

## Appendix II – The People of the Book and Diversity of Religion

Islam's attitude to Christianity is as old as Islam itself, since Islam partly took shape by adopting certain important ideas from Judaism and Christianity and criticizing others. Indeed, Islam's self-definition is partly the result of its attitude to these two religions and their communities.

That there was messianism among certain Meccan Arab circles at the time Muḥammad (PBUH) appeared has been amply documented. Instead of accepting either Judaism or Christianity, these Arab circles were looking for a new revealed religion of their own, so that "they might be even better guided" than the two older communities. After the advent of Muḥammad (PBUH) as God's Messenger, the Qur'ān repeatedly refers to a group of people about whom it says, "We had already given them the Book [i.e., the Torah and the Gospel] and they also believe in the Qur'ān." These verses clearly show that some Jews or Christians or Judeo-Christians had also entertained messianic hopes and encouraged Muḥammad (PBUH) in his mission. The Qur'ān, indeed, taunts the Meccan pagans, saying that whether or not they believed in the Qur'ān (or the Prophet), "those to whom We had already given the Book, believe in it [or him]" (cf. Chapter VIII).

There are several important and interesting issues connected with this phenomenon. For example: was Islam entirely the result of Jewish or Christian "influences," or was it basically an independent native growth that picked up some important ideas from the Judeo-Christian tradition? A number of Jewish and Christian scholars have vied with each other to show that Islam was genetically related to one or the other religion. Recently several Western scholars, among them Montgomery Watt, Maurice Gaudefroy-Demomlyness, and, above all, H.A.R. Gibb, have argued convincingly that in its nativity Islam grew out of an Arab background, although in its formation and development there have been many important influxes from the Judeo-Christian tradition.<sup>1</sup> But the issue with which we are directly concerned here is not the "originality" of Islam but Muḥammad's (PBUH) perception of himself and his mission, which is intimately connected with his perception of his relationship to other prophets, their religion(s), and their communities.

It is quite obvious from the Qur'ān that from the beginning to the end of his prophetic career Muḥammad (PBUH) was absolutely convinced of the divine character of the earlier revealed documents and of the divine messengership of the bearers of these documents. This is why he recognized without a moment of hesitation that Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and other Old and New Testament religious personalities had been genuine prophets like himself. This acceptance was undoubtedly strengthened when some followers of these earlier religions recognized Muḥammad (PBUH) as a true prophet and the Qur'ān as a revealed book. Hence the falsity of the view popular among Western Islamists (originally enunciated by the patriarchs of Western Islamic studies like Snouck Hurgronje and Nöldeke-Schwally) that in Mecca the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) was fully convinced that *he was giving to the Arabs what Moses and Jesus had previously given to their respective communities*, and that it was at Madina, where the Jews refused to recognize him as God's Messenger, that

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<sup>1</sup> W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford, 1953), pp. 1-29; Maurice Gaudefroy-Demomlyness, *Mahomet* (Paris, 1957), pp. i-xxii; and H.A.R. Gibb, "Pre-Islamic Monotheism in Arabia," *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962) 269-80.

he instituted the Muslim community as separate from Jews and Christians (cf. Chapter VIII).

There is no mention of any fixed religious communities in the earlier part of the Qur'ān. True, different prophets have come to different peoples and nations at different times, but their messages are universal and identical. All these messages emanate from a single source: "the Mother of the Book" (43.az-Zukhrū:4; 13.ar-Ra'd:39) and "the Hidden Book" (56.al-Wāqī'ah:78). Since these messages are universal and identical, it is incumbent on all people to believe in all divine messages. This is why Muḥammad (PBUH) felt himself obligated to believe in the prophethood of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, for God's religion is indivisible and prophethood is also indivisible. Indeed, the Prophet is made to declare in the Qur'ān that not only does he believe in the Torah and the Gospel but "I believe in whatever Book God may have revealed (42.ash-Shūrā:15). This is because God's guidance is universal and not restricted to any nation or nations: "And there is no nation wherein a warner has not come" (35.Fāṭir:24) and "For every people a guide has been provided" (13.ar-Ra'd:7). The word "Book" is, in fact, often used in the Qur'ān not with reference to any specific revealed book but as a generic term denoting the totality of divine revelations (see 2.al-Baqarah:213, for example).

If Muḥammad (PBUH) and his followers believe in all prophets, all people must also and equally believe in him. Disbelief in him would be equivalent to disbelief in all, for this would arbitrarily upset the line of prophetic succession. In the late Meccan period, however, the Prophet became more aware that Jews and Christians would not believe in him, nor would they recognize each other. Recent scholarship has shown that this awareness came to Muḥammad (PBUH) in Mecca and not in Madina, as is often believed. At this point, Jews and Christians are called *al-aḥzāb* (sectarians, partisans, people who are divisive of the unity of religion and disruptive of the line of prophetic succession), each *ḥizb* (also *shi'a*) or party rejoicing in what it has to the exclusion of the rest. Muslims are warned not to split up into parties. It is at this point that the religion of Muḥammad (PBUH) is described as "straight" and "upright," the religion of the *ḥanīf* (i.e., of an upright monotheist who does not follow divisive forces) and is linked and identified with the religion of Abraham.

The awareness of the diversity of religions, despite the unity of their origin, sets Muḥammad (PBUH) a theological problem of the first order. It so persistently and painfully pressed itself on his mind that from the beginning of this awareness until well into the last phase of his life, the Qur'ān treats this question at various levels. The fact that religions are split not only from each other but even within themselves is recurrently deplored. But a somewhat different point of view on the problem also emerges in the Qur'ān. Humankind had been a unity, but this unity was split up because of the advent of divine messages at the hands of the prophets. The fact that the prophets' messages act as watersheds and divisive forces is rooted in some divine mystery, for if God so willed, He could surely bring them to one path:

Mankind were one single community. Then God raised up prophets who gave good tidings and warnings and God also sent down with them The Book in truth, that it may decide among people in regard to what they differed. But people did not differ in it [i.e., with regard to the Truth] except those to whom it had been given [and that only] after clear signs had come to them; [and this they did] out of [sheer] rebelliousness among themselves. (2.al-Baqarah:213)

If your Lord had so willed, He would have made mankind one community, but they continue to remain divided. (11.Hūd:118)

Men were but one community; then they began to differ. But for a decree of your Lord that had already preceded, a decision would have been made with regard to that wherein they differ. (10.Yūnus:19)

In Madina, the terms "sectarians" and "partisans" are dropped, and Jews and Christians are recognized as "communities," although, of course, they continue to be invited to Islam. As we noted earlier, the Qur'ān, in the early stages in Mecca, does not speak at all in terms of communities and certainly not in terms of exclusivist communities. It was the awareness and subsequent recognition of the existence of the mutually exclusive Jewish and Christian communities (and probably equally exclusivist subgroups in Christianity) that led the Qur'ān first to call them "sectarians" and "partisans" and subsequently to recognize them (in Madina) as communities. It was the solidification of these communities that led to the announcement of Muslims as a separate community:

The Jews say, The Christians have nothing to stand on, and the Christians say, The Jews have nothing to stand on,—while both recite the same Book. (2.al-Baqarah:113)  
They say, No one shall enter the paradise except those who are Jews or Christians—these are their wishful thoughts. (2.al-Baqarah:111)  
Jews and Christians will never be pleased with you [O Muhammad!] unless you follow their religion[s]; say [to them]: The guidance of God [not of Jews or Christians] is the guidance. (2.al-Baqarah:120)

The Qur'ān's reply to these exclusivist claims and claims of proprietorship over God's guidance, then, is absolutely unequivocal: Guidance is not the function of communities but of God and good people, and *no* community may lay claims to be uniquely guided and elected. The whole tenor of the Qur'ānic argument is against election:

When God tested Abraham by some words and he [Abraham] fulfilled them, God said [to Abraham], I am going to make you a leader of men. What about my progeny? asked Abraham; He [God] replied, My promise does not extend to the unjust ones. (2.al-Baqarah:124)

The whole mystique of election is undermined by the repeated statements of the Qur'ān after mentioning Biblical prophets and their people:

That is a community that is by-gone: to them belongs what they earned and to you [O Muslims!] will belong what you will earn, and *you* will not be asked for what they had done. (2.al-Baqarah:134, 141)

In conformity with this strong rejection of exclusivism and election, the Qur'ān repeatedly recognizes the existence of good people in other communities—Jews, Christians and Sabaeans—just as it recognizes the people of faith in Islam:

Those who believe [Muslims], the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabaeans—whosoever believe in God and the Last Day and do good deeds, they shall have their reward from their Lord, shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they come to grief. (2.al-Baqarah:62; cf. 5.al-Mā'idah:69)

In both these verses, the vast majority of Muslim commentators exercise themselves fruitlessly to avoid having to admit the obvious meaning: that those—from any section of humankind—who believe in God and the Last Day and do good deeds are saved. They either say that by Jews, Christians, and Sabaeans here are meant those who have actually become "Muslims"—which interpretation is clearly belied by the fact that "Muslims" constitute only the first of the four groups of "those who believe"—or that they were those good Jews, Christians, and Sabaeans who lived before the advent of the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH)—which is an even worse *tour de force*. Even when replying to Jewish and Christian claims that the hereafter was theirs and theirs alone, the Qur'ān says, "On the contrary, whosoever surrenders himself to God while he does good deeds as well, he shall find his reward with his Lord, shall have no fear, nor shall he come to grief (2.al-Baqarah:112).

The logic of this recognition of universal goodness, with belief in one God and the Last Day as its necessary underpinning, demands, of course, that the Muslim community be recognized as *a* community among communities. Here, the Qur'ān appears to give its final answer to the problem of a multi-community world:

And We have sent down to you the Book in truth, confirming the Book that existed already before it and protecting it. ... For each one of you [several communities] We have appointed a Law and a Way of Conduct [while the essence of religion is identical]. If God had so willed, He would have made all of you one community, but [He has not done so] that He may test you in what He has given you; *so compete in goodness*. To God shall you all return and He will tell you [the Truth] about what you have been disputing. (5.al-Mā'idah:48)

The positive value of different religions and communities, then, is that they may compete with each other in goodness (cf. 2.al-Baqarah:148, 177; where, after announcing the change in the *qibla* from Jerusalem to Mecca, it is emphasized that the *qibla* per se is of no importance, the real worth being in virtue and *competing in goodness*). The Muslim community itself, lauded as the "Median Community" (2.al-Baqarah:143) and "the best community produced for mankind" (3.Āli 'Imrān:110), is given no assurance whatever that it will be automatically God's darling unless, when it gets power on the earth, it establishes prayers, provides welfare for the poor, commands good, and prohibits evil (22.al-Ḥajj:41, etc.). In 47.Muḥammad:38, the Muslims are warned that "If you turn your backs [upon this teaching], God will substitute another people for you who will not be like you" (cf. 9.al-Tawbah:39).

According to the Qur'ān, the most fundamental distinction between God and creatures is that God is infinite—All-Life, All-Power, All-Knowledge, etc.—whereas all creatures are finite. God, the Infinite, has created everything "according to a measure" (e.g., 54.al-Qamar:49). He alone is the "Measurer [*qādir*]," while everything else is "measured [*maqdūr*]." This idea is ubiquitous in the Qur'ān. This is not a doctrine of "pre-determinism," as many Muslim theologians of the medieval ages understood it to be. "Measuring" in this context simply means "finitude" of potentialities, despite their range. Human beings, for example, are acknowledged by the Qur'ān to be possessed of great potentialities: Adam outstripped angels in a competition of creative knowledge and angels were thus ordered to honor him (2.al-Baqarah:30 ff.); yet human beings cannot be God.

It is because of the infinitude of God that both absolute mercy and absolute power are both attributable to God alone. God's mercy is literally limitless (40.Ghāfir:7; 7.al-A'rāf:156)—indeed, mercy is a law written into God's nature (6.al-An'ām:12).

And the very fact that there exists the plenitude of being rather than the emptiness of nonbeing is an expression of the primal act of God's mercy. God's power is commensurate with God's mercy. You may not point to any human being, with delimitations and a date of birth, and say simply, "That person is God." To the Qur'ān, this is neither possible, nor intelligible, nor pardonable.

The severity of the Qur'ān's judgments on incarnation and trinity has varied. There are verses that regard the Christian doctrine simply as "extremism in faith":

O People of the Book! do not go to extremes in your faith and do not say about God except truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was but a Messenger of God and His Word that He cast into Mary and a Spirit from Him. So believe in God and in His Messengers and say not, [God] is there, desist from this, it is better for you. God is but one and only God—far above He be from having a son; to Him belong whatever is in the heaven and in the earth. . . . The Messiah [Jesus] will not be too proud to be God's servant, nor will those angels who are very near God [d disdain to be His servants]. And whosoever should disdain to do service to Him and be too proud [for this], God will gather all of them to Himself [on the Last Day] . (4.an-Nisā':171-72; cf. 5.al-Mā'idah:77)

But there are much stronger verses reminiscent of the Qur'ānic statements against idolaters:

Those are infidels who say: God is the Messiah, son of Mary. Say: Who will be of any help against God, if He should want to destroy the Messiah, son of Mary, his mother and all those who live on the earth? To God belongs the kingdom of heaven and earth and whatever is between them; He creates whatever He wills, and God is powerful over everything. (5.al-Mā'idah:17)

Again:

Committed to infidelity are those who say: God is the same as the Messiah, son of Mary; . . . committed to infidelity are those who say: God is one among three—while there is no God but the Unique one; if they do not desist from what they say, a painful punishment will touch those of them as commit infidelity. Why do they not repent to God and seek His pardon, for God is forgiving and merciful? The Messiah, son of Mary, was but a Messenger—before him had gone many other messengers; his mother was the truthful one; they both used to eat food [like other men]. Just see how We make the signs clear to them and also see how they are being deceived! (5.al-Mā'idah:72-75)

The Qur'ān speaks in the same vein about and to Muḥammad (PBUH):

Muḥammad is but a Messenger—before him have gone many other Messengers. Should he then die or be slain [in battle] will you turn back upon your heels [O Muslims!]? (3.Āli 'Imrān:144)

Say [to the pagan Arabs], Tell me, if God were to destroy me and all those who are with me, or should have mercy upon us, who will provide refuge. . .? (67.al-Mulk:28)

Muḥammad (PBUH) cannot take it for granted that God will automatically continue to send him revelatory messages:

Do they say that he [Muhammad] concocts lies and attributes them to God? But if God so will, He may seal up your heart [O Muhammad! So that no revealed message will issue forth from it]—indeed. God [not Muhammad] obliterates the falsehood and confirms what is true, through His Words . . . (42.ash-Shūrā:24)

For the Qur’ān, then, Jesus can be as little an incarnation of God as Muhammad (PBUH) himself or, indeed, any other prophet. But it is true that the Qur’ān speaks with tenderness of Jesus and also his followers (see 5.al-Mā’idah:82: "You shall find the nearest of all people in friendship to the Believers [Muslims] those who say they are Christians. This is because among them there are priests and monks and they are not a proud people"; also 57.al-Hādeed:27: "Then we followed up [these Messengers] with Jesus, son of Mary, to whom We gave the Evangel, and We put in the hearts of his followers kindness and mercy . . .").

This attitude toward Christianity has no parallel toward other communities mentioned in the Qur’ān. Because the Qur’ān is sometimes very mild, indeed highly tender, toward Christians (although at times highly critical of them), some Western scholars have thought that basically Muhammad (PBUH) was a fellow-traveler and perhaps almost a Christian. It has been argued that political motivations prevented him from a full and explicit identification with Christianity. Some have also seen his increasing hostility toward Byzantium as the cause of the increasingly severe criticism of Christianity in the Qur’ān. Some also think that he did not correctly understand the nature of the doctrine of Jesus in Christianity because it was misrepresented to him by Christians. But it is difficult to see how the doctrine of incarnation, for example, could be misunderstood. The trouble with the first view is that it is impossible to prove that the severely critical passages of the Qur’ān are necessarily later than other passages. For example, 57.al-Hādeed:27 seems to be quite late Madinan. The truth, then, appears to be that Muhammad (PBUH) must have encountered various views at the hands of various representatives of Christianity and that the Qur’ān appears to address different groups at different points.

In any case, the unacceptability of Jesus' divinity and the Trinity to the Qur’ān is incontrovertible, as is the fact that Jesus and his followers are regarded as exceptionally charitable and self-sacrificing. The Qur’ān would most probably have no objections to the Logos having become flesh if the Logos were not simply identified with God and the identification were understood less literally. For the Qur’ān, the Word of God is never identified simply with God. Jesus, again, is the "Spirit of God" in a special sense for the Qur’ān, although God had breathed His spirit into Adam as well (15.al-Hijr:29; 38.Şād:72). It was on the basis of some such expectations from the self-proclaimed monotheism of Christians—and, of course, Jews—that the Qur’ān issued its invitation: "O People of the Book! Let us come together upon a formula which is common between us—that we shall not serve anyone but God, that we shall associate none with Him" (3.Āli ‘Imrān:64). This invitation, probably issued at a time when Muhammad (PBUH) thought not all was yet lost among the three self-proclaimed monotheistic communities, must have appeared specious to Christians. It has remained unheeded. But I believe something can still be worked out by way of positive cooperation, provided the Muslims hearken more to the Qur’ān than to the historic formulations of Islam and provided that recent pioneering efforts continue to yield a Christian doctrine more compatible with universal monotheism and egalitarianism.