414.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 414-5.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. ix.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

These prophets never committed mistakes concerning what Allah sent them to accomplish. They were infallible, somehow above wrongdoing. They neither committed minor sins nor major sins, either before or after their missions. They were on a level of perfection (...) a level we can never dream of attaining.<sup>17</sup>

The concept that world history consists of a sequence of prophets, and that with the coming of the prophet Muḥammad a final stage of history has been reached, is helpful for the development of a historical consciousness. The idea of consecutive prophets creates a historical 'spine' to the nebulous mass of events in the world. On the other hand, the super-human perfection of these prophets militates against writing a serious history of these individuals; its basis is so unhistorical that it places their histories outside the boundaries of critical scholarship.

The stories of the prophets illustrate the similarity in the way how their people received them: They were all met with disbelief, accusation, harm and evil.<sup>18</sup> The life of the prophets was often difficult, as they had to stand up against the people and their rulers in order to proclaim monotheism. The prophet's stories deal with things like 'the conflict between good and evil'. These forces of darkness which are trained, organized and concentrated against the forces of goodness, which are few, scattered and beaten.<sup>19</sup> The single threat through all prophets' stories is conflict:

No prophet starts his call without the whole world suddenly turning against him. His peace, safety and livelihood are gone and he is attacked. Before his mission the prophet lived in great peace on the outside, but lived with great worry on the inside.<sup>20</sup>

'The greatest in Allah's sight is the one who suffered the most', says Bahgat.<sup>21</sup> According to him, hardships are an unchangeable divine rule.<sup>22</sup> However, in the end, Allāh blessed all prophets and they all of them were successful.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 10-11.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 17-18.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 19.



In the stories of the prophets, the angel Gabriel (Jibrîl) frequently appears, as the Spirit who conveyed heavenly revelations on earth. When he appears, Allâh's mercy appears, and a prophet is sent to his people and a book from Allâh is revealed.<sup>23</sup> The archenemy is Iblîs, the worst creature on earth, who supports all the evils, injustices and sins committed on earth.<sup>24</sup> He is the symbol of evil.<sup>25</sup>

The fact that vast spiritual forces inhabit the universe does not mean that human beings are not able to freely choose how to live. There is a 'vast scope of freedom of will. This scope includes the responsibility of choice in which there is room for questioning', says Bahgat.<sup>26</sup>

#### **4 The historical views of Ayatullah Baqir al-Sadr**

Ayatullah Baqir al-Sadr, a shi'ite theologian, was known for his support for what he termed 'topical exegesis' of the Qur'ân. His definition of this shows that he actually means what in Christian theology is termed Systematic Theology. 'The topical commentator concentrates his investigations on some particular subject of life, dealt with by the Qur'ân, whether the subject is doctrinal, social or universal, and ascertains the views of the Qur'ân about it.'<sup>27</sup>

Baqir's first practiced his 'topical exegesis' in writing about trends in history according to the Qur'ân. His main interest in developing his historical views based on the Qur'ân, was in order to support change in Islamic societies in accordance with the revolutionary views of the regime in Iran since 1979.

According to Baqir, the Qur'ân teaches that 'societies are governed by some fixed and unchangeable laws. The Qur'ân has laid much stress on this point.'<sup>28</sup> He mentioned three major 'categories' of Qur'ânic verses about this theme:

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 8

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 59-60.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

1. The verses which lay down a general rule – the Qur’ân says: *Every nation has a term; when it comes, they cannot put it back a single hour, nor can they put it forward.* (Q 7:34). This is a universal law of history.
2. There are other verses that refer to the consequences of injustice and oppression. One of the says: *If Allah took people to task by that which they deserve, He would not leave a single living creature on the surface of the earth; but He reprieves them to an appointed time.* (Q 35:45) Allâh gives societies respite, and one should not expect a quick change in society, for social changes have their own appointed time under the laws governing them.
3. Some verses of the Qur’ân exhort people to study historical events and carry out investigations about them. In this connection there are several verses of similar wording. One of them says: *Have they not traveled in the land to see what happened to those who were before them? Allah wiped them out. And for the disbelievers there will be the like thereof.* (Q 47:10)<sup>29</sup> From this verse it becomes clear that society is governed by fixed and unchangeable laws and norms.<sup>30</sup>

This view of societies being ruled by divine laws is linked to the Islâmic concept that Allâh has sent his prophets to each nation. When nations forget Allâh and transgress against his laws, he sent prophets to call them back to Islâm. If people do not obey, they will suffer the consequences. The Qur’ân says that ‘those who violate the norms of history are bound to be punished but in due course. The quickness of the punishment of relative [but] it will come soon’.<sup>31</sup>

Baqir considers this trend in society as normative, because he believes this trend to be based on the historical norms of the Qur’ân. These historical norms have three basic characteristics:

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

1. They are universal, as Q 35:43 says: *You will not find for Divine Law any substitute, nor will you find in Divine Law any change.*<sup>32</sup>
2. The laws of society have a divine aspect, but ‘the divine method and practice passes exactly through the same channels as the system of causes and effects. The only thing is that while we accept what science says about the causative and other systems, we also believe that all systems ultimately depend on Allah.’<sup>33</sup>
3. The laws of history are not inconsistent with human freedom. Q 13:11 says: *Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change that which is in their hearts.* It is a divine law that people will have one destiny if they do not change and stick to their old habits and customs.<sup>34</sup>

These laws of history are ‘fixed and invariable’.<sup>35</sup> But as the second and third law that Baqir mentioned allow for human freedom and admit the existence of ‘natural’ causality, these ‘laws’ should encourage people to obey the messengers sent to their nations, and to follow Islām. According to Baqir:

[It] is a divine practice that if any nation or the people of any country disobey the commandment of Allah, they are destroyed. The cause of their destruction is not Allah’s sovereign power alone. They are destroyed because of their own doings.<sup>36</sup>

Allāh has placed everything of the world at the disposal of man as a trust. All problems are automatically solved, when man follows that course.<sup>37</sup> When societies suffer from problems, it is because they do not follow Islām.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-12.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

According to Baqir, declining societies, where Islâm is not followed, follow a historical cycle in four stages. It seems he describes modern secular societies here, predicting their downfall if Islâm is not adopted:

1. They may have a relative ideal, and they may obtain some positive results as far as material wealth is concerned (Q 17:18, *Whoever desires this worldly gain, We hasten for him in this world that We will and for whom We please.*)
2. After they have achieved their objective, the second stage comes, which is a stage of pause.
3. But as man may not be without an ideal for long, they choose some prominent personalities from among them as their ideal. Q 33:67 – *They say: Our Lord, we obeyed our chiefs and elders, and they misled us from the way.* As a result these leaders begin to lead a luxurious life. In order to keep their wealth and position, they resist every reform. Q 43:23 – *We never sent a warner before you (Muhammad) to any township, but its luxurious ones said...* So: whenever a prophet comes, he is first of all opposed by the very wealthy class.
4. When the wealthy class becomes so oppressive it deprives society of the fruits of civilization and destroy their resources. They create disorder, which destroys their own society.<sup>38</sup>

Based on the Qur'ân, Baqir also proposes a sociology. An ideal society is the Islâmic, 'divine', society, which is blessed with the quality of homogeneity.<sup>39</sup> If a society is not Islâmic, it is 'Pharaonic'; that is a society where not Islam but the evil rulers of this world dictate. Baqir describes how that society is divided into six different classes of people. He speaks of:

1. The despised class – those people who depend on the despots. (Q 34:31)

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 38-39.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 47

2. The rulers' favorites and advisors. (Q 7:127)
3. Those with no goals or ideals, mostly illiterates, backward and poor people who need to be guided in the right direction. (Q 33:67)
4. People who understand the unjust despots but who keep quiet. (Q 4:97)
5. Those who withdraw from society; they should work to reconstruct society instead. (Q 9:34)
6. Underprivileged who stand up against the tyranny. If they rise up, they always gain victory. (Q 28:5)

This stereotyping of societies and the changes they go through seems to be an Islâmic response to the 'scientific' stratifications of society and the patterns on history as proposed by Marxism. Iran and Iraq have known strong socialist movements before Islâmism became the popular vehicle for resistance against autocratic governments.

## 5 Conclusions

The fact that Islâm views Allâh as the Creator in the past, as the present Sustainer of life, and as the future Judge, has created a linear view of history, and enabled the development of a 'view of history'. History is seen as a sequence of societies that are ruled by certain divine laws, and that are visited by prophets for the sake of calling these societies back to obedience to Islâm.

This view of history is part and parcel of what it means to be a Muslim. Therefore, in order to understand 'the Arab mind', more understanding of this historical aspect of their worldview is of importance. This does not only give us insight in what Muslims believe about their past, but it also shows us how they view the world they presently live in.

## CRACKS IN THE FOUNDATION OF ISLAM?

BY DUANE ALEXANDER MILLER

### 1 Introduction

In this paper I will first summarize the information in the Camel Training Manual (CTM)<sup>1</sup>. Specifically, all the information I am using here is from *Appendix 1: Islam Today*, pp 75-93. The appendix itself is a challenging piece of writing, because it contains information from many different sources and it is not always clearly referenced. Also, it is a training manual, like the name says, so it was not necessarily composed with academia in mind. Finally, I don't know who put it together—there is no indication of an author anywhere.

Nonetheless, it is interesting material and worth our attention; it is obviously from someone working in South or Southeast Asia. My own research involves, among other things, trying to discern why it is that after 800+ years of preaching missions to *Dâr al-Islâm*, it is only in the last few decades that we are seeing a substantial and perhaps surprising increase in conversions from Islâm to Christianity, or conversion within Islâm to being an Muslim follower of Jesus—sometimes also called Insiders, 'Isâ Muslims or Messianic Muslims. I will therefore summarize the info in the CTM and then offer some additional comments and observations.

### 2 Summary from the Camel Training Manual

The CMT author identifies eleven indicators that in his judgment show that 'Islam's foundation is cracking'. (p. 75) I am always suspicious of this sort of language though - when I look at Europe and North America I actually feel like Christianity's foundation is cracking. And let us not forget that predictions of Islâm's demise have been premature in the past;

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.gracecommunitychurch.org.uk/resources/CamelTrainingManual.pdf](http://www.gracecommunitychurch.org.uk/resources/CamelTrainingManual.pdf) (accessed May 13 2009).

no less a great mind than Samuel Zwemer wrote a book called *The Disintegration of Islam* all the way back in 1916<sup>2</sup>, and let us just say that far from disintegrating Islâm has grown a great deal—growth in terms of numbers and power, for what that's worth.

In any case here are the proposed indicators of cracks in the Foundation of Islâm:

1. **Spotlight:** After 9/11 Islâm was literally forced to become part of the popular mind, in that it was no longer a topic one could simply dismiss or ignore.
2. **Cloud of Shame:** Terrorism and Islâm are becoming synonymous, causing some Muslims to ask difficult questions.
3. **No Borders:** Some closed countries have recently become open to the presence of Christian missionaries.
4. **Reformation:** With the translation of the *Qur'ân* into many popular languages under the initiative of former King Fahd of Saudi Arabia<sup>3</sup>, many Muslims can now read the book and find it, let us say, less than satisfying. These translations along with the fact that the *aḥadâth* (pl. of *ḥadīth*) are available online for free represent a decentralization of power, out of the hands of scholars and religious leaders. 'Muslim laymen are reading the Koran in their heart language and discovering that what their Imams have been teaching them is not aligned with the Koran.' (p. 78)
5. **Last Two Decades:** 'More Muslims have come to Christ in the last two decades than at any other time in Islamic history.' (p. 80) Each year 900,000 Muslims...cross over into Christianity.
6. **Abundant Tools:** abundant and effective tools, such as:
  - a. Use of *Qur'ân* in evangelism
  - b. Muslim-friendly Bibles and tracts
  - c. The Jesus Film in local languages
  - d. Radio ministry targeting Muslims
  - e. Audio cassette distribution

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<sup>2</sup> Which you can download at [www.archive.org/details/disintegrationof00zwem](http://www.archive.org/details/disintegrationof00zwem) (accessed 13 May 2009).

<sup>3</sup> For more info see <http://www.kingfahdbinabdulaziz.com/main/m600.htm>.

7. **Increasing Missionary Force:** ‘Between 1982 and 2001, missionaries<sup>4</sup> working with Muslims have nearly doubled from an estimated 15,000 to somewhere in excess of 27,000.’ (p. 82) In 1978 two events occurred that helped to publicize ‘how many Muslims lived in the shadow of Islam and how many workers and resources were needed.’ (p. 82). Those events were:
  - a. The publication of the *Glen Eyrie report* on Muslim Evangelization to the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism.
  - b. The decision by Brother Andrew, head of Open Doors ministry<sup>5</sup>, to engage the Middle East and the Muslim world. September 11 is also mentioned as an event that increased the number of people interested in being missionaries in the Muslim World.
8. **Back to Jerusalem:** An initiative by the Asian churches, especially Chinese and Korean, to evangelize Westward, roughly following the old Silk Road, thus planting churches and making converts, so that the Gospel will eventually, after it’s long Westward meandering to Europe, North America, and then East Asia, reach back to Jerusalem.
9. **The Burden of the Indian Church in the USA**
10. **Dreams:** Muslim converts often reference dreams or visions. There are four recurring themes:
  - a. ‘Empowering dreams give boldness and strength to endure persecution.’ (p. 85).
  - b. Visions of heaven, or messages from heaven.
  - c. Healing through dreams.
  - d. ‘Dreams that send Muslims on a journey that leads them to the Truth about the prophet Isa.’ (p. 89).
11. **Church Planting Movements:** A CPM is ‘a rapid and multiplicative increase of indigenous churches planting churches within

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<sup>4</sup> I’m not certain of this, but I presume this refers only to Protestant/evangelical/charismatic missionaries, and would thus not include Catholic religious, say. The figure appears to be from this article (accessed 13 May 2009) <http://dawnbible.com/2003/0310-hl.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Founded in 1955, this ministry originally focused on distributing Bibles (sometimes smuggling them in) behind the Iron Curtain. Brother Andrew wrote about this in his now-classic book *God’s Smuggler*.



a given people group or population segment'.<sup>6</sup> 'In Northern Africa, 16,000 Muslims converted to Christianity', and in one South Asian country '[f]rom 1998-2003, 150,000 Muslims have come to faith'. (p. 92) According to David Garrison, an authority on CPM's, 'the past decade has seen more than 13,000 Kazakhs come to faith worshipping in more than 300 new Kazakh churches'. (p. 93)

### 3 Observations and Comments

*Appendix 1: Islam Today* offers us a brief glimpse at how one community evaluates the weaknesses of Islâm. On the whole the document is optimistic and, as I implied in the introduction, perhaps too optimistic. That is one observation of mine. The second is that while a couple of dates and events are mentioned, a lot has been left out. And thirdly, some of the factors he mentions are also strengths of Islâm, and the author does not take this into account. Let me deal with the topics one by one:

**Spotlight:** I agree that this is a key issue—Islâm cannot be ignored anymore. Whatever opinion one comes to regarding this venerable civilization/religion/empire, several things have happened in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in this new century that have focused attention on Islâm more than ever. I would add a few things to his list—it's not just about 9/11. There have been other events that drew the West's attention to the Muslim world like the Second Arab Oil Embargo (1973-74) and the Iran Hostage Crisis (1979-81), not to mention the terror attacks in Europe, in London (2005) and Madrid (2004). Those are just a few things that could be added, but clearly if we only go back to 2001, as important as that date was, then we lose the awareness that this has been an incremental increase in attention and awareness.

I also think we should recognize that the press, governmental organizations, and Islâmic societies have done a fine job of portraying Islâm in a positive light, insisting that terror is not in any substantial or important

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<sup>6</sup> According to the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. Accessed 13 May 2009, [www.imb.org/CPM/Glossary.htm](http://www.imb.org/CPM/Glossary.htm).

way linked to Islâm, the *Qur'ân*, or the Prophet. On the one hand, my experience tells me that people are finding that those explanations are wearing thin. On the other hand though, this increased exposure to Islâm has functioned, at times, as free publicity, and just as Muslims have converted to Christianity, the sword cuts both ways, and Christians have converted to Islâm as well for a number of reasons.

**Cloud of Shame:** I agree with CTM's assessment on this. But this also leads us to some dangerous ground. Some Muslims start to doubt Islâm because of it, but other Muslims simply become more convinced that the 'shame' surrounding Islâm today is the result of Islâmophobia—they feel like they are in a corner and are the victims of a huge attempt to discredit what is to them, very obviously, the pinnacle of human history. When someone is convinced that they are the ultimate victim, then any act of violence, including 9/11, becomes self-defense.

**No Borders:** I'm not sure that I agree with this. The author points to Iraq and Afghanistan as examples. Afghanistan certainly is more open to Christians now than under the Taliban, but it is hard to see that as a major success, as the country—if one can call it that—teeters on the edge of anarchy. Also, regarding Iraq, I would say that the huge exodus of indigenous Christians is more harmful to Christian mission than whatever benefit we see from Westerners going there. I say that with some reservation though, because who knows what will happen in the future? Perhaps I will be wrong, if Iraq can become a stable republic with something resembling democracy and human rights, where Muslims can legally convert to Christianity (and I do not think this will happen—human rights grew out of the Judeo-Christian soil of Europe, and cannot be transplanted to the arid soil of *Dâr al-Islâm*). Other countries in *Dâr al-Islâm* (Pakistan, Yemen) teeter on the edge of disintegration (think Somalia), as their population growth far outpaces their development of agriculture and natural resources. I would then project more failed states in *Dâr al-Islâm*, and failed states are very difficult places for Western missionaries to function.

**Reformation:** I suppose there is a question about how one interprets the Protestant Reformation. Of course, some Muslim scholars don't appre-

ciate the comparison at all, and to be honest most evangelicals have a very shallow and inadequate understand of the actual historical events that transpired in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. That having been said, his central point about what I would call the decentralization of hermeneutical authority—in this case away from the ‘*ulamá*’ and into the hands of the average Muslim—is certainly a positive development and indeed is a legitimate parallel with the 16<sup>th</sup> century European reformations. Moreover, the *aḥādīth* are now available online and contain much information about the life of the Prophet and the early *ummah* that many Muslims have not previously had ready access to. If we look at the testimonies of ex-Muslims, including both converts to Christianity and especially converts to secularism/humanism/agnosticism/deism/atheism, we find a recurring theme: actually reading the Qur’ān and the *aḥādīth* is often a key step in their apostasy<sup>7</sup>.

We find statements like, ‘After reading the Koran a few times I started wondering about some of the verses. There were things in the Koran that were making me nervous, also the many stories about Muhammad were also cause for concern...’ (Ibn Warraq, p. 119). Other ex-Muslims are much more direct with their language: ‘After converting [to Islām ...] I read translations of the *hadith* on the Internet. I was often disturbed by them. In some cases the Prophet is described as brutal, not exactly Christlike.’ (p. 125) Or this: ‘Then I read the Koran for the first time critically. It was a disgusting book full of hatred and intolerance.’ (p. 128) Or finally, ‘It slowly dawned on me that the Koran was not the infallible, immutable word of God, but a fascist slur on humanity’. (p. 130), and examples could be multiplied *ad infinitum*.

**Last Two Decades:** My problem with this is that it is not necessarily false, but it paints an incomplete picture. Islām is growing faster than Christianity, because Muslims have more children than Christians. It is that simple. Nowhere is there a mention of the very real, very concerning demographic realities the world is facing: poor, Muslim countries have quickly-growing populations, and those countries cannot feed or supply water, education, or jobs for those people. Some will emigrate, others will turn to Christ, and others will turn to terrorism. Europe is

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<sup>7</sup> A voluminous collection of such testimonies can be found in Ibn Warraq (ed), *Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak Out* (Prometheus Books 2004).

quickly becoming an Islâmic society and there is no possibility, in my view, of reversing this trend. The West has opted for hedonism, abortion, and birth control, and Western Europe has consequentially made a collective, if perhaps not entirely conscious, decision to eliminate itself. That is the reality, and it will happen. Where are the cracks in the foundations of Islâm when we consider this reality? Whatever the number of Muslims who convert to Christianity may be, it is certainly smaller than the number of new Muslims born on a given day.

**Abundant Tools:** I agree with the author—a more sensitive and informed presentation of the Gospel has made a big difference. One glaring omission though is that he left out the internet, which has had a huge impact.

**Increasing Missionary Force:** I agree with the author that many more people are considering missionary work in the Muslim World than ever before. But there are still some very real concerns: missionaries are like other professionals, meaning that today there is a real possibility of changing careers after a few years. Is it really better to have five missionaries who are learning Arabic and getting familiar with the local culture and who will leave after five years than to have one missionary who has mastered the language and spent many years in the region? It is an error to assume that more is better; indeed sometimes more is not better, as inexperienced short-term missionaries can at times create more trouble than benefit. I would also point out that the now-popular short-term missions are a very resource-intensive (i.e., expensive) form of ministry that is generally speaking not a good fit for the Muslim world. It is one thing to send folks to build a church in Mexico, it is another to send them to Morocco or Jordan or Pakistan.

**Back to Jerusalem:** I think it is too early to see how fruitful B2J will ultimately be. Evangelical mission have been run like American businesses for decades now. What will be the outcome of a much less structured approach as lived out by the Chinese faithful, who also have fewer financial resources?

**The Burden of Indian Churches in the USA:** To be honest I know nothing about this topic.

**Dreams:** I agree that dreams and visions are a major element in what is going on today in the Muslim World. Many Muslims who commit to following Christ - either within Islâm or as Christians - explain that dreams or a dream/vision were one of the main things that brought about conversion.

**CPM's:** The research behind CPM's indicates that this strategy is indeed much more promising than what was previously the custom—bringing the MBB's into the local Christian church. That was very difficult for the local Christians who had often suffered centuries of abuse at the hands of Islâm, and it was difficult for the MBB's, as the different cultural and linguistic customs were not easily assimilable. In terms of mission to the Muslim world, a major breakthrough would be a CPM among Muslim Arabs, and that has never happened. Certainly, developments among the Berbers and Bengalis and others are encouraging, but Islâm comes with a culture and a language - and both are Arabic.

## 4 Conclusion

In conclusion I believe that the author's conclusion that there are cracks in the foundation of Islâm are premature. Even if the number of conversions to Christ tripled or quadrupled it would still be a very minute number in comparison with the total Islâmic population. Nevertheless, this unattributed Appendix provides some rare insights into the small but growing number of Muslims who convert to Christianity.