

# **The Qur'ān in Christian Thought:**

## **Reflections from an Historical Perspective**

**by The Reverend Sidney H. Griffith**

Christians have been familiar with the Arabic Qur'ān from the very beginning of Islam, for Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians were in the audience to whom Muḥammad addressed the speech of his Lord that God commanded him to proclaim (XCVI *al-'Alaq* 1) in good, clear Arabic (XVI *an-Naḥl* 103 & XXVI *ash-Shu'ara'* 195). After the Arab occupation of the territories of the major Christian centers in the east (the patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem) in the second third of the seventh century, where the dominant learned and liturgical languages had been Greek, Aramaic, Syriac, and Coptic, non-Arab Christians quickly learned Arabic and within a century they were translating their scriptures, other church books and Christian religious classics from their original languages into Arabic.<sup>1</sup> They also began to write Christian theology, and apologetic and polemical tracts in Arabic.<sup>2</sup> And as we shall see, from the very beginning of the spread of Islam, in spite of the stipulation in the *Covenant of 'Umar* to the effect that Christians would not teach the Qur'ān to their children,<sup>3</sup> the Arabic scripture nevertheless very soon made its presence felt in Christian Arabic thought and writing. Christian authors not only referred to the Qur'ān, and quoted from it, they also borrowed

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<sup>1</sup> See Sidney H. Griffith, "From Aramaic to Arabic: The Languages of the Monasteries of Palestine in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Periods," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 51 (1997), pp. 11-31.

<sup>2</sup> See Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008). See also Martin Tamcke, *Christen in der islamischen Welt; von Mohammed bis zur Gegenwart* (München: Verlag C.H.Beck, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> See A.S. Tritton, *The Caliphs and their Non-Muslim Subjects: A Critical Study of the Covenant of 'Umar* (London: Frank Cass, 1970 [c.1930]), p. 8; Antoine Fattal, *Le statut legal des non-musulmans en pays d'islam* (Beyrouth: Imprimerie Catholique, 1958), p. 61.

its religious vocabulary, customarily employed some of its more memorable phrases in their ordinary parlance, and even used quotations from the Arabic scripture in their apologies for Christian faith.

It was not until about the ninth century that Christians began to make translations of the Arabic Qur'ān into their ancestral, ecclesiastical languages. Within the World of Islam, Christian scholars translated major portions of the Qur'ān into Syriac; outside of that world, in Constantinople, as early as the mid-800's, a Greek translation was in circulation.<sup>4</sup> In the twelfth century, Peter the Venerable (c.1094-1156), the influential abbot of Cluny, commissioned the first translation of the Islamic scripture into Latin,<sup>5</sup> followed somewhat later by other Latin translations.<sup>6</sup> In the fifteenth century, relying on the available Latin translations, Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) wrote the earliest western, Christian commentary on the Qur'ān, proceeding from the perspective of an apologist for Christianity.<sup>7</sup> It was then not long after the Reformation in the sixteenth century that interpretations in modern western languages began to appear.<sup>8</sup>

The purpose of the present essay is not to discuss the Christian translations of the Arabic Qur'ān, especially those done into western languages such as Greek or Latin. These versions, while sometimes carefully done, were nevertheless often used in harsh

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<sup>4</sup> For Syriac, see Alphonse Mingana, "An Ancient Syriac Translation of the Qur'ān Exhibiting New Verses and Variants," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 9 (1925), pp. 188-235. Mingana somewhat implausibly argued for a translation already in the seventh century. For more information on the text discussed by Mingana, see now Joseph P. Amar (ed. & trans.), *Dionysius Bar Ṣalībī: A Response to the Arabs* (CSCO, vols. 614 & 615; Lovanii: In Aedibus Peeters, 2005), third tract, chaps. 24-30. For the early Greek translation, see now Astérios Argyriou, "Perceptions de l'islam et traductions du coran dans le monde byzantin grec," *Byzantion* 75 (2005), pp. 25-69.

<sup>5</sup> See James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964).

<sup>6</sup> See Thomas E. Burman, *Reading the Qur'ān in Latin Christendom, 1140-1560* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> See Jasper Hopkins (trans.), *Nicholas of Cusa's De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani: Translation and Analysis* (Minneapolis, MN: A.J. Banning Press, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> See Hartmut Bobzin, "Translations of the Qur'ān," in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (6 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2001-2006), vol. V, pp. 340-358.

and uninformed, anti-Islamic polemical texts, whose authors were interested only in demonstrating what they perceived to be the errors and misconceptions in the text.<sup>9</sup> Rather, the purpose here is first of all, after a quick recollection of the Qur'ān's critique of the faith and practice of the Christians in its milieu, to turn our attention secondly to the attitude of Arabic-speaking Christians in the early Islamic period to the Arabic Qur'ān and their use of it in their own theological, apologetic and polemical treatises and tracts in Arabic. Thirdly, after a brief consideration of the views of several modern Christian readers of the Qur'ān, who have taken the Muslim scripture religiously seriously, the purpose is to explore ways in which Christians in the twenty-first century in the west might profitably read interpretations of the Qur'ān in their own languages with religious understanding and in service of the quest for a Christian/Muslim *modus convivendi*.

## I

### **The Qur'ān's Critique of Christians**

Scholars sometimes say that the event of the Arab conquest is the “historical fact that set the stage on which the meeting between Islam and Christianity took place.”<sup>10</sup> Such was surely the case from the point of view of the earliest recorded Christian response to the rise of Islam, but there is an earlier record of the encounter. It is clear from the Qur'ān itself that Arabic-speaking Christians were in the audience to whom the

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<sup>9</sup> See the still standard accounts in Théodore Adel Houry, *Polémique Byzantine contre l'Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1972); Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1960; published in a revised ed., Oxford: One World, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Rémi Brague, *The Legend of the Middle Ages: Philosophical Explorations of Medieval Christianity, Judaism, and Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 193.

Islamic scripture was first addressed.<sup>11</sup> In general, they are included among the ‘Scripture People’ (*ahl al-kitāb*), who are mentioned some fifty-four times, but Christians are also called ‘Nazarenes’ (*an-naṣārā*) fourteen times, and once, in *al-Mā’idah* (V):47, the Qur’ān speaks of them as ‘Gospel People’ (*ahl al-injīl*). The name ‘Christians’ (*al-Masīḥiyyūn* in Arabic) never actually appears in the Qur’ān.<sup>12</sup> The Qur’ān’s stance toward the Christians is best described as a religious critique. Within the context of an over-all approbation of the Christians as a tolerable ‘Scripture People’, the Arabic scripture critiques both their doctrine and their practice. Perhaps the most comprehensive verse to this effect is the following one:

O Scripture People, do not go to excess in your religion, and do not say about God anything but the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, Mary’s son, is only God’s messenger, and His word, which He cast into Mary, and a spirit from Him. So, believe in God and in His messengers, and do not say, ‘Three’; it is better for you to stop it. God is but a single God. Praise be to Him, He has no off-spring, neither in the heavens, nor on the earth. He suffices as a guardian. (*an-Nisā* (IV):171)

From the Qur’ān’s point of view, the principal way in which the Christians go to excess in their doctrines is precisely in what they say about Jesus, the Messiah: “They have disbelieved who say that God is the Messiah, the son of Mary.” (*al-Mā’idah* (V):72) In this way, according to the Qur’ān, the Christians, with their confession that Jesus of

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<sup>11</sup> See Sidney H. Griffith, “Christians and Christianity,” in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān* (6 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2001-2006), vol. I, pp. 307-316.

<sup>12</sup> On this subject, see Sidney H. Griffith, “*al-Naṣārā* in the Qur’ān: Hermeneutical Reflections,” forthcoming in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), QHC II.

Nazareth is God and the Son of God, have gone to excess and followed the whims of those who in the past had gone astray from the even path (cf. *al-Mā'idah* (V):77). For, as the Qur'ān also clearly teaches, "God is one, God the everlasting; He has neither generated nor is He generated; He has none to equal Him." (*al-Ikhlāṣ* (CXII):1-4) From the Qur'ān's point of view, it is due their basic mistake about Jesus that Christians wrongly speak of God in terms of 'three': "They have disbelieved who say that God is treble; there is only one God." (*al-Mā'idah* (V):73)

In terms of their behavior, the Qur'ān lists the Christians among the socially tolerable 'Scripture People', as long as they pay the poll tax and maintain a humble social profile (cf. *at-Tawbah* (IX):29).<sup>13</sup> They are presented as the closest of the 'Scripture People' in affection to the believers (cf. *al-Mā'idah* (V):82), but the Christians will not be pleased until the believers would follow their religion (cf. *al-Baqarah* (II):120). Christians take teachers and monks, along with the Messiah, as Lords, and they are greedy (cf. *at-Tawbah* (IX):31 & 34). It was the Christians, not God, who invented monasticism, but they even then have not observed it properly (*al-Ḥadīd* (LVII):27) They distort the scriptures and twist their meanings (cf. *al-Baqarah* (II): 75-79; *al-Mā'idah* 12-19), so the Muslims should not take them or the Jews as friends/patrons/allies. (cf. *al-Mā'idah* (V):51 & 57)

But the Christian presence in the Qur'ān is not limited to direct religious critique and inter-religious controversy, albeit that the so-called, Medinan *sūrah*s make it clear that controversy with Jews, Christians and others was an important part of the process of identity-formation for the burgeoning Islamic community. Throughout the Arabic

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<sup>13</sup> See Yohanan Friedman, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

scripture, and especially in the Meccan *sūrahs*, one finds echoes of and allusions to the Jewish and Christian scriptures, both canonical and apocryphal, and to their religious language and lore. There is a high quotient of inter-textuality between these scriptures. Indeed it seems that one could even credibly speak of a biblical subtext for the Qur’ān,<sup>14</sup> so implicated are the earlier scriptural traditions in its narrative. The eminent French scholar of Islam and the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s leading Catholic thinker in Catholic/Muslim relations, Louis Massignon (1883-1962), once wrote that from his point of view the Qur’ān may be considered “une édition arabe tronquée de la Bible. . . . Le Qor’ân,” he went on to say, “serait à la Bible ce qu’Ismaël fut à Isaac.”<sup>15</sup> The Qur’ān adopted many of the biblical personalities, the patriarchs, Joseph, Moses and Aaron, and from the New Testament, Zachary, John the Baptist, Jesus, and his mother Mary. More than that, the Qur’ān and Islamic tradition even honors Christian saints and martyrs, as in the instance of the hagiographic legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, whom the Qur’ān calls ‘the Companions of the Cave’ (*al-Kahf* (XVIII):9-26),<sup>16</sup> and Alexander the Great, whose story was a staple of the Late Antique literary tradition.<sup>17</sup>

More recently, in the Medinan *sūrahs*, and especially in Christological passages, some scholars have been uncovering intriguing evidence of the interplay between mainline Syriac Christian (i.e., Melkite, Jacobite, and Nestorian) thinking and nascent,

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<sup>14</sup> See Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur’ān and its Biblical Subtext* (Religious Studies in the Qur’ān; London & New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Louis Massignon, *Les trois prières d’Abraham* (Paris: Cerf, 1997), p. 89.

<sup>16</sup> See Sidney H. Griffith, “Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur’ān: the ‘Companions of the Cave’ in *Sūrat al-Kahf* and in Syriac Christian Tradition,” in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *The Qur’ān in its Historical Context* (Routledge Studies in the Qur’ān; London & New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 109-138.

<sup>17</sup> See Kevin van Bladel, “The *Alexander Legend* in the Qur’ān 18:83-102,” in Reynolds, *The Qur’ān in its Historical Context*, pp. 175-203.

developing Islamic positions.<sup>18</sup> The evidence consists of instances of convergence and divergence in the texts that disclose what one might call a ‘Medinan milieu’ of intertextuality and interreligious conversation and controversy. It suggests a redaction process in the Qur’ān that may well have extended beyond Muḥammad’s lifetime, reaching into the early eighth century and extending geographically from the Ḥijāz into the wider realms of the early caliphate. Be that as it may, given the high profile of Christianity in the Qur’ān, it is no wonder that very soon after the rise of Islam; the Arabic scripture quickly came to the attention of the Christians living outside of Arabia, in the territories brought under Muslim control by the Arab conquest and occupation.

## II

### The Qur’ān and Arab Christians

While there is some evidence that Greek-speaking Christians in Palestine around the year 700 CE were already familiar with verses from the Qur’ān,<sup>19</sup> the Arabic scripture is first mentioned by name in a Christian text in a Syriac, apologetic work that was in all probability originally composed not long after the year 720.<sup>20</sup> In it a monk apologist for Christianity speaks to his Muslim interlocutor of the “Qur’ān, which

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<sup>18</sup> See especially the work of Frank van der Velden, “Konvergenztexte syrischer und arabischer Christologie: Stufen der Textentwicklung von Sure 3,33-64,” *Oriens Christianus* 91 (2007), pp. 164-203; *idem*, “Kontexte im Konvergenzstrang – die Bedeutung textkritischer Varianten und christlicher Bezugstexte für die Redaktion von Sure 61 und Sure 5, 110-119,” *Oriens Christianus* 92 (2008), pp. 181-224. See also Michel Cuypers, *Le festin: une lecture de la sourate al-Mâ’ida* (Rhétorique Sémitique; Paris: Lethielleux, 2007; English translation: *The Banquet: A Reading of the Fifth Sura of the Qur’ān* (Miami, FL: Convivium, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> See Sidney H. Griffith, “Anastasios of Sinai, the *Hodegos* and the Muslims,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 32 (1987), pp. 341-358.

<sup>20</sup> See Sidney H. Griffith, “Disputing with Muslims in Syriac: The Case of the Monk of Bêt Ḥālê with a Muslim Emir,” *Hugoye* 3, no. 1 (2000), <http://syrc.com.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol3No1/HV3N1/Griffith.html>. See also Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, 13; Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, 1997), pp. 465-472

Muḥammad taught you.”<sup>21</sup> It would have been in this same era that St. John of Damascus (d.c.749) brought up the Qur’ān in the *De Haeresibus* section of his summary presentation of Christian faith, the *Fount of Knowledge*, composed in Greek. There, as the last of the heresies he was to discuss (no. 100), St. John spoke very disparagingly of the heresy that he described as “the still-prevailing deceptive superstition of the Ishmaelites, the fore-runner of the Antichrist,” and he went on to say that Muḥammad “spread rumors that a scripture (γρῶην) was brought down to him from heaven.”<sup>22</sup> Throughout the discussion, and in the course of his polemics against Islam, John of Damascus alludes to or quotes passages from the Qur’ān; recognizably but usually not literally. Of the text itself he says, “This Muḥammad, as it has been mentioned, composed many idle tales, on each one of which he prefixed a title,”<sup>23</sup> and John goes on to mention some of the names of the *sūrah*s, again not accurately, but recognizably: the Woman, God’s Camel, the Table, the Heifer. As Robert Hoyland has remarked, “This composition exerted great influence upon the language, tone and content of subsequent Byzantine polemic against Islam.”<sup>24</sup> And it was a negative, even hostile tone. But even though he was himself in all probability an Arabic-speaking Aramean, writing in Greek within the World of Islam, the attitude displayed in John of Damascus’ Greek text was not typical of the approach to Muḥammad, the Qur’ān and Islam of the Arabic-speaking

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<sup>21</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, p. 471.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: “The Heresy of the Ishmaelites”* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), p. 133. See Raymond Le Coz (ed.), *Jean Damascène: Écrits sur Islam* (Sources Chrétiennes, 383; Paris: Cerf, 1992). See also Sidney H. Griffith, “John of Damascus and the Church in Syria in the Umayyad Era: The Intellectual and Cultural Milieu of Orthodox Christians in the World of Islam,” *Hugoye* 11, no. 2 (2008), <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol11No2/HV11N2/Griffith.html>, Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, pp. 480-489.

<sup>23</sup> Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, p. 137.

<sup>24</sup> Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, p. 488.

Christians writing in Arabic in the same milieu some years later,<sup>25</sup> albeit that a similar attitude is displayed in at least one, anonymous Arabic text written by a Christian in the ninth century.<sup>26</sup>

In Arab Christian apologetic texts generally one finds some ambivalence about the Qur'ān, On the one hand, some authors argue that it cannot possibly be a book of divine revelation, citing in evidence its composite, and, as they saw the matter, its all too human origins.<sup>27</sup> But on the other hand, its literary and religious power proved impossible to resist. Given the progressive enculturation of Christianity into the Arabic-speaking World of Islam from the eighth century onward, most Arab Christian writers themselves commonly quoted words and phrases from the Qur'ān in their works.<sup>28</sup> Inevitably its language suffused their religious consciousness. Some of them even built their apologetic arguments in behalf of the truthfulness of Christianity on a certain interpretation of particular verses from the Islamic scripture. In short, while Christian apologists argued that the Qur'ān is not a canonical scripture on the level of the Bible, they nevertheless also, and not infrequently, quoted from it as a testimony to the truth of

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<sup>25</sup> See Mark N. Swanson, "Beyond Proof-texting: Approaches to the Qur'ān in Some Early Arabic Christian Apologies," *The Muslim World* 88 (1998), pp. 297-319; Sidney H. Griffith, "The Qur'ān in Arab Christian Texts: The Development of an Apologetic Argument: Abū Qurrah in the *Maḡlis* of al-Ma'mūn," *Parole de l'Orient* 24 (1999), pp. 203-233.

<sup>26</sup> This is the fictional correspondence, composed in Arabic by a now unknown Christian, between a Muslim character, significantly named 'Abd Allāh ibn Ismā'il al-Hāshimī and a Christian character named 'Abd al-Masīh ibn Ishāq al-Kindī, in which the latter polemically disposes of the claims advanced in behalf of Islam, Muḥammad, and the Qur'ān by the former. The text was translated into Latin under the auspices of Peter the Venerable in the twelfth century. See Jose Muñoz Sendino, "Al-Kindi, Apologia del Christianismo," *Miscelanea Comillas* 11 & 12 (1949), pp. 339-460. An English translation is available in N. A. Newman, *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries (632-900A.D.; Translations with Commentary* (Hatfield, PA: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993), pp. 355-545. For a discussion of the text see Bénédicte Landron, *Chrétiens et Musulmans en Irak: Attitudes Nestorienne vis-à-vis de l'islam* (Études Chrétiennes Arabes; Paris: Cariscript, 1994), pp. 78-89.

<sup>27</sup> See in particular the al-Hāshimī/al-Kindī correspondence mentioned above, n.26.

<sup>28</sup> See Sidney H. Griffith, "The Qur'ān in Arab Christian Texts: The Development of an Apologetic Argument: Abū Qurrah in the *Maḡlis* of al-Ma'mūn," *Parole de l'Orient* 24 (1999), pp. 203-233.

Christian teachings. Alternatively, some Syriac and Arab Christian writers of the ninth century were also very much alive to what they perceived to be the Christian inspiration of much of the Qur'ān and from this perspective they laid claim to it by arguing that the Qur'ān's original, Christian inspiration was obscured by the distortion and alteration of its text and the misappropriation of its meanings at the hands of those who would thwart this expression of a burgeoning Arab Christianity. We may briefly consider an example of each of these approaches to the Arabic Qur'ān on the part of Arabic-speaking Christians living in the World of Islam in the early Islamic period.

#### A – The Qur'ān as a Font of Scriptural Proof-Texts –

In the context of its own inter-religious controversies, the Islamic scripture in several instances demands that its adversaries produce proof (*al-burhān*) for the position they are espousing in contrast to what the Qur'ān proclaims. For example, in the controversy with Jews and Christians, the Qur'ān says, “They say, ‘No one will enter the Garden except those who are Jews or Nazarenes/Christians (*an-naṣārā*).’ Those are their wishes. Say, ‘Produce your proof (*burhānakum*) if you are telling the truth’.” (II *al-Baqarah* 111) It seems that the proof envisioned in this verse is scriptural proof, for in other passages where the term ‘proof’ (*al-burhān*) is mentioned in the inter-religious context it is clear that the ‘proof’ is the Qur'ān itself. For example, in the context of its critique of Christian doctrine, the Qur'ān says in regard to itself, “O People, proof (*burhān*) has come to you from your Lord; He has sent down a clear light [i.e., the Qur'ān] to you.” (IV *an-Nisā*' 174) Similarly, in the context of the rejection of polytheism, the Qur'ān speaks in reference to itself and to earlier scriptures when it advises Muḥammad, “Say, ‘Produce your proof (*burhānakum*). This is the ‘scriptural

recollection' (*dhikr*) of those with me, and the 'scriptural recollection' (*dhikr*) of those before me." (XXI *al-Anbiyā'* 24)<sup>29</sup> Given this Qur'ānic call for scriptural proof for the positions espoused by those whose teachings it criticizes; it is perhaps not surprising that some Arab Christians sought their proof texts in the Qur'ān itself.<sup>30</sup>

One of the most interesting Arab Christian texts to cite the Qur'ān in testimony to the truth of Christian doctrines is actually one of the earliest Christian Arabic texts we know.<sup>31</sup> It is anonymous and its first modern editor gave it the name it still carries in English, *On the Triune Nature of God*; it was composed in all likelihood in the third quarter of the eighth century.<sup>32</sup> The author quotes from the Qur'ān explicitly and in his work he uses both the vocabulary and the thought patterns of the Qur'ān. In an important way the Islamic idiom of the Qur'ān had become his religious lexicon. This feature of the work is readily evident in the poetical introduction to the text, which by allusion and

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<sup>29</sup> It is clear that the term *dhikr* in this passage refers to the recollection of scripture passages, perhaps liturgical pericopes recounting events in salvation history that are thought of as being recorded in the heavenly *kitāb*. See Angelika Neuwirth, "Vom Rezitationstext über die Liturgie zum Kanon," in Stefan Wild (ed.), *The Qur'ān as Text* (Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science, Texts and Studies, vol. 27; Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 90-91. One translator actually renders the term in this verse with the word 'scripture'. See M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (trans.), *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Q 21:24, p. 204. In two other passages the Qur'ān uses the phrase, *ahl adh-dhikr* as a virtual synonym for *ahl al-kitāb*; see XVI *an-Naḥl* 43 and XXI *an-Anbiyā'* 7. It is interesting to note in this connection that at-Ṭabarī listed *dhikr* as one of the names of the Qur'ān, alongside the names: *qur'ān*, *furqān*, and *kitāb*. See Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur'ān's Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 130.

<sup>30</sup> It is interesting to note in passing that some Arab Christian apologists named their treatises, *Kitāb al-burhān*. The ninth century, 'Nestorian' writer, 'Ammār al-Baṣrī is a case in point and the editor of his text knew of seven other instances of texts with this same name. See Michel Hayek, *'Ammār al-Baṣrī: apologies et controversies* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1977), pp. 32-33.

<sup>31</sup> There is another early Arab Christian text from the late eighth century or the very early ninth century, a fragmentary papyrus, in which the author quotes the Qur'ān and names the *sūrahs* from which he quotes. But the text is too fragmentary to allow one to say much about the author's overall purposes. See Georg Graf, "Christliche-arabische Texte. Zwei Disputationen zwischen Muslimen und Christen," in Friedrich Bilabel & Adolf Grohmann (eds.), *Griechische, koptische und arabische Texte zur Religion und religiösen Literatur in Ägyptens Spätzeit* (Heidelberg: Verlag der Universitätsbibliothek, 1934), pp. 8-23/

<sup>32</sup> See Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *An Arabic Version of the Acts of the Apostles and the Seven Catholic Epistles, with a Treatise on the Triune Nature of God* (Studia Sinaitica, VIII; London: C.J. Clay & Sons, 1899), pp. 74-107 (Arabic); 2-36 (English); Maria Gallo (trans.), *Palestinese anonimo: omelia arabo-cristiana dell'VIII secolo* (Roma: Città Nuova Editrice, 1994). See also Samir Khalil Samir, "The Earliest Arab Apology for Christianity (c.750)," in Samir Khalil Samir & Jørgen Nielsen (eds.), *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), pp. 57-114.

the choice of words and phrases echoes the diction and style of the Qur'ān.<sup>33</sup> As Mark Swanson has rightly remarked, “The text simply *is* profoundly Qur'ānic.”<sup>34</sup> One can see it even in English translation, as in this brief passage from the opening prayer:

We ask you, O God, by Your mercy and your power,  
to put us among those who know your truth,  
follow Your will, and avoid your wrath,  
[who] praise Your beautiful names, (Q 7:180)  
and speak of Your exalted similes. (cf. Q 30:27)  
You are the compassionate One,  
the merciful, the most compassionate;  
You are seated on the throne, (Q 7:54)  
You are higher than creatures,  
You fill up all things.<sup>35</sup>

Shortly after this prayer, the author makes a statement that may well serve as an expression of his purpose in composing his work. Again, the attentive reader can hear the Qur'ānic overtones clearly. The author says,

We praise you, O God, and we adore you and we glorify you  
in your creative Word and your holy, life-giving Spirit, one  
God, and one Lord, and one Creator. We do not separate God  
from his Word and his Spirit. God showed his power and his  
light in the Law and the Prophets, and the Psalms and the Gospel,  
that God and his Word and his Spirit are one God and one Lord.

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<sup>33</sup> See Samir, “The Earliest Arab Apology,” pp. 69-70; Swanson, “Beyond Prooftexting,” pp. 305-308.

<sup>34</sup> Swanson, “Beyond Prooftexting,” p. 308.

<sup>35</sup> Adapted from the text and translation in Samir, “The Earliest Arab Apology,” pp. 67-68.

We will show this, if God will, in those revealed scriptures, to anyone who wants insight, understands things, recognizes the truth, and opens his breast to believe in God and his scriptures.<sup>36</sup>

One notices straightaway the author's intention to make his case for Christian teaching from the scriptures; he names the Law (*at-Tawrah*), the Prophets (*al-Anbiyā'*), the Psalms (*az-Zubūr*), and the Gospel (*al-Injīl*), scriptures that are named as they are named in the Qur'ān. Moreover, in emphasizing God, his Word, and his Spirit, the author recalls the Qur'ān's own mention of these three names in the often quoted phrase, "The Messiah, Jesus, Son of Mary, was nothing more than a messenger of God, His word that He imparted to Mary, and a spirit from Him." (IV *an-Nisā'* 171) What is more, the author is willing to include explicit citations from the Qur'ān among the scripture passages he quotes in testimony to the credibility of the Christian doctrine. On the one hand, addressing the Arabic-speaking, Christian readers who were his primary audience, the author speaks of what "we find in the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms and the Gospel," in support of the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. On the other hand, several times he rhetorically addresses Muslims; he speaks of what "you will find . . . in the Qur'ān," and he goes on to cite a passage or a pastiche of quotations from several *sūrahs*, in support of the doctrines, in behalf of the veracity of which he has been quoting or alluding to scriptural evidence from passages and narratives from the Old or New Testaments.<sup>37</sup> For example, at one point in the argument, in search of testimonies to a certain plurality in the Godhead, the author turns to the scriptures for citations of

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<sup>36</sup> Gibson, *An Arabic Version*, pp. 3 (English), 75 (Arabic). Here the English translation has been adapted from Gibson's version

<sup>37</sup> See, e.g., Gibson, *An Arabic Version*, pp. 5-6 (English); 77-78 (Arabic). See the passage quoted and discussed in Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, p.55.

passages in which God speaks in the first person plural. Having quoted a number of such passages, he goes on to say:

You will find it also in the Qur'ān that “We created man in misery [Q XC:4], and We have opened the gates of heaven with water pouring down [Q LIV:11], and have said, “And now you come unto us alone, as we created you at first.” [Q VI:94] It also says, “Believe in God, and in his Word; and also in the Holy Spirit.” [cf. Q IV;171] The Holy Spirit is even the one who brings it down (i.e., the Qur'ā) as “a mercy and a guidance from thy Lord.” [Q XVI:64, 102] But why should I prove it from this (i.e., the Qur'ān) and bring enlightenment, when we find in the Torah, the Prophets, the Psalms, and the Gospel, and you find it in the Qur'ān, that God and His Word and His Spirit are one God and one Lord? You have said that you believe in God and His Word and the Holy Spirit, so do not reproach us, O men, that we believe in God and His Word and His Spirit: we worship God in His Word and His Spirit, one God and one Lord and one Creator. God has made it clear in all of the scriptures that this is the way it is in right guidance (*hudan*) and true religion (*dīn al-ḥaqq*).<sup>38</sup>

Evidently in this passage the Christian author is addressing himself directly, at least in part, to readers of the Qur'ān as well as to the devotees of the Christian Bible. He speaks of what “we find in the Torah, the Prophets, the Psalms, and the Gospel,” and of what “you find . . . in the Qur'ān.” One also notices in this passage the prominence of the

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<sup>38</sup> Adapted translation from Gibson, *An Arabic Version*, pp. 5-6 (English), 77-78 (Arabic).

author's references to God, His Word, and His Spirit, and how they provide a continual evocation of *sūrat an-Nisā'* 171. Like almost every Arab Christian apologetic writer after him, the author of *On the Triune Nature of God* takes this verse as Qur'ānic testimony to the reality that the one God is in fact possessed of Word and Spirit and that they are He, the Son of God and the Holy Spirit, as the Christians speak of them.

In a further passage, the author of *On the Triune Nature of God* takes advantage of another verse in the Qur'ān to explain how it came about that by the action of the Holy Spirit, God's Word, the Son of God, became incarnate and was clothed, even veiled (*iḥtajaba*),<sup>39</sup> in Mary's human nature. "Thus," he says, "God was veiled (*iḥtajaba*) in a man without sin."<sup>40</sup> The 'veiling' language here once again evokes a particular passage in the Qur'ān: "God speaks with man only by way of revelation, or from behind a veil (*hijāb*), or He sends a messenger and he reveals by His permission what He wishes." (XLII *ash-Shūrā* 51) The author of our treatise likens Jesus' humanity to the veil, from behind which the Qur'ān says God might speak to man.<sup>41</sup>

*On the Triune Nature of God* is somewhat unique among Christian Arabic texts by reason of the manner of its obvious accommodation to the Qur'ān and its citation of the Islamic scripture alongside biblical texts in testimony to the veracity of Christian doctrines. Yet the author obviously also maintains the distinction between the Bible and the Qur'ān; when he cites the latter, one finds the introductory phrase, "You will also find (it) in the Qur'ān . . .," or, "It is also written in the Qur'ān . . .,"<sup>42</sup> phrases that effectively distinguish the scriptures. It does not appear that the author accepts the Qur'ān as a

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<sup>39</sup> See Gibson, *An Arabic Version*, p. 11 (English), p. 83 (Arabic).

<sup>40</sup> Gibson, *An Arabic Version*, p. 13 (English), p. 85 (Arabic).

<sup>41</sup> This theme of Jesus humanity as a 'veil', echoing the Qur'ānic text, became quite popular in later 'Melkite' Arabic works of religious apology; see Swanson, "Beyond Proof-texting," esp. pp. 301-302.

<sup>42</sup> See Gibson, *An Arabic Version*, pp. 5, 12, 33 (English), 77, 84, 104 (Arabic).

canonical scripture; throughout the treatise he adduces arguments from the Bible and Christian tradition expressly to refute the Qur'ān's critique of Christian doctrine and practice.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless it is also clear that for him the Arabic Qur'ān does possess evidentiary potential and probative value for Christian apologetic purposes. The text certainly presumes that its Christian readers are familiar with the Qur'ān and it may even suggest that they positively esteem its language.

It is true that the treatise *On the Triune Nature of God* is unique among Christian Arabic texts in its forthright emulation of Qur'ānic style and its obvious willingness to align testimonies from the Arabic Qur'ān with those from the Jewish and Christian scriptures, albeit in a subsidiary position. Nevertheless, and in spite of the fact that there were also Arab Christian texts that disparaged the Qur'ān, as we mentioned above, it remained the case in the early Islamic period that other Arab Christian writers also frequently quoted from the Qur'ān, sometimes inexactly, as if from memory, and echoed its words and phrases in their ordinary discourse.<sup>44</sup> The point is that by contrast with the attitudes of Christians living outside of the World of Islam, who worked with Greek or Latin translations of the Arabic text,<sup>45</sup> and who despised the Islamic scripture and demeaned it at every opportunity for almost a millennium,<sup>46</sup> Arabic-speaking Christians were for the most part willing, positively, and with respect, to engage the Qur'ān

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<sup>43</sup> See the remarks in Gallo, *Palestinese anonimo omelia*, p. 61, esp. n. 50.

<sup>44</sup> For more on this topic, see Griffith, "The Qur'ān in Arab Christian Texts," esp. pp. 214-223; Sidney H. Griffith, "Answers for the Shaykh: A 'Melkite' Arabic Text from Sinai and the Doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation in 'Arab Orthodox' Apologetics," in David Thomas *et al.* (eds.), *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 277-309, esp. 288-301.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Burman has shown that scholarly, western translators of the Qur'ān often did their work philologically correctly, and very carefully strove to present the text in the light of the current modes of Islamic interpretation, albeit that they may have disdained the Islam that produced it. See Burman, *Reading the Qur'ān in Latin Christendom*, esp. pp. 36-59.

<sup>46</sup> See Hartmut Bobzin, "'A Treasury of Heresies': Christian Polemics against the Koran," in Wild, *The Qur'ān as Text*, pp. 157-175.

religiously, albeit that their purpose was primarily the more clearly to express their traditional Christian faith in Arabic, within the hermeneutical circle of the Qur'ān. For unquestionably the Qur'ān set the parameters in the Arabic-speaking world for the discussion of important religious doctrines, even Christian ones. Christian theologians spoke in the same religious idiom in Arabic as did their Muslim counterparts, and Qur'ānic terms became common in Christian discourse. In early Islamic times, and well up into the thirteenth century, Arab Christian writers regularly cited passages from the Qur'ān in defense of the veracity of the religious ideas they commended, and they quarreled with Muslim exegetes who interpreted the pertinent verses differently.<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps the high point of the Arab Christian engagement with the Arabic Qur'ān for apologetic purposes came in the twelfth century. The 'Melkite' bishop of Sidon, Paul of Antioch (*fl. c.* 1180-1200),<sup>48</sup> who was the author of a number of theological treatises in Arabic,<sup>49</sup> wrote a 'Letter to a Muslim Friend' in Sidon, in which he skillfully deploys selected passages from the Qur'ān to build a defense of Christianity as the true religion and one which the Qur'ān itself enjoins Muslims to respect. Paul's contention is that the Qur'ān enfranchises Christianity and proves that its doctrines are not such as to be compared with the unbelief (*al-kufr*) of polytheists (*al-mushrikūn*).

Using the literary form of a public letter, Paul presents a scenario according to which he has just returned from an extended visit to the cities of Constantinople, Rome and the land of the Franks, where, due to his status as a bishop, he says he had gained

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<sup>47</sup> See Ute Pietruschka, "Die Verwendung und Funktion von Koranzitaten in christlichen Apologien der frühen Aggasidenzeit (Mitte 8. Jahrhundert – Anfang 10. Jahrhundert)," in Walter Beltz & Jürgen Tubach (eds.), *Religiöser Text und soziale Struktur* (Hallesche Beiträge zur Orientwissenschaft, 31; Halle: Martin-Luther Universität Halle-Wittenberg, 2001), pp. 271-288.

<sup>48</sup> On the problem of dates, see S.K. Samir, "Notes sur la 'lettre à un musulman de Sidon' de Paul d'Antioche," *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 24 (1993), pp. 179-195.

<sup>49</sup> See Paul Khoury, *Paul d'Antioche, évêque melkite de Sidon (XIIe.s.)* (Recherches de l'Institut de Lettres Orientales de Beyrouth, vol. 24; Beyrouth: Imprimerie Catholique, 1964).

entrée to the company of both civil leaders and scholars. Paul reports that these people asked him about Muḥammad and about the scripture he claimed God had sent down to him. Referring no doubt to the Greek translations of the Qur’ān, Paul says that these Christian, non-Muslims whom he had met on his journey, told him that they had arranged to gain access to the Muslim scripture. So Paul reports that in response to his questions, almost as if he were a spokesman for the Muslims, these foreign Christians quoted passages from the Qur’ān to prove that Islam itself was only for those who speak Arabic and that their scripture actually enjoins respect for Christians and commends the veracity of their doctrines and the rectitude of their religious practices. Paul, of course, cites the passages from the Arabic Qur’ān, some sixty of them in all. He very artfully weaves the quotations, allusions and echoes of the Qur’ān’s text, often cited inexactly and bundled into catenae of quotations of phrases and half phrases, into a coherent defense of Christianity. At the end of the letter, Paul tells his Muslim friend that if the foreign readers of the Qur’ān have gotten it right, as he has reported their scripture-based reasoning, then God will have “reconciled opinions and put a stop to the quarrelling between His servants, the Christians (*an-naṣārā*) and the Muslims.”<sup>50</sup> If, however, there are problems, Paul says that his Muslim friend will explain the matter to him and that he, Paul, will transmit the objections to his foreign interlocutors, who had made him an intermediary (*safīran*).

The ingenuity of the letter as an apologetic tract is evident, including the ploy that Paul is but the intermediary for foreign readers of the Qur’ān. And while the reading of the Islamic scripture is on the face of it a respectful one, it is also quite obviously a

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<sup>50</sup> Khoury, *Paul d’Antioche*, p. 83 (Arabic), p. 187 (French).

selective, not to say a ‘Christianizing’ reading.<sup>51</sup> In the end, Paul intended his reading to undercut the Qur’ān’s obvious critique of Christian faith and religious practice and contrariwise, positively to commend Christianity. It is no wonder that on the one hand, the text quickly gained popularity among Arabic-speaking Christians and on the other hand prompted Muslim scholars to write refutations of it. Already in the thirteenth century, the text was known in Cairo and the prominent Muslim, legal scholar Shihāb ad-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Idrīs al-Qarāfī (1228-1285) included a point by point refutation of the letter in his book *Proud Answers to Impudent Questions*.<sup>52</sup> Then in Cyprus, sometime in the thirteenth century, now unknown Christian hands expanded Paul of Antioch’s letter to a length some “three or even four times as long”<sup>53</sup> as the original. This Cypriot letter, as we may call the expanded recension of Paul’s original letter to his Muslim friend in Sidon, eventually came to the attention of two prominent Muslim scholars in Damascus in the early years of the fourteenth century, and they both wrote refutations of it, quoting long portions of the text in their refutations. They were Muḥammad ibn Abī Ṭālib ad-Dimashqī (*fl. c.* 1320)<sup>54</sup> and Taqī d-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328).<sup>55</sup> Their works were to mark a turning-point in the history of Christian/Muslim relations; thereafter few original works of Christian theology were composed in Arabic.

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<sup>51</sup> See the comments of David Thomas, “Paul of Antioch’s *Letter to a Muslim Friend* and *The Letter from Cyprus*,” in David Thomas, *Syrian Christians under Islam: The First Thousand Years* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 203-221, esp. pp. 208-213.

<sup>52</sup> Shihāb ad-Dīn al-Qarāfī, *Al-ajwibat al-fākhīrah ‘an al-as’ilat al-fājīrah* (ed. Bakr Zakī ‘Awaḍ; Cairo: Maktabat Wahbah, 1407/1987). On Shihāb ad-Dīn, see Sherman A. Jackson, *Islamic Law and the State: The Constitutional Jurisprudence of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī* (Studies in Islamic Law and Society, vol. 1; Leiden: Brill, 1966).

<sup>53</sup> Thomas, “Paul of Antioch’s *Letter*,” p. 215.

<sup>54</sup> See the publication and discussion of both the Cypriot Letter and ad-Dimashqī’s refutation of it in Rifaat Y. Ebied & David Thomas (ed. & trans.), *Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades: The Letter of the People of Cyprus and Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī’s Response* (The History of Christian-Muslim Relations, 2; Leiden: Brill, 2005).

<sup>55</sup> See Thomas F. Michel, *A Muslim Theologian’s Response to Christianity: Ibn Taymiyya’s al-Jawab al-Sahih* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1984).

Toward the beginning of his subsequently very influential book in refutation of the Cypriot letter, *The Sound Response to Those Who Have Changed the Religion of the Messiah*,<sup>56</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah commented on the letter's widespread influence among the Christians of his time. He wrote:

A letter arrived from Cyprus in which there is an argument for the religion of Christians. In it the scholars of their religion as well as the eminent persons of their church, ancient and modern, plead their case with religious and intellectual arguments. . . . That which they state in this book is the basic support on which their scholars depend, both in our time and in previous ages, although some of them may elaborate further than others depending on the situations. We have found them making use of this treatise before now. Their scholars hand it down among themselves, and old copies of it still exist.<sup>57</sup>

While in earlier Islamic times there were some Muslim responses to the apologetic tracts written by Arabic-speaking Christians, the rebuttals by major Muslim scholars of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to Paul of Antioch's Qur'ān based reasoning in support of the veracity of Christian faith and practice were unprecedented. They came at a time when the center of gravity of Muslim intellectual life had shifted

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<sup>56</sup> A recent edition is Taqī d-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Taymiyyah, *Al-jawāb aṣ-ṣaḥīḥ liman baddala dīn al-masīḥ* (ed. Muḥammad Ismā'īl, 2 vols.; Cairo: al-Maktabah al-'Ilmiyyah, 1423/2003).

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in the translation of T.F. Michel, *A Muslim Theologian's Response*, p. 93. See the full passage in Ibn Taymiyyah, *Al-jawāb aṣ-ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. I, pp. 22-23. In the part left out by Michel, Ibn Taymiyyah says, "This makes it necessary for us to quote in response what each section of the text proposes, to explain the mistakes according to what is correct, so that intelligent people might profit from and the measured speech and scripture that God sent with His messengers might become clear. I will quote what they mention in the own words, section by section, and I will follow up each section with the corresponding answer basically systematically, fittingly conclusively." *Ibidem*, p. 23.

from Baghdad to Cairo and Damascus, when the crusades were underway, and when the Christian populations in the World of Islam were beginning their long slide into demographic insignificance. In regard to the strength of the unusual Islamic response to an apology for Christianity, it was perhaps not irrelevant that Paul of Antioch's letter to his Muslim friend in Sidon, and its expansion into the Cypriot letter, was almost entirely based on a Christian reading of the Arabic Qur'ān. With all the selectivity and sleight of hand in quotation that one can point out in the text, it nevertheless appealed to what seemed to be obvious interpretations, from a non-Muslim perspective, of the passages of the Qur'ān that it quoted. Thereby, one might opine, the text gained an unprecedented purchase on the attention of Muslims and solicited the rebuttals that would long remain the most authoritative Islamic challenges to Christianity in the Arabic-speaking world.

### B – The Qur'ān as a Crypto-Christian Scripture –

One of the most intriguing accounts from early Islamic times, claiming Christian origins for the Arabic Qur'ān comes in an apologetic/polemical text that was composed in all probability in the ninth century and originally in Syriac. In due course it has been transmitted over the centuries in Syriac in both 'Jacobite' and 'Nestorian' recensions, and in both a short and a long Arabic recension. Modern scholars typically refer to this work as the legend of Sergius Baḥīrā and the story has long remained popular in eastern Christian circles.<sup>58</sup> In its origins, the legend builds on the account in the early Islamic biography of Muḥammad according to which in his youth, while on a journey to Syria with his uncle Abū Ṭālib, the future prophet and his entourage encountered a Christian

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<sup>58</sup> The currently definitive edition, translation and discussion of the Syriac and Arabic recensions of the legend, surpassing all previous studies, is Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam* (History of Christian-Muslim Relations, vol. 9; Leiden: Brill, 2009).

monk named Baḥīrā who, as the story goes, with the help of Christian texts in his possession, was able to recognize the sign of future prophet-hood on Muḥammad's body.<sup>59</sup>

Utilizing this Islamic reminiscence of an event in Muḥammad's early life as a frame-narrative for the legend, the now unknown Syriac author composed a narrative in which a fellow monk introduces the main character of the story as a monk of doubtful orthodoxy called Sergius Baḥīrā. The narrator then recounts Sergius Baḥīrā's story as he unfolds it. The text includes both an apocalypse of Baḥīrā,<sup>60</sup> in which the monk recapitulates themes from Syriac apocalyptic narratives written by Syriac-speaking Christians in earlier Islamic times,<sup>61</sup> and a section that the modern editor calls Baḥīrā's teachings, in which the monk catechizes Muḥammad in Christian doctrine and practice in a manner he deemed suitable for the communication of Christianity to Bedouin Arabs.<sup>62</sup> It is in the section of the text recounting Baḥīrā's teachings, as they are presented in the Arabic recensions of the legend, that one finds the development of the idea that the Qur'ān was originally a Christian composition, composed by Baḥīrā, and designed to suit the requirements for Muḥammad to evangelize the Arabs.<sup>63</sup> All the recensions insist that Baḥīrā's tutelage of Muḥammad in Christianity was in the end corrupted by others, most notably initially by the famous early Jewish convert to Islam, Ka'b al-Aḥbār, thereby

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<sup>59</sup> See 'Abd ar-Ra'ūf Sa'd (ed.), *As-Sīrat an-nabawwiyyah l'ibn Hishām* (4 vols.; Beirut: Dār al-Habīl, 1975), vol. I, pp. 165-166; A. Guillaume (trans.), *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allah* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 79-81.

<sup>60</sup> See Roggema, *The Legend*, pp. 61-93.

<sup>61</sup> Most notably the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius, and other apocalyptic texts of the seventh and eighth centuries. See Francisco Javier Martínez, "La Literatura Apocalíptica y las Primeras Reacciones Cristianas a la conquista islámica en Oriente," in G. Anes & Á. de Castrillón (eds.), *Europa y el Islam* (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 2003), pp. 143-222.

<sup>62</sup> See Roggema, *The Legend*, pp. 95-128.

<sup>63</sup> See Roggema, *The Legend*, pp. 129-149. See also Barbara Roggema, "A Christian Reading of the Qur'ān: The Legend of Sergius-Baḥīrā and Its Use of Qur'ān and Sīrā," in David Thomas (ed.), *Syrian Christians under Islam; the First Thousand Years* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 57-73.

accenting an anti-Jewish dimension already prominent in the text. The legend of Sergius Baḥīrā or various parts of it or allusions to it circulated widely in Syriac and Arab Christian, apologetic and polemical works in the Middle East from the ninth century onwards.<sup>64</sup> And perhaps the idea that found the widest circulation is that the Qur’ān was originally a Christian composition and that the monk Sergius Baḥīrā, was its original author.

In the longer Arabic recension of the legend, the redactor of the story has ingeniously woven some forty verses from the Qur’ān into the narrative in such a way as to show first “that the Qur’ān is authored by a Christian, and secondly, that Muslim polemic against Christian doctrine is not justified.”<sup>65</sup> In the telling, Sergius Baḥīrā speaks in the first person, and having described his meeting with Muḥammad more or less according to the Islamic story in the *Sīrah*, the monk tells him to leave with his companions but to return later for personal instruction. Muḥammad comes back alone three days later and his catechesis begins. The monk teaches him the basic doctrines of Christianity about God’s Word and His Spirit and extracts a promise that when Muḥammad and his people come to power they will protect the Christians and not extract taxes from them, neither *jizyah* nor *kharāj*. The monk instructs Muḥammad to claim he is a prophet in order to gain a hearing among his people and when he says, “How will they believe me, while I do not possess a book?” Sergius Baḥīrā says, “I will take it upon me to write for you what you need and to tell you about any given matter that they ask you about, be it reasonable or not.” And the monk begins at the beginning, with I *al-Fātiḥah* 1, the opening phrase of every *sūrah* but one; he says:

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<sup>64</sup> See Roggema, *The Legend*, pp. 151-208.

<sup>65</sup> Roggema, *The Legend*, p. 148.

And I wrote for him: ‘*In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate*’. With this I mean the Holy Unified Trinity: ‘God’ is the Father and the Eternal Light, and ‘the Merciful’ is the Son, who is merciful to the peoples and has purchased them with his holy blood, and ‘the Compassionate’ is the Holy Spirit whose compassion is bestowed amply on all and who dwells in all believers. And I taught him things that brought him close to the true faith.<sup>66</sup>

From here on, through his account of the rest of the forty some verses of the Qur’ān that he quotes or paraphrases as he teaches Muḥammad, Sergius Baḥīrā fairly consistently employs the formula, “I wrote for him . . . , with this I mean . . . ,” first reciting the verse, then either mentioning the Christian truth he meant to commend with the Qur’ān’s words, or countering an Islamic, anti-Christian interpretation of the Qur’ān passage that was common in early Islamic times. Here, due to considerations of time and space, one must resist the temptation to recount what the monk says about the many verses he says he wrote for Muḥammad. Suffice it to mention one or two of the more interesting instances, sufficient to show how in this composition the author not only promotes the idea that in its origins the Qur’ān was a Christian book, but also how he proposes to correct what he takes to be mistaken Muslim readings of the Arabic scripture, by supplying the original meaning. In the ensemble, the exercise becomes an apology for Christianity, based on proof-texts from the Qur’ān interpreted from a Christian perspective.

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<sup>66</sup> Roggema, *The Legend*, p. 459.

In reference to the verse of the Qur’ān that Muslims were already taking to mean that Jesus did not die on the cross, Sergius Baḥīrā says, “I also wrote for him: ‘They did not kill him and they did not crucify him, but it was made to appear so to them.’ (IV *an-Nisā’* 157) With this I mean that Christ did not die in the substance of his divine nature but rather in the substance of his human nature.”<sup>67</sup>

In another instance, the monk says, “I also wrote for him, ‘If you are in doubt about what has been revealed to you, then ask those to whom the scripture was given before you.’ (X *Yūnus* 94) With this I intended to prove that the Holy Gospel is truer than any of the scriptures, and cannot be impaired by those who want to discredit it, nor can any change (*taghyīr*) or corruption (*taḥrīf*) be correlated with it.”<sup>68</sup>

In a passage in which he conflates several verses from the Qur’ān, Sergius Baḥīrā takes responsibility for specifying Muḥammad’s role in the history of salvation, He says, “And I wrote for him too: ‘Muḥammad is the messenger of God (*rasūl Allāh*). (XLVIII *al-Fatḥ* 29) He sent him with guidance and the true religion, that He may make it prevail over all religion, though the polytheists be averse.’ (IX *at-Tawbah* 33 & LXI *aṣ-Ṣaff* 9) And I wrote for him: ‘Muḥammad is no more than a messenger. Messengers have passed away before him.’ (III *Āl ‘Imrān* 144) . . . And: ‘God and His angels bless the prophet. O you who believe, bless him and salute him’. (XXXIII *al-Aḥzāb* 56)”<sup>69</sup>

Along the way, the monk offers some explanation of his project to tutor Muḥammad. He says, “Innumerable things I wrote for him with which to try to make him incline toward the faith of truth and the confession of the coming of Christ to the world and also to make him denounce the Jews regarding what they allege against our

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<sup>67</sup> Roggema, *The Legend*, p. 463.

<sup>68</sup> Roggema, *The Legend*, p. 469, slightly altered.

<sup>69</sup> Roggema, *The Legend*, pp. 487-489.

Lord, the true Messiah.”<sup>70</sup> But the monk knows that much of what he wrote for Muḥammad “will be changed and subtracted from and added to many times, because after him people will follow him who will become inimical and hateful to us.”<sup>71</sup> In the end, Sergius Baḥīrā confesses that he overreached himself and that he had sinned in what he had done with Muḥammad. He said,

I wanted his prophet-hood to be in the name of the Trinity,  
confessed to be one, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. . . .

I wanted to confirm the kingdom of the Sons of Ishmael, in  
order that the promise of God to Abraham about Ishmael would be  
fulfilled.<sup>72</sup> That was all I intended, so I devised prophet-hood for  
him and I produced a scripture for him and I presented it as  
having come down to him as a revelation, so that the words of  
our Lord Christ in his Gospel, ‘After me false prophets will  
come to you. Woe to the one who follows them’ (Mt. 24:11)  
would be fulfilled.<sup>73</sup>

Even from the few quotations given here, one clearly sees how the author of the legend made use of selected quotations from the Arabic Qur’ān. It is important to recognize that these relatively few quotations did not make up the entirety of the catechesis of Muḥammad in the narrative. Rather, they are woven into the whole fabric of the story, telling how, the author claims, the monk of questionable ecclesiastical standing, Sergius Baḥīrā, invented both the Qur’ān and Islam and taught Muḥammad as a

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<sup>70</sup> Roggema, *The Legend*, p. 471.

<sup>71</sup> Roggema, *The Legend*, p. 489.

<sup>72</sup> See Genesis 21:15-21 & 25:12-18.

<sup>73</sup> Roggema, *The Legend*, p. 511.

strategy for evangelizing the Bedouin Arabs, a strategy that, as the monk concedes, was ill conceived and ultimately failed. Obviously, the whole work is an attempt apologetically and polemically to discount Islam's religious claims in Arab Christian eyes and an effort to forestall Christian conversions to Islam.

### III

## **The Qur'ān in Arab Christian Tradition and Western Christian Readings in the Qur'ān**

It is clear that from an Islamic perspective, one could suppose that the Arab Christian reading of the Qur'ān and the use of selected verses from it quoted as proof-texts in defense of Christian teaching could be considered a misuse, or a misappropriation of the Qur'ān. This Muslim reaction is clearly seen in the spirited response on the part of Shihāb ad-Dīn al-Qarāfī and Ibn Taymiyyah to the Cypriot recension of Paul of Antioch's letter to his Muslim friend in Sidon. Similarly, present-day western historians are often inclined to speak disparagingly of what they regard as the polemically inspired, Arab Christian distortions of the Qur'ān, or of their 'Christianizing' readings of selected verses employed as proof-texts, 'proof-texting' itself being considered an intellectually dishonest procedure. One may think of the matter in another way.

In the Arabic-speaking milieu of early Islamic times, the Arabic Qur'ān was socially and culturally an authoritative text for all Arabic speakers, at the same time as for the Muslims it was also a record of divine revelation. Arabic-speaking Christians, along with the Arabophone population more generally, readily and regularly incorporated words and phrases from the Qur'ān into their ordinary speech and writing. And inevitably the Qur'ān set the parameters for the discussion of religious topics in the public forum.

While Arab Christians did not credit the Islamic scripture as a bearer of divine revelation, and some of them went to great lengths even harshly to discount the claims made by Muslims for its being God's very speech,<sup>74</sup> they nevertheless did acknowledge the Qur'ān's literary and religious stature in their world. They recognized the Qur'ān's bid, consciously to speak in an inter-textual, scriptural dialogue against the background of the Bible's prophetic history from Adam to Jesus of Nazareth, albeit that at the same time they faulted the construction the Qur'ān put upon that history. They sought out passages in the Qur'ān's own pages not only to blunt its critique of Christian doctrine and practice, but positively to commend the credibility, if not the veracity of Christian teachings and to make a case for the good treatment of Christians in Islamic society. After all, culturally speaking, in the heyday of Abbasid times,<sup>75</sup> Christians had played a major role in the formation of the classical culture of the world of Islam and they were themselves fully acculturated, if disenfranchised citizens of that world. Their legal status effectively designated them subaltern citizens (*ahl al-dhimmah*), subject to social disabilities designed to diminish their public esteem, to enforce a humble mode of public behavior among them, and to encourage their conversion to Islam by the attrition of Christian public institutions.<sup>76</sup> In these circumstances, Arabic-speaking Christians had to devise strategies of survival against the pressure of the overwhelming social disabilities. One of

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<sup>74</sup> Most notably but not exclusively, as we have seen above, there is a strong, anti-Qur'ānic line of argument in the fictional, apologetic and polemical pamphlet, the al-Hāshimī / al-Kindī correspondence. See n. 26 above.

<sup>75</sup> See Javier Teixidor, *Homage à Bagdad: Traducteurs et lettres de l'époque 'abbaside* (CNRS Histoire; Paris: CNRS, 2007).

<sup>76</sup> See A. Noth, "Abgrenzungsprobleme zwischen Muslimen und Nicht-Muslimen: Die 'Bedingungen 'Umars (*aš-šurūṭ al-'umariyya*)' unter einem anderen Aspekt gelesen," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1987), pp. 290-315; Mark R. Cohen, "What Was the Pact of 'Umar? A Literary-Historical Study," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 23 (1999), pp. 100-157; Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

their apologetic strategies involved a close reading of the Qur'ān as the hegemonic scripture in their world, for the purpose of showing how the plain text of selected passages, apart from or contrary to their customary interpretation by Muslims, could be read in support of Christianity.

Up until the twentieth century, Christians in the west who had access to the Qur'ān in Greek or Latin translations, or, after the sixteenth century, in the vernacular languages of the west, approached the Islamic scripture from a very different perspective from that of their co-religionists in the Arabic-speaking world, who read the text in its original language. Western Christians did not by and large recognize the Qur'ān as a familiar text, nor did they take account of its knowledgeable critique of Christian teaching. They certainly did not consult it for passages suitable to quote for their probative value or as proof-texts useful for commending Christian faith or for claiming the right to good treatment in civil society. Neither did they harbor the suspicion that somehow in its origins the Qur'ān might have Christian roots. Rather, aside from the philological and scholarly interest some intellectuals had in the Arabic text and in the effort fairly to translate it, most westerners had little or no respect for the book and many of them took every opportunity to demean its message.<sup>77</sup> The most notable exception to the general lack of religious interest in the Qur'ān in the west until modern times was Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa's (1401-1464) close reading of the text in his *Cribratio alchorani*.

#### A – Religiously Respectful Western Readings of the Qur'ān –

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<sup>77</sup> See Thomas E. Burman, "Polemic, Philology, and Ambivalence: Reading the Qur'ān in Latin Christendom," *The Journal of Islamic Studies* 15 (2004), pp. 181-209.

In the *Cribratio*, Nicholas of Cusa, who was in general very concerned with the ways of discerning and expressing religious truths in the Christian east and the west, commented on the Qur’ān searching for points of strength and weakness that would allow for a more effective commendation of Christianity to Muslims.<sup>78</sup> While his approach was respectful and discerning, in keeping with the theoretical framework he had developed in other works, Nicholas of Cusa’s basic concern was with what today Christians would call evangelization.

It was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that western Christian scholars turned a kindlier eye toward the Qur’ān. Many westerners in the era of missionaries and colonizers came to have personal religious experiences among Muslims and to discover the riches of the Arabic Qur’ān; some looked for Christian ways positively to esteem the Islamic scripture. One thinks the most immediately in this connection of Louis Massignon (1883-1962), who in the 1930’s was struggling to find a way, within the framework of his Roman Catholic, Christian faith, to speak religiously positively of the Qur’ān in what he called the edition of Uthmān. Massignon wrote:

Il peut être considéré comme une édition arabe tronquée  
de la Bible, amalgamée d’inédits, nivelée au niveau de la  
descendance d’Ismaël, et on peut lui appliquer la règle d’autorité  
conditionnelle concédée aux décisions des antipapes, dans les  
limites où il constituerait la “règle scripturaire du schisme

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<sup>78</sup> See Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa’s De Pace Fidei and Cribratio alkorani: Translation and Analysis* (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1990); Nicholas Rescher, “Nicholas of Cusa on the Qur’ān – A Fifteenth Century Western Encounter with Islam,” *The Muslim World* 55 (1965), pp. 195-202. James E. Biechler, “Christian Humanism Confronts Islam: Sifting the Qur’ān with Nicholas of Cusa,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 12(1976), pp. 1-14; *idem*, “Nicholas of Cusa and Muhammad: A Fifteenth-Century Encounter,” *The Downside Review* 101 (1983), pp. 50-59.

abrahamique, des *agaréniens* exclus.” Le Qor’ān serait à la Bible ce qu’Ismaël fut à Isaac.<sup>79</sup>

As positively motivated as it is, Massignon’s strained effort to find language calculated to express a Catholic way religiously to appreciate the Qur’ān, in spite of his good will, falls far short of recognizing it as an integral scripture, at the heart of its own related, but distinct faith community, taking a critical stance in regard to the teachings of the earlier, Bible based communities.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, but from a different perspective, and inspired by Massignon’s teaching, Giulio Basetti-Sani, OFM, advanced a project of re-interpreting the Qur’ān in the light of Christ.<sup>81</sup> By this he meant to offer an interpretation that distanced itself from the traditional approach of Muslims, thereby effectively removing it from the hermeneutical horizon provided by the Muslim community and reading it rather from the perspective of Roman Catholic faith. Basetti-Sani maintains, “It is proper that the Church interpret the Koran. Just as she has the ‘key’ to interpret the Old Testament, she also has the ‘key’ for the correct explanation of the Koran.”<sup>82</sup> Basetti-Sani finds this ‘key’ in the New Testament, and more specifically in what he calls the “Christian Light.”<sup>83</sup> Then, accepting a premise basic to Massignon’s view, Basetti-Sani says, “The Koran is the special ‘revelation’ destined for the pagan Arabs, Ishmael’s descendants.”<sup>84</sup> And he finds in it “a mysterious evolution toward Christ.”<sup>85</sup> As he reviews various Qur’ānic passages, he finds them to be rejecting pagan and Jewish ideas.

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<sup>79</sup> Louis Massignon, *Les trios priers d’Abraham* (Patrimoines; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1997), p. 89.

<sup>80</sup> See further Sidney H. Griffith, “Sharing the Faith of Abraham: the ‘Credo’ of Louis Massignon,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 8 (1997), pp. 193-210.

<sup>81</sup> Giulio Basetti-Sani, OFM, *The Koran in the Light of Christ: A Christian Interpretation of the Sacred Book of Islam* (trans. W.R. Carroll & B. Dauphinee from the original Italian, *Il Corano nelle luce di Cristo*; Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977).

<sup>82</sup> Basetti-Sani, *The Koran in the Light*, pp. 101-102.

<sup>83</sup> Basetti-Sani, *The Koran in the Light*, p. 105.

<sup>84</sup> Basetti-Sani, *The Koran in the Light*, p. 137.

<sup>85</sup> Basetti-Sani, *The Koran in the Light*, p. 138.

And in respect to the verses critical of Christian faith and practice, Basetti-Sani says that far from rejecting orthodox, i.e., Roman Catholic, teaching, “In these texts, when they are read with the Christian key, [there] is an introduction to the mystery of Christ, but, at the same time, one is put on guard against false interpretations of the Trinity and the incarnation, contained in Monophysite and Nestorian formulas.”<sup>86</sup>

Clearly, Basetti-Sani’s Christian reading of the Qur’ān is appreciative of the Islamic scripture as it is, and of the Qur’ān’s inter-textual dialogue with the earlier Jewish and Christian scriptures. Nevertheless, with its ‘Christian key’, it fails to respect the Qur’ān in its own context and ignores its message within its own hermeneutical frame of reference, especially the full import of the Islamic critique of all Christian confessions already in the Qur’ān.

From another perspective, the long time Anglican interpreter of Islam for Christians, Bishop Kenneth Cragg, presented translated selections from throughout the Qur’ān under thematic subject-headings familiar to westerners: God, Creation, Prophets, Muḥammad, Faith and Religion, Society and Law, and the Last Things. Together with a long introductory essay and multiple indices, the volume is meant “to facilitate intelligent comprehension of the Qur’ān wherever the English language goes.”<sup>87</sup> The problem here is that the dismemberment of the Qur’ān text, while it indubitably enables the presentation of many of the scripture’s master ideas in a foreign idiom for the sake of western Christian understanding, it also masks the integral structure of the Qur’ān and the rhetorical force of its critique of Christianity. The approach blunts the perception of the Qur’ān as the scripture of a confessional community not only critical of Jews, Christians

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<sup>86</sup> Basetti-Sani, *The Koran in the Light*, p. 179.

<sup>87</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *Readings in the Qur’ān* (London: Collins, 1988).

and others, but as the basic, revelational warrant for a new faith community, albeit one that presents itself as a corrective revelation, in continuity with the earlier scriptures with which it interacts inter-textually. Like Basetti-Sani's reading, Bishop Cragg's enterprise, from a very different perspective and in its own way, nevertheless also brings the Qur'ān within the hermeneutical horizon of Christianity, where its own message largely escapes notice.

### B – Christians Reading the Qur'ān in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century –

Over the long history of Christian readings in the Qur'ān one notices that writers have for the most part been interested only in those verses in which Christian themes have been prominent, biblical narratives have been echoed, or in verses they might cite in support of a favorable view of Christian thought or practice. Unlike some modern historians of religion or some scholars interested in the comparative study of religious traditions from an academic point of view, only seldom have confessional, non-Muslim readers of the Qur'ān, expressly reading from a religious perspective, taken an interest in the canonical text as an integral scripture, that composes its meanings within its own, internal hermeneutical circle. One is not speaking here of the exegetical tradition, or of the long history of Islamic commentary on the Qur'ān, but about the Qur'ān itself as a canonical, scriptural unity in its own right, which over the course of its history of 'coming down' (*an-nuzūl*) during Muḥammad's lifetime, and in the process of its collection into its *textus receptus*, has achieved its own inward referentiality, evident in many structural ways, but culminating in the proclamation of the major themes it commends. These themes broadly speaking are essentially two: commending belief in one God (*at-tawḥīd*) and recognizing the one God's human messengers (*rusul Allāh*), and

particularly Muḥammad as the “the messenger of God and the seal of the prophets.”

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Looking from the perspective of the Qur’ān’s canonical unity as an integral scripture, one sees straight away that its community is neither Judaism nor Christianity; it explicitly sets itself off over against these two communities, critiques their thought and practice and calls out to its own distinctive faith community. So while it is certainly legitimate for Jews and Christians to discuss the significance of the Qur’ān among themselves, from their own point of view, and even to employ its passages in their own apologetic enterprises, it is not true to fact to interpret what the Qur’ān itself actually means within itself, from a Jewish or Christian, or any other, non-Qur’ānic point of view. We have seen that with the best will in the world, this is what has most often happened in the case of both ancient and modern Christian readers of the Qur’ān anxious positively to esteem the Islamic scripture religiously; ignoring its intention to critique Christianity from the perspective of the commendation of its major themes, they have most often read the Qur’ān through Christian lenses.

The exigencies of the twenty-first century, with their summons to more objective inter-religious and inter-cultural conversations for the sake of justice and peace between nations and peoples of different faith traditions, call for new reading strategies in the Christian approach to the Qur’ān. What follows is a set of personal reflections on the principles that one thinks are basic for an honest, Christian reading of the Islamic scripture.

Taking one’s cue from recent scholarly studies of the history of Late Antiquity, one recognizes that the prophetic career of Muḥammad and the coming to be of the

Qur'ān have their most immediate, historical frame of reference within the context of the presence of Judaism among the Arabic-speaking peoples and the spread of several Christian confessions in the same milieu, mostly expressed originally in an Aramaic idiom (principally Syriac), especially from the fifth century onward. The Qur'ān, itself being the best evidence for it, is fully cognizant of this context and addresses itself directly to it; its audience was made up of Arabic-speaking polytheists, Jews, and Christians among others.

Literarily speaking, the Arabic Qur'ān is scripturally inter-textual; it evidently presumes in its audience a familiarity with the narratives and major prophetic figures of the Jewish and Christian scriptural traditions, along with much rabbinical and ecclesiastical lore. This dimension of the Qur'ān's is most evident in the Meccan *sūrahs*.

In these same Meccan *sūrahs*, the Qur'ān's concern, as it evokes the ritual, liturgical, scriptural, and homiletic language in which God addresses His messenger, is principally with the commendation of its major themes and the calling forth of the nascent Islamic community in the context of the audience's interactions with God's messenger.

Inter-religious confrontations with Jews and Christians come to the fore in the Medinan *sūrahs*, in which the Qur'ān's distinctive names for the rival communities of faith come to the fore, along with a heightened polemic against the distinctive Jewish and Christian doctrines and practices that are presented as being in conflict with the Qur'ān's major themes. Here the Qur'ānic critique of Christian belief and behavior is most pronounced.

These same Medinan *sūrahs* are nevertheless not principally concerned with confrontations between the nascent Islamic community and Jews or Christians. Rather, their main concerns are with community building among the believers themselves, with rules of behavior, religious decorum, and political arrangements in Medina and beyond in the Arabic-speaking tribal areas of the peninsula. Interactions with Christians, such as those traditionally said to have come from Najrān to confer with Muḥammad,<sup>88</sup> are only one part of the prophet's Medinan concerns; for the most part he heeds God's word and proclaims it amidst the vicissitudes of life in the burgeoning World of Islam.

Nevertheless, from the historian's point of view, all the while that the Qur'ān is for him the record of the on-going call to Islam that brought forth a new faith community within the hearing range of the voices of synagogue and church, it is also, albeit secondarily, an accidental record of the synagogue's and especially the church's interactions with a strong, new religious voice challenging its doctrines of God and its traditional prophetology. And given the interface of the Qur'ān with the earlier scriptural traditions, the record allows the historian of Christianity to retrieve traces of otherwise lost portions of the church's history in the Arabic-speaking world.

For the Christian reader of the Qur'ān, this awareness of the origins and character of the Islamic scripture allows openness to its testimony to the supernatural dimension of life, even in its most pedestrian details. It enables the reader to hear the prophetic call to care for the poor and abandoned, all the while that the Qur'ān also continually calls the Christian in God's sight to voice his faith in answer to Jesus' question, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" and "Who do you say that I am? (Mt. 16:13-15)

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<sup>88</sup> See René Tardy, *Najrān: Chrétiens d'Arabie avant l'Islam* (Recherches, 8; Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1999).

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