THE ISLAMIC VIEW OF CHRISTIANITY

By:

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Abstract

This paper aims at clarifying the traditional Islamic views of Christianity based on the Qur'an and Hadith and the interpretations of these twin primary sources of Islam by Muslim religious authorities over the centuries. In light of the Qur'anic Christology, the paper presents a critical review of the Muslim understanding of Christian theology as well as its ethics and religious practices. In particular, the paper discusses the traditional Islamic view of the Christian doctrine of Trinity and of Incarnation. A special reference is made to the view of Ibn 'Arabi on the subject. The paper also discusses what the absence in Christianity of a divine law, the *Shari'ah*, as understood in both Judaism and Islam, means to that religion particularly in terms of its capability to offer a life of equilibrium between the spiritual and the temporal for its ordinary believers. Also touched is the Muslim belief of abrogation of one divine revelation by a subsequent revelation. This belief has implications for the Muslim attitudes toward other religions, including Christianity. Finally, the paper discusses the major factors that have brought about changes, more often negative, in the Muslim-Christian relations in the modern world.

The Traditional View of Christianity

In considering the vast subject of the Islamic view of Christianity it is important to bear in mind the presence of an Islamic doctrine concerning Christianity rooted in the Qur'an and *Hadith*, the Muslims' continuous experience of living with Eastern Christians for fourteen hundred years, over a millennium of battle with a West which for most of that period was Christian and the diversity of the experience of various parts of the Islamic world during the European domination of the colonial period which in any case cannot be divorced in the Muslim mind from Christianity.

It is also essential to bear in mind the hierarchic structure of the Islamic revelation in the sense that it possesses levels of meaning ranging from the most exoteric to the most esoteric and the grades of those who attach themselves to the religion to which the Qur'an itself refers as those who follow the injunction of the religion, *al-islam*, those who possess faith in its more inward sense, *al-iman*, and those who possess spiritual virtue, *al-ihsãn*. The attitude of Muslims belonging to these various categories vis-a-vis other religions and especially Christianity has never been the same. Muslim saints and even philosophers have had Christian disciples or teachers while a certain religious authority living in the same city at the same time may have been writing polemics against Christians. Likewise, Muslims living in a particular area without much contact with Christianity have held a different attitude toward Christians than those who fought against the Crusaders, or were expelled from Spain or were put under various kinds of pressures by Christian missionaries.

Nevertheless, despite these geographical and historical variations, there remains the Islamic view of Christianity rooted in certain chapters of the Qur'an mostly dealing with Christ and the Virgin Mary and remaining as a permanent background for Muslim reflections upon the religion which from the beginning was considered to be the closest to Islam not only in time in the historic unfolding of the Abrahamic

religions but also in structure and beliefs. In contrast to Christianity which obviously does not possess a specifically Christian doctrine of Islam rooted in its Sacred Scripture, Islam possesses its own revealed knowledge of Christianity, a knowledge which has been interpreted over the ages on many levels from the juridical and theological to the Gnostic and mystical but which nevertheless has remained over the centuries as the central determining factor in the way Muslims have viewed Christianity. Even today one cannot gain an in-depth understanding of the Islamic view of Christianity without knowledge of what the Islamic tradition based upon the Qur'anic revelation has taught the Muslims about the religion of Christ.

This traditional Islamic view of Christianity is founded first of all upon accepting Christianity as a religion revealed by God, of Christ as being sent by Him and even possessing miraculous characteristics including his virgin birth[1] and of the gospels as being a revealed book. Hence, Christianity became juridically and theologically accepted as a *'religion of the book'* and the Christians as *'the people of the book' (ahl al-kitab)* with all that such a status implied for them according to the Divine Law *(al-Shari'ah)*[2] of Islam including the recognition and protection of their religion wherever and whenever they would be under Muslim rule. The Islamic view of Christianity possesses of course its own doctrine of *Christ*, his mission, his being taken to Heaven in body without suffering death upon the cross and his eschatological role in bringing the present cycle of human history to a close. It also includes clear teachings about *Mary*, the most blessed of women, the only woman mentioned by name in the Qur'an after whom even a chapter of the Sacred Text is named, and the person who accompanies the soul of blessed Muslim women to paradise. The Qur'anic and Islamic doctrine of Christ and the Virgin, who moreover, appear nearly always

[1] References to Jesus and Mary abound in the Qur'an. See especially Surahs III, V, XIX, and LXI.

[2] There is an extensive literature on the legal status of dhimmah and dhimmis especially Christians. As far as the Western views of the subject are concerned, see Chehata, C. 1936. *Essai d'une theorie generale de l'obligation on droit musulman*. Cairo; and Rose, R. B. 1982. 'Islam and the development of personal status laws among Christian *dhimmis*.' *Muslim World*, 72, 159-79. Muslims are in general ery sensitive to the Christian criticsm of the Islamic law of *dhimmis* and nearly all Muslim apologetic literature from Amir 'Ali onward contains discussions of this subject.

together in the Qur'an, remains a part of the Islamic religion itself independent of Christianity. But the presence of such teachings cannot but affect the Muslims' views toward Christians, and indeed, over the centuries, despite all the enmity and distrust that has characterized much of the history of the two religions when in confrontation with each other, Islam and all traditional Muslims have continued to revere the two figures who also stand at the heart of the Christian religion.

Rejection of Trinity and Incarnation

There is, however, on the basis of the acceptance of the Divine Origin of the Christian message and reverance of an exceptional character for Christ and the Virgin, a rejection in the Qur'an itself of both the doctrine of the Trinity and the incarnation. Since Islam is based on the Absolute and not its manifestations and seeks to return Abrahamic monotheism to its original purity as the religion of the One, any emphasis upon a particular manifestation of the One in the direction of the many is seen by Islam as a veil cast upon the plenary reality of *Divine Unity* which Islam seeks to assert so categorically and forcefully. Therefore, the trinitarian doctrine, not only of certain Oriental churches to which the Qur'anic account seems to be closer than Western interpretations of the doctrine but of any other kind which would not place the trinitarian relationship below the level of Divine Oneness, is rejected by the Islamic perspective. Needless to say Islam would accept an interpretation of the Trinity which would not in any way compromise Divine Unity, one which would consider the persons of the Trinity to be 'Aspects' or 'Names' of God standing below His Essence which, being the Absolute, must be One without condition and above all relations. Likewise, the idea of a Divine Descent in the form of *incarnation* is excluded from the Islamic point of view. The chapter which is entitled 'Unity' or 'Sincerity' in the Qur'an and which summarizes Islamic beliefs concerning the nature of God is as follows:

Say: 'He God is One.'
God, the Self-sufficient Besought of all;
He begetteth not, nor is He begotten,
And none is like unto Him. (translation of M. Lings)

These verses not only define the Islamic perspective but almost seem to oppose directly the doctrine of the Trinity (*tathlith*) and incarnation (*hulü*), both being such an anathema to the Muslim mind, as these doctrines were usually understood in the world in which Islam spread.

The question thus appeared to the earliest Muslims as to why a religion revealed by God through such a major prophet as Christ to a people some of whom the Prophet of Islam met and respected, should possess such teachings which should be so directly opposed to what Muslims consider as the obvious truth concerning the nature of the Divine. Few Muslim theologians of the earlier or even later centuries sought to examine the works of Christian theologians themselves on these issues, especially writings emanating from the Latin Church, while certain Sufis such as 'Ibn *'A*rabi and many of the Persian Sufi poets saw both the doctrine of Trinity and incarnation as symbolic ways of speaking about the Absolute and Its manifestations without in any way destroying the doctrine of Divine Unity.[3] Moreover, a theologian and Sufi like *al-Ghazzali* tried expressly to absolve Christ himself from having ever taught either

[3] In his *Tarjuman al-ashwaq*, trans. Nicholson, R. A. 1978. London, p. 70, Ibn 'Arabi has a poem which is as follows: My beloved in three although He is One, even as the (three) Persons (of the Trinity) are made on Person in essence. In his own commentary upon the poem (*Tarjuman*, p. 71), he adds, 'Number does not beget multiplicity in the Divine substance, as the Christians declare that the Three Persons of the Trinity are One God, and as the Koran declares (17: 110): '*Call on God or call on the Merciful: howsoever ye invoke Him, it is well, for to Him belong the most excellent Names.*' The cardinal Names in the Koran are three, viz. Allah, al-Rahman and al-Rabb, by which One God is signified, and the rest of the Names serve as epithets of those Three.' In his *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyyah* (Beirut, n. d., 3, p. 172), Ibn 'Arabi states that the Christians in emphasizing the Trinity still have a way open to God's uniqueness (*al-farddaniyyah*) since the number three is in a sense a return to the number one, and trinity being the first reflection of unity in the domain of multiplicity.

the Trinitarian or the incarnationist doctrine, he being a prophet who cannot, according to Islam, but claim God's Oneness without any reserve or compromise.[4]

Belief in Abrogation

By and large, however, Muslims tended toward the elaboration of the Qur'anic teaching itself concerning the changes and modifications brought about in the text of earlier revelations as a result of the passage of time and lack of care of the followers of these religions to preserve the actual texts revealed to them, not to speak of purposeful distortions. To this view was added the belief in *abrogation* (*naskh*) according to which a later revelation abrogates an earlier one. Some argued on the basis of this idea that the gospels abrogated the Torah and the Qur'an the gospels and that with the coming of Christianity all Jews should have embraced Christianity and likewise with the coming of Islam all Christians should have become Muslims. But many perceptive religious thinkers of Islam realized that the doctrine of abrogation could not be applied so simply because in the case of the Qur'an itself certain verses directly concerned with the Divine Law abrogated earlier verses without the earlier verses becoming false or ceasing to be the Word of God. Moreover, Christians continued to live and practice their religion as did the Jews and both obviously according to God's Will. Therefore, their religion could not simply be dismissed as being abrogated. The commonly held view thus remained one of accepting the Divine Origin of Christianity and that Christians would be saved if they practiced their religion,[5] while there was the general feeling that somehow changes had taken place

[4] See his *al-Radd al-jamil 'ala sarih al-injil*, trans. Chidiac, R. 1939. Paris. Some contemporary scholars have doubted the authenticity of the attribution of this work to al-Ghazzali, while Louis Massignon and several other scholars consider it to be one of al-Ghazzali's authentic writings. In any case the work exemplifies the attitude we wish to point out.

[5] There were some Muslim religious authorities who did not accept this view, but the majority of them, as well as of traditional Muslims in general have believed and continue to believe that the doors of both heaven and hell are open for Christians as they are for Muslims. Moreover, there are numerous *hadiths* concerning both Christ and Moses leading the virtuous members of their community to paradise on the Day of Judgment. The general use of the term *kafir* (usually translated as infidel), so common in Muslim

in the Sacred Scripture of the Christians leading them to such doctrines as that of the Trinity and incarnation, neither of which could have been taught by a prophet of God, as Muslims envisaged the prophetic function in its totality from Adam to the Prophet of Islam.

Problems with Christian Ethics

The Islamic view of Christianity is also as much concerned with the moral and practical aspects of religion as with the theological. Here, two very different forms of morality have examined and judged the other in the light of their own precepts and norms. Islam criticizes Christianity for not having a Divine Law, a *Shari'ah*, in the strict sense of the term and does not understand why Christianity did not follow Mosaic Law or bring a law of its own. Christianity is seen by Muslims as a religion devoid of an exoterism which then substitutes a message of an essentially esoteric nature as the exoteric, thereby creating disequilibrium in human society. Christian ethics is seen by Muslims as being too sublime for ordinary human beings to follow, the injunction to turn the other cheek being meant only for saints. That is why Sufis call Christ the prophet of inwardness and the spiritual life. But since all human beings are not saints, this Christian morality is seen by Muslims as neglecting the reality of human nature and of substituting an unattainable ideal, as far as the collectivity is concerned, for a realism based on human nature and capable of creating equilibrium for man in his earthly life and felicity in the hereafter based upon this equilibrium.

Nowhere is this opposition of moral views more evident than in the question of sexuality which is seen as being tainted with sin in the mainstream of Christian theology, especially as it developed in the West, while being seen as a sacrament in

sources when referring to Christians, is more a custom than a strictly speaking theological distinction. Some Muslim schools of thought have called their Muslim opponents *kafirs* as well without this implying damnation in principle as the doctrine of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* would imply.

Islam as long as it is practiced according to the Divine Law. Islam sees the indissoluble, monogamous marriage of Latin Christianity as being certainly a possibility but of not exhausting all the possibilities of human nature. Moreover, Islam opposes celibacy and therefore cannot accept the Christian doctrine of the virtue of celibacy over married life. Muslims are especially surprised when Christians attack the Islamic attitude toward sexuality and such practices as polygamy while in the West, in which Christianity has been the religion of the vast majority, sexual promiscuity is of a dimension inconceivable to a traditional Muslim.

This lack of realism in promulgating Christian ethics is seen by Muslims to be also at the root of the Christian opposition to the world and worldly power. The Muslims have always asked if Christianity is opposed to war and Christ said, 'He who uses the sword shall perish by the sword', then why is it that Christian people over the centuries have not carried out less wars than others and certainly have not shown any more restraint in war than have non-Christians. The whole attitude of Christianity toward the world, whether it be its political and economic aspects or the enjoyments of the flesh, is seen by Islam to contain an ambiguity where the ideal preached and the practice followed have often little to do with each other. This opposition issues in fact from the very different conception of the 'world' in the religious perspectives of Christianity and Islam. "For the Christian 'what is of this world, *ipso facto* takes one away from God'; for the Abrahamic Semites [Muslims and also Jews] 'what takes one away *de facto* from God is of this world alone.'[6]

Lest it be thought that the evaluation of Christianity morality by Muslims is simply negative, it must be emphasized that for traditional Muslims the ethical teachings of Christ are to be criticized not for being imperfect but for being too exalted to be realized by most human beings and therefore not widely applicable. All Muslims, who still remain faithful to their tradition, revere and respect the Sermon on the

[6] Schuoun, F. 1985. *Christianity/Islam—Essays on Esoteric Ecumenism*. Polit, G. trans. Bloomington, Indiana, 111.

Mount, and have great reverence for those who put such sublime teachings into practice. They criticize Christianity on this score in being too spiritual, not that it lacks spiritual character. In fact there is a widespread Islamic belief according to which in the Abrahamic cycle of revelation, Judaism represents the Law and the religion of this world; Christianity the Way and the religion of the heart or of the other world; and Islam the synthesis of both, in which a balance is created between the Law and the Way, between the demands of the body and of the spirit. It is no accident that Christ plays such an important role in Islamic esoterism, totally independent of historical influences, for he represents the esoteric dimension in the Abrahamic tradition, while Sufism *is* esoterism in Islam which seeks to return to the Unity and synthesis of the religion of Abraham before its particularization into the Judaic and Christian religions.

Appreciation for Christianity

The appreciation of the spiritual nature of Christianity morality is especially evident where Muslims live near pious Christians. In lands such as Syria and Egypt as well as the Holy Land before recent tragedies, there was hardly a devout Muslim who did not revere and deeply respect some pious Christian friend or neighbor. Reverence for Christian piety and beauty of soul of certain Christians in daily contact with Muslim constitutes a most important element of the Islamic view of Christianity, one which is often left out of account in theological or historical discussions and also one which unfortunately tends to become destroyed in those lands where the fruit of centuries of harmonious relationship between Muslims and Christians is being destroyed as a result of internal wars as well as intrusion of alien factors and forces.

The appreciation of Christianity is, however, not confined to human contacts on an every day basis. In spite of polemics written by Muslim theologians and jurists, there

exists a notable body of Islamic literature, especially in Arabic and Persian, which is based on profound respect for Christianity. Most of this literature is of a mystical nature where Christ plays a crucial role but in a Muhammadan universe. No one can read the poetry of Hãfiz or Rümi without becoming immediately aware of the ever present power of the 'breadth of the Messiah' to enliven the soul of man in the same way that the historical Christ brought the dead back to life. One must not forget that a saint like Rümi had many Christian disciples and even a Christian wife who did not convert to Islam, and that he visited Christian monasteries where he held friendly discourse with monks. It was only a bit over a century ago when in Isfahan, where many Armenians lived across the Zayanderud River from the Muslim quarters, a poet like Hãtif could claim that while trying to debate with a Christian concerning the Trinity, he heard from the church bells themselves that there is but one God worshipped by Muslims and Christians alike. Likewise, an Ibn 'Arabi, who hailed from southern Spain where he had encountered numerous Christians, could write many an illuminating page on the Christic reality and its function in the whole cycle of prophecy.[7]

Problems of the Common History

Historical contingencies and events such as the Crusades and the expulsion of Muslims from Spain have had of course a great deal of effect upon the view of certain Muslims about Christians, if not Christianity itself. But by and large before the present period Muslims have remained remarkably indifferent to Western Christianity and have not been at all interested in studying it. Accounts of West European Christianity do not appear in Muslim sources until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and then in chronicles of Ottoman and Moroccan ambassadors rather than in

[7] See especially his *Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. Austin, A. W. J. 1980. New York. chapter XV 'The Wisdom of Prophecy in the Word of Jesus'; and Ibn 'Arabi. *La Sagesse des Prophetes*. Trans. Burckhardt, T. 1955. Paris. 109-29.

the works of theologians. In general in these sources, some description is given of the institution of the papacy which Muslims did not understand fully and which they usually opposed. In fact something of the anti-clericalism of the French Revolution entered into the Islamic world and even affected those Muslims who were opposed to modernism, but who saw this European anti-clericalism as affirming their own opposition to the presence of a priesthood in Christianity. Again, they contrasted the situation of Islam in which every man is his own priest with that of Christianity, especially Catholic Christianity with an elaborate ecclesiastic hierarchy, and thought of the latter as being a later invention opposed to the original simple teachings of Christ. As Muslims came to know also more about post-medieval religious art of Europe, especially that of the Baroque period with its extremely ornate and naturalistic patterns and designs, they grew in their opposition to the practices of Christians and criticized their possession of power, both economic and military, combined with an art which appeared to Muslim eyes as an idolatry.[8] Such was not the case in either medieval Spain or Byzantium, but then Muslims were facing a Christian civilization of traditional character, possessing a spirituality and an other worldliness of which the more perceptive among Muslim observers were fully aware.

Likewise, missionary activity, whether Catholic or Protestant, usually combined with political and economic domination played a major role in determining Muslim attitudes toward Christians to the extent that in the Arab world to this day missionary activity (*tabshir*) is practically identified with colonialism (*isti'màr*). Since the Western powers, while opposing religion within their borders usually helped the missionaries from their countries when they went abroad, most Muslims came to identify practically all the activities of western powers with Christianity. A distrust was created of Western Christianity, which did not exist during the Crusades when European nations were openly Christian. This distrust has become aggravated as a

[8] This kind of reaction was not to be observed to the same extent as far as Protestantism was concerned. Many Muslims, who in fact encountered Protestantism for the first time …thought that it was closer to Islam and that Luther had moved in the direction of the Islamic understanding of religion.

result of political machinations and such colossal tragedies as recent events in Palestine and Lebanon. As a result, an atmosphere of bitterness has been created in many quarters vis-à-vis Christianity, an atmosphere which did not exist even half a century ago and certainly not in the Middle Ages when Christians and Muslims often fought, but as enemies who respected each other.

To these negative elements must be added the rise *of* what in the West is called Islamic fundamentalism. Many of the movements grouped under this name have in fact much in common with modernism and are not to be confused with traditional Islam. One of the major points of difference between them is in fact in their attitude toward Christianity. To the extent that these movements, many of which are fanatical and seek to redress grievances through violence, spread among traditional Muslims, the base of faith of the Muslims who accept their rhetoric and so-called ideology becomes narrowed. A simple peasant in the countryside of Tunisia or a merchant in the Lahore bazaar is usually more open to Christianity and appreciative of its spiritual values than an educated Muslim student caught in the web of one of such so-called fundamentalist movements. The fire of hatred burns bonds of amity and shrivels the soul of the faithful whether they be Muslim or Christian.

Coexistence and Mutual Acceptance

There are, however, those within the Islamic world who realize that the destinies of Islam and Christianity are intertwined, that God has willed both religions to exist and to be ways of salvation for millions of human beings, that the enemy of both religions is modern agnosticism, atheism and secularism, and that Christianity is a dispensation willed by Heaven not only as a historical background to Islam but as a revelation destined to guide a sector of humanity until the second coming of its founder. Such Muslims can draw from a vast resource of traditional Islamic writings which is able to

provide ample basis for a veritable ecumenical encounter with Christianity based not on reducing each religion to a bare minimum to accommodate the other, but grounded in that transcendent unity which unites all authentic religions, and especially Christianity and Islam. Such Muslims, far from surrendering to the fads and fashions of the day in the name of keeping up with the times, or of loosening the reins which control the passions in order to express anger in the name of indignation, base themselves on the eternal message of the Qur'an in their dealing with Christians. They develop, in the light of present needs, the expressly Qur'anic doctrine of the universality of revelation and even practice the Christian virtue of turning the other cheek when it comes to the matter of religious truth, that is, they accept the validity of Christianity even if Christians deny the authenticity of the Islamic revelation. They let the matter of who is saved be decided by the Supreme Judge who judges according to the truth not the 'fashions of the times' and expediency.

The voice of such Muslims might seem to be drowned out at the moment by the cry and fury of those who preach hatred in the name of justice and who even insult other religions in direct opposition to the injunctions of the Qur'an. But the voice of understanding and harmony cannot but triumph at the end for it is based upon the truth and surely Christ whose second coming is accepted by both Christians and Muslims shall not come but in truth and shall not judge but by truth, that truth which he asserted himself to be, according to the Gospel statement, and which the Qur'an guarantees as being triumphant at the end for there will finally arrive the moment when it can be asserted with finality that 'the Truth has come and falsehood has perished.'