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Christianity and Islam



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Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgment and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?
(Nostra Aetate 1)

Dear Readers:

The opening chapter of the conciliar declaration *Nostra Aetate* “on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions” expresses with pointed precision both the task and the expectations that any faith community must confront if it wishes to have any relevance for people. The questions about God and His revelation, about the nature and goal of

human existence and about the meaning and design of the world are essential coordinates of any religious system – and they would have to stand at the center of any serious dialogue between the religions.

Our age is marked by a breathtaking variety of possibilities in the areas of communication, information and exchange. At the same time it appears that misunderstandings, prejudices and lack of communication among the cultures and the religions are on the increase. It is a truism to say that genuine dialogue can only succeed when parties to a conversation can show mutual respect for each other, when they have made clear their own position, and when open and rational discussion has laid all topics on the table.

It is no doubt true that Jewish-Christian and Christian-Islamic dialogue are in many respects different, not only in terms of their starting positions and themes, but also with respect to their pre-histories and possibilities. If there are topics for which the time is not yet ripe to put them on the agenda, there are certainly enough other topics, the discussion of which is urgently necessary already today and – even if sometimes only with pain – possible. This, too, was shown by the reactions to the Pope’s lecture in Regensburg during his recent visit to Germany.

In interreligious dialogue the Jewish and Christian Holy Scriptures play a central role, as does the Koran. What does it mean to speak of the “Word of God” and how is this understood in Judaism, in Christianity and in Islam? What role does God’s revelation play within the framework of the different religions? Can commonalities be found, in spite of all the necessary distinctions that must

be made and the differences that exist in the religions? Between Judaism and Christianity and between Christianity and Islam is it possible to agree on common grounds that can form a basis from which to respond to the urgent questions, concerns and needs of people of today? And what should be the main themes discussed in a Jewish-Christian, or a Christian-Islamic dialogue on the Word of God?

These questions touch the self-understanding of each religion at the inmost core of their being. They were also among the topics discussed intensively among Jewish, Muslim and Christian theologians at the Dei Verbum Congress 2005 in Rome. In this issue, therefore, of the *Bulletin Dei Verbum* we supply the text of five of these contributions, supplemented by a few background articles.

Interreligious and intercultural dialogue is a necessity for building together this world of peace and fraternity ardently desired by all people of good will. In this area, our contemporaries expect from us an eloquent witness to show all people the value of the religious dimension of life. (Pope Benedict XVI on September 25th, 2006)

Collaboration in the construction of a world of peace and justice – the words of the Holy Father give expression to what must ultimately be the goal of dialogue between the religions. And it is impossible to come to grips with this common task without engaging in common reflection on the meaning of the Word of God. Perhaps this issue of our Bulletin can offer a few ideas, suggestions and clarifications on this topic.

I extend to you my warm greetings from the General Secretariat and wish you a thought-provoking reading.

Claudio Etti



Studying Sacred Scripture in Two Dimensions: Reflections on *Dei Verbum* after Forty Years

Baruch A. Levine



Baruch A. Levine earned his Rabbi from the MHL Jewish Theological Seminary, New York and his Ph.D. from Brandeis University. From 1969 to 2000 he was professor of Hebrew, of Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Studies at New York University. He held guest professorships at the Universities in Jerusalem and Beersheba, Israel.

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, is formulated with theological precision, and exhibits a distinctive documentary structure. *Dei Verbum* regularly introduces its new pronouncements against the background of existing doctrine, as if to emphasize their traditional justification. At the same time, Article 6, in particular, recognizes the need to engage ongoing intellectual inquiry, and to take human reason into account in the effort to understand the Word of God. There is a strong precedent for this view in Jewish philosophical literature reaching back to medieval times, and, in fact, there is much else in *Dei Verbum* that corresponds in a striking manner to Jewish interpretations of the Hebrew Bible. What is more, I sense an awareness of some of the same issues that face Jewish scholars in balancing traditional interpretation with historical-critical inquiry.

To assess the impact of *Dei Verbum* properly requires a consideration of other documents emerging from Vatican II, particularly *Nostra Aetate*, the "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions", which also appeared forty years ago. "The Book" is inevitably bound up with "The People of the Book." Moreover, important statements have appeared in the interim, both on behalf of national Catholic Churches and in the name of the Universal Church. Of particular interest to the present discussion are two publications by the Pontifical Biblical Commission. The first is a 1993 text, published in its English version in 1995 as: The Biblical Commission's Document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. It provides a commentary by my American colleague, Professor Joseph Fitzmyer, S.J. The second is entitled *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, which appeared in 2001. Both documents bear a preface by the then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger.

In preparation for this paper, it has been my good fortune to be able to turn to learned colleagues for clarification

on any number of questions, most notably to Professor Michael Patrick O'Connor, S.J. of Catholic University of America, who has, among other things, provided information on Catholic liturgy. In the necessarily brief comments to follow, I find it preferable, however, to limit myself to reflections on *Dei Verbum* as my principal text. In this way, I hope to present one Jewish scholar's view of the differences between representative Jewish interpretations of the Sacred Scriptures and Catholic interpretation as presented therein, calling attention as well to significant similarities between the two.

Context and community: The two dimensions of biblical interpretation

It might help to assess the impact of *Dei Verbum* if we were to explore what are observably two principal modes of biblical interpretation, which I call, respectively, "context" and "community." By context I mean the original context of Sacred Scripture, of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament; namely, what the biblical texts meant, to the best of our knowledge, to those who first wrote them, heard them, and read them at the time. It has been the primary objective of modern, critical biblical research to retrieve original context, in contradistinction to earlier, traditional scholarship, which was largely community oriented. By community I mean the reception of the Bible by successive communities of believers, Christian and Jewish, (also Muslim, for that matter), and its continuing interpretation by them in the light of contemporary experience. In this mode, we seek to know what the Bible came to mean to these communities at various periods of their history, and what has been its role in their lives.

It is the search for original context that prompts scholars to study ancient Near Eastern and classical languages, so as to be able to read external sources, employing the comparative method. We follow archeological discoveries, and benefit from the insights of historians and social scientists. We seek to identify *Sitz im Leben*, and analyze literary forms, to trace the formation of the biblical text through compilation and redaction. We acknowledge inner-biblical development over the cumulative periods of composition of the two Testaments, while being attentive to the holistic coherence of the canonical texts in their complete form. In this spirit, scholars apply the contextual approach not only to the original environments of the Old and the New Testaments, but also to the realities



faced by religious communities during the subsequent periods of history. We seek to understand the contemporary intellectual universe of the Tannaim and Amoraim of Talmudic literature, as we do of Saint Jerome and Saint Augustine.

Viewing the two Testaments as foundation documents of ongoing communities of believers directs us to hermeneutics and to homily. These are the principal methods employed to translocate the biblical narratives, as well as laws, prophecies and wisdom, to new contexts, so that their message may be seen as addressing the ongoing needs of differently structured communities, living under differing external conditions. The religious mind urgently seeks to explain the changing fortunes of the community, to retain a vision of destiny amidst change. It is the focus on community that accounts for the monumental creativity represented in Judaism by Rabbinic literature, and in Christianity by the writings of the Church Fathers. The role of Sacred Scripture in the life of the community is also evident in the respective liturgies of the Church and the Synagogue, both of which include scriptural texts.

The contextual approach to Scripture, which had been present, but relatively recessive in both Jewish and Christian exegesis since late antiquity, surged during the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Age of Humanism, and has continued to develop ever since. It has often been resisted, even opposed in Jewish, Catholic and conservative Protestant circles, out of concern for maintaining the authority of Sacred Scripture and the unity of the respective communities. Increasingly, though, the contextual approach has justified itself to scholars from all confessions, perhaps because the salutary effects of its realism have been perceived as outweighing its challenges to tradition. It adds immediacy to the content of Sacred Scripture; the actors, the places, and the events become real.

There has often been tension between these two foci, context and community, but in my view they are not intrinsically incompatible so long as we do not become confused into thinking that there are no differences between them, or that contextual inquiry is sufficient in itself. Just as we would lack something in our religious appreciation of the words of Sacred Scripture if we knew, and were concerned only with the real past, so would we lack something in our understanding of the enduring meaning of Divine Revelation if we failed to investigate that real past. "Context" and "community" complement each other as dimensions of interpretation.

On methodology in general, consider Article 12 of *Dei Verbum*, in part:

However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate

to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words. To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given among other things, to "literary forms". For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or of other forms of discourse.

This theme is elaborated further, and continues through Article 13. It has a familiar ring. The Latin: *Dei enim verba, humanis linguis expressa* (for the words of God, expressed in human language) immediately recalls the Hebrew of the laconic Talmudic dictum: *dibberah torah kileson benei adam* (the Torah speaks in accordance with human language, Babylonian Talmud, *Berakot* 31b, and parallels). In original context, this comment was intended to explain the use of a particular literary form in the Hebrew Bible, the infinitive-absolute followed by the finite verb (specifically, in 1 S 1:11). This syntax is not the most economical way to communicate, but rather than seeing in its use an added specification, or intended inference, the view is expressed that it merely accords with the way people express themselves. Moses Maimonides, in his treatise, *The Guide to the Perplexed* (Book One, chapter 26) seized upon this particular Talmudic dictum, applying it to the great medieval debate on the subject of divine attributes, the anthropomorphic and anthropopathic features attributed to God in biblical diction. These are not to be taken literally, but are rather a concession to the limits of human perception, on which see note 11 to Article 13 of *Dei Verbum*. By endorsing a literary approach, *Dei Verbum* opens the door to the contextual mode of interpretation, as I have outlined it, and it is my sense that it is forthcoming in this respect.

Dei Verbum does not explicitly address the issue of the sources of knowledge. Article 6, in its reference to Romans 1:20, and in its pronouncement on the capacity of humans to know the nature of things from created reality (*rebus creatis*) would probably allow scholars to bring to bear on their understanding of Sacred Scriptures what the sciences and the humanities make available to them. Once again, we observe similar views in Jewish thought.

Dei Verbum has helped to create an atmosphere of mutual understanding across confessional lines, and this is true of other Christian confessions that have published similar statements on Scriptural interpretation in recent decades. We have arrived at a common language of discourse, for Jewish, Catholic and other Christian scholars with respect to our shared heritage, the Hebrew Bible. I recall two great, contextual scholars out of many in the twentieth century, the American Protestant, W.F. Albright, and the French Dominican, Roland de Vaux. They and their colleagues brought the Hebrew Scriptures into the western canon on a new basis.



The same can be said for New Testament research, which is of growing interest to Jewish scholars, just as early Judaism is now of greater interest to Christian scholars.

The complexities of dialogue in the mode of community

When we move to the dimension of community, however, dialogue is complex, and basic differences between Judaism and Christianity often obstruct the unimpeded communication that we have achieved in the contextual dimension. The respective situations in Judaism and Christianity are no longer symmetrical. *Dei Verbum* proclaims that the New Testament is the fulfillment of the Old Testament; the perfection of revelation, realized through the presence, words and acts of Jesus Christ. As we read at the end of Article 4:

The Christian dispensation, therefore, as the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away and we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ (see 1 Tm 6:14 and Ti 2:13).

It is important to emphasize that in official Judaism, prophetic revelation was thought to have ceased several centuries before the advent of Christianity. Traditionally, the last Hebrew prophets were Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi of the Second Temple period. We are taught that prophecy will only be renewed in preparation for Israel's redemption and restoration to Zion, which will usher in the Messianic era. I will return to this important subject further on.

What is interesting, at this point, is that neither Jewish nor Catholic teaching accepts the notion of continuous, public revelation subsequent to the sealing of their respective canons, until the future redemption, as each community foresees it. For its part, the Church accepts the entirety of the Old Testament as Sacred Scripture, consonant with the principal role that it projects for it as preparing the way for the Gospel. This role is reiterated for emphasis, as a central theme, in Articles 3, 11 and 14 of *Dei Verbum*. Historically, Judaism, having what may be called "historic priority," has not acknowledged the New Testament as a new revelation. Theologically speaking, it can be said that the Jewish people continue to await the fulfillment of their covenant promise of redemption as pronounced in the Hebrew Bible. Here, then, is the central difference in the respective roles of the two Testaments in Judaism and Catholicism.

Dei Verbum further ordains in Chapter II: "Handing on Divine Revelation" that it is the Catholic Church, exclusively, which preserves Apostolic tradition, and transmits it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. From the Jewish perspective, this may be regarded as a matter of internal Christian concern. In a parallel manner, Judaism has

traditionally insisted on the authority of Rabbinic interpretation of the Hebrew Bible down through the centuries, especially in the area of religious law. It must be taken into account that within Jewry there has been, since late antiquity, no single, authoritative individual, or body that could speak for the Jewish people collectively, in the same way that a Pope or an ecumenical council can speak for the Church. What I am about to say should be seen merely as an attempt to summarize representative Jewish teachings, as I understand them.



The differing roles of the Hebrew Bible in Judaism and Catholicism

I was interested in what Article 15 had to say about the books of the Old Testament, which "remain permanently valuable" (end of Article 15):

These same books, then, give expression to a lively sense of God, contain a store of sublime teachings about God, sound wisdom about human life, and a wonderful treasury of prayers, and in them the mystery of our salvation is present in a hidden way. Christians should receive them with reverence.

With fairly obvious qualifications, I would say the same about the books of the New Testament, simply because I find in them expressions and amplifications of Jewish teachings. The approach of Jewish scholars to the New Testament, if it goes beyond the contextual, will be necessarily selective, but it can be positive, nonetheless. Reading the New Testament I am strongly impressed by the authority it ascribes to the Hebrew Bible, an authority that peers through the many passages from the Hebrew Bible that are cited as proof-texts. In a related way, The Lord's Prayer could be recited in any synagogue, for every word and formula in it is paralleled in Hebrew or Jewish Aramaic writings. Hypothetically, if I



had been present at the Sermon on the Mount, I would not have thought that Jesus was preaching a new religion. I would have thought that he was introducing his interpretations of Judaism, and challenging accepted interpretations, just as Jewish Sages were wont to do. There are, furthermore, pinnacles of spirituality in the New Testament, such as Paul's elegy on love, preserved in 1 Corinthians. It would surely be valuable for Jews, as for all human beings, to know this Christian text, and be guided by it. These epitomes, only a few out of many, are cited to support my view that those scholars who locate the essential differences between Judaism and Christianity regarding the sanctity of the New Testament within the area of teachings about human behavior, of relations between man and man, have it wrong!

It is my view that the core issue between Judaism and Christianity on the subject of the New Testament as Divine Revelation pertains to the historic identity of the Jewish people; to polity more than to theology, strictly speaking. This conclusion emerges from a consideration of both context and community. There are, to be sure, serious theological factors involved, beliefs basic to Christianity which were foreign to Judaism. In the polemical literature we usually find reference to the Holy Trinity and to certain sacramental practices. But, as I try to comprehend why successive Jewish communities have not accepted the New Testament as Divine Revelation, and have resisted conversion to Christianity, often under extreme duress, theological issues, alone, do not explain the phenomenon to my satisfaction. In significant ways, the same caveat would apply to Jewish resistance to Islam. Christianity is, after all, a monotheistic religion rooted in Judaism, itself; a religion whose canon includes the entire Hebrew Bible, and which has even preserved ancient Jewish writings regarded as apocryphal in the Jewish tradition. Hence my impression that the issue centered on identity. To become a Christian was to enter a new polity, to lose one's belonging to the historic Jewish people, to be absorbed. This is what happened to those who did convert, both to Christianity and to Islam, and there were many that did so over time in differing circumstances. I am compelled to conclude that persistent Jewish communities believed that there was special significance to the continued existence of the Jewish people as part of God's plan. If there is a cardinal, theological issue involved it is to be found in the differing conceptualizations of redemption, as between Judaism and Christianity. Redemption is the link between theology and polity.

It is in this connection that I now return to a consideration of the canonization process within ancient Judaism, and the determination that prophetic revelation ceased sometime in the late Persian or early Hellenistic period. This is perhaps the most obscure chapter in the history of Jewish religion. The most probable explanation is that prophecy ceased as a consequence of the shock of

national disaster after the destruction of the First Temple and the Exile. This is signaled in 1 M 9:27, and in the Babylonian Talmud, e.g. in *Baba Batra* 12b. In sociological terms, we could say that the national spirit was depressed, but that it revived after the Return, only to sink once again. The unhappy situation of continued dispersion, and life in the homeland under successive empires, finally brought an end to the acceptance of prophecy. In theological terms, we can say that the Shekinah, a manifestation of the divine presence associated with the gift of prophecy, does not abide with us amidst the sadness and distress brought about by Israel's sinfulness, but only amidst the joy of fulfilling the commandments. So it was that the Shekinah withdrew from the people of Israel after the destruction of the First temple, and was only intermittently present during the period of the Second Temple (Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 9b). The nexus of Israel's gift of prophecy and its national destiny is highly suggestive.

It reminds us that, along with all else, the Hebrew Bible envisions an enduring future for Israel as a covenant people throughout history, a vision endorsed by Rabbinic Judaism. The Hebrew Bible projects a national restoration to Zion, to the Holy Land, where Israel will dwell in security, and where God will reign in Zion over Israel and all humankind. The individual Jew is to seek redemption amidst his people, by working to make of it a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, a blessing in all the earth. Beyond this, he is to join with those of all nations in working to bring about the Kingdom of God. The salvation history of Israel as narrated in the Hebrew Bible tells how God made a covenant with Abraham and his seed and granted them the land of Canaan, in the hope that this people would listen to His voice and exemplify His truth. Across the centuries, and despite repeated disappointments; through the punishments of defeat and exile, the God of Israel never abandoned His people, or annulled His covenant with them, although, for their part, they had been less than faithful to it. This is divine providence, God's *khesed*, His steadfast love for Israel.

The universal vision of the later Jewish tradition, pursuant to that of Isaiah and Micah, is one of humankind united under God, in a world of peace and justice. This universal vision is expressed in the traditional Jewish liturgy for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, in a sequence of four beautiful prayers of petition. Here is what we pray for:

That the Lord will instill awe in all He has created, so that all His creatures may form one fellowship to worship Him, who alone is powerful, with a perfect heart.

That dignity will be restored to His people, Israel; hope to those who seek God, and vindication to those who hope in Him; "joy to Your land and gladness to Your city," and ascendancy to the Messiah, scion of David, speedily in our own day.



- That all wickedness and political oppression will be brought to an end.
- That the Lord will reign alone over all His creatures; in Zion and Jerusalem, the locus of His earthly abode, as it is written: "The Lord will reign forever; your God, oh Zion, for all generations, Halleluyah." (Ps 146:10).



In the two millennia since the advent of Christianity the Jewish people has not been dormant. It has been continuously creative, both for the enrichment of its own life, and, when permitted, for the benefit of humankind. Under unprecedented threats to its security in modern times, and despite losing one third of its sons and daughters within a period of less than ten years, the Jewish people possessed the collective vitality to rebuild its ancestral homeland. There it has revived the language of the prophets, and created a vibrant, Hebraic culture. Israel has gathered in multitudes of fellow Jews from many lands. We are hopeful that the curtain is rising on the next act in the drama of modern Israel, the establishment of peace in the land, and friendship between Israelis and Palestinians, and among all the nations of the region. Only then can we fully rejoice in the rebuilding of Zion.

A postscript

Perhaps I can clarify my thoughts on polity and identity as central to an understanding of Divine Revelation, by reference to a specific prophecy. In chapter 31 (31-34), Jeremiah speaks of "a new covenant," Hebrew *berit khadasha* between God and the House of Israel that will be enacted in days to come, a covenant written in their hearts, not etched in stone. This beautiful prophecy of consolation is clearly resonated in the New Testament, where Jesus is "the mediator of a new covenant" (*diatheikheis neas*) at the Eucharist, and its guarantor (Lk 22:20, 1 Co 11:25, 2 Co 3:6, Heb 12:24). In the Catholic lectionary, Jer 31:31-34 is one of the readings, occurring

once every three years, for the Fifth Sunday of Lent, where it serves to prepare the Church for its remembrance of the sequence of events from Palm Sunday, technically the Sixth Sunday of Lent, through Easter Sunday. It is part of the configuration of redemption in Christ.

For my part, I regard the several, related New Testament interpretations of Jeremiah 31 to be wholly acceptable methodologically. They represent exactly the sort of hermeneutic that we find so often in Rabbinic Midrash, whereby the future orientation characteristic of prophecy is further extended in time, and its venue relocated. Rabbinic interpretation of the Hebrew Bible is based on the principle of the multiple meanings of Scripture. Therefore, I, as an adherent to Judaism, am ready to accept the Christian understanding of Jeremiah 31 as one of several, legitimate readings of that text; not, of course, as the only legitimate reading.

From the Jewish perspective, such Christian interpretations of the Hebrew Bible should not be considered as misinterpretations, but rather as alternative interpretations. There is room for more than one interpretation of Scripture, and added value in knowing more than one interpretation.

For myself, I take my cue from context, from what immediately follows in Jeremiah 31, verses 35-37, because the terms of the new covenant are, in my judgment, integral to its meaning. The God of Israel makes a solemn promise:

*Thus said the Lord
Who set the sun for light by day,
The fixed order of moon and stars for light by night;
Who stirs up the sea into roaring waves,
Whose name is the Lord of Hosts:
'If this fixed order were ever to cease from My presence.'
– Speech of the Lord –
'Only then would the seed of Israel
Cease to be a nation in My presence for all time'
Thus said the Lord:
'If the heavens above can be measured,
And the foundations of the earth below fathomed,
Only then would I, as well, cast off all the seed of Israel
On account of all they have committed.'
– Speech of the Lord –*



Torah and Gospel for Unity in Service

Pier Francesco Fumagalli



Msgr. Pier Francesco Fumagalli holds a doctoral degree in theology from the Ambrosian University in Milan. He has done extensive research on Hebrew manuscripts in Italy and at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and has served as Secretary of the Commission for Religious Relations with Judaism of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

I. *Nostra Aetate*

1. The Second Vatican Council

By way of promoting fraternal relationships between Christians and Jews after the Shoah, the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) set a “milestone” with the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (October 28, 1965), dedicated to interreligious relations, with respect to which paragraph 4, devoted to the Jews, occupies the central position.

The profound renewal introduced by the conciliar magisterium forty years ago, which cancels a multi-millennial “doctrine of contempt” (Jules Isaac), constitutes an integral part of a theological context which one of the principal protagonists of the time, Cardinal Augustin Bea, wanted to be always firmly anchored to the biblical foundations.¹ This strong interweaving of biblical and theological perspectives is especially evident in those documents in whose drafting the then Secretariat for the Unity of Christians (now Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity) under the leadership of Bea played a particular collaborative role: besides *Nostra Aetate*, these would also include *Lumen Gentium*, *Dei Verbum*, *Dignitatis Humanae* and *Unitatis Redintegratio*.² As an example of this robust exegetical-theological structure we could cite *Lumen Gentium* 6, 9 and 16, *Dei Verbum* 14-16 and *Nostra Aetate* 4, in which the same themes of Israel and the Church, the unity of the two covenants³, recur, especially with reference to the Letter to the Romans: “As regards the Gospel they are enemies of God, for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:28-29).

2. A fruitful forty years

After forty years of journeying we can observe the fruits of this theological, spiritual and pastoral methodology, reflecting again on what the Pope John Paul II said in

1990 – by way of summarizing the first twenty-five post-conciliar years. With reference to the relationship with the Jews, John Paul II praised the efforts of those who had devoted themselves to the intense promotion of a faith dialogue, to which not only “biblical scholars and theologians, but also writers, artists and catechists have contributed”.⁴ In his more recent intervention, of historic value, Pope Benedict XVI acknowledged that *Nostra Aetate* “opened new perspectives in Jewish-Christian relations in terms of dialogue and solidarity”.⁵

3. A treasure shared in communion

For the last forty years, the application of the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* has been realized in many forms: in the experience of the local churches, in the thriving organizations of friendship such as the *International Council of Christians and Jews* and in the official documents that have emanated since the Council from the individual Episcopal Commissions, from the Commission of the Holy See and from the bilateral dialogue Commissions.⁶ This process of brotherly coming together has constantly recognized reverence for the Sacred Scriptures and the proclamation of the Word of God heard in faith as one of the principal elements of the common spiritual patrimony between Jews and Christians.

Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini summarizes in seven points the invaluable treasure of this shared heritage: the faith of Abraham; the vocation to holiness; reverence for the Sacred Scriptures; the tradition of prayer; obedience to the moral law; the witness of life; responsibility for creation.⁷

4. Scripture and Tradition

The most authoritative statements of the Church that have appeared since the Council, in the *Catechism* of 1992 (in particular nn. 56-64; 1096; 2569-2597) as well as in the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission of 2001, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*,⁸ have also offered numerous other examples of how we share such a precious treasure as are the Scriptures.

But there is more: when introducing the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 2001, with reference to paragraph 22, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger – today Pope Benedict XVI – not only underscored the fact that “the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in con-



tinuity with the Jewish Scriptures of the Second Temple period”, but also went on to say that “Christians can learn a great deal from a Jewish exegesis practiced for more than 2.000 years; in return, Christians may hope that Jews can profit from Christian exegetical research”.

For these reasons, too, therefore, we can join Pope Benedict XVI in reaffirming our radical union with our “brothers of the Jewish People”, a union founded “on the irrevocable promises of God” (April 24, 2005).

In line with this conciliar doctrine, and by way of underlining the unity of Sacred Scriptures and their dialogical relationship, Erich Zenger proposed the marvelous idea of viewing the Hebrew Bible or *tanach* as the “First” Testament, as opposed to the “Second”, made up of the New Testament part.⁹ A definition which, without negating the legitimacy for Christians of distinguishing in our Bible between the “Old” and “New” Testaments, complements its meaning by expressing at the level of Scripture the originating nuclear reality which Catholic prayer summarizes in the great intercession of Good Friday, when it prays for Israel as the “eldest son (first-born) of the covenant”. To this first-born character, whose existence it is impossible to deny, corresponds the priority of the written Testament, the *tanach*, with respect to the New Testament canon. The concept of renewal and fullness is instead better underscored by the now classical terminology of Old and New Testament.

I would like to offer here a few seminal reflections on these principles to which I have briefly alluded.

II. Challenges and hopes

1. Surplus of hopes

Jews and Christians in the contemporary world can offer a humble testimony of paradoxical hope of pardon and of peace, against the experience of desperation and of distrust, of violence and of hatred. We could say that Judaism and Christianity offer what appear to be asymmetrical complementarities. On the one side, what Leo di Simone calls the “asymmetry of the total manifestation of the event” which is Christ, “not conditioned by necessity, in a dimension totally unexpected and unknown from the categories of Greek thought”, and in a certain sense innovative even with respect to the expectation of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs of Israel.

On the other hand, Judaism presents us with a Torah which continues to reveal itself and renew itself in a tradition and in careful study, in an orthopraxis that tends toward fullness, in expectation of the messianic redemption.

Both of these traditions, Torah and Gospel, call the

human being to a response of holiness, in solidarity with the neighbor and brother who is to be served in justice and in charity (*mishpat u-tzedakah*), in the rigor of truth and in the mercy of love (*hesed we-emet*), united in the beauty of happiness. It is precisely in the awareness of our very faith differences, according to the exhortation of Pope Benedict XVI in his historic visit to the Cologne synagogue, that “we should respect each other and love each other” (August 19, 2005).

Nevertheless, in both cases – both with respect to Jews and Pagans – this double asymmetry reveals continuous harmonic affinities, when compared either with the Hellenic *logos*, or with the Jewish Torah. After millennia, and still today, we who are believers or post-believers, stand as it were before an excess of metaphysical and religious hope, before a reflowering of a fragile trust that can challenge the easy triumphalisms of *ratio* and *religio* beyond the borders thus far firm and embattled, beyond the certainties of technocracy and of *pietas*. The hope of Israel and the hope of the Church are both subjected to the light of the Word, a thousand times proclaimed, and interpreted in a thousand different ways in the life of the People of God.

2. The challenge of *shabbat*

This is precisely what we learn from this Sabbath day’s (September 17, 2005) *parasha ki-tetze* (Dt 21:10-25:19), which expounds the Mosaic legislation on war, on the law of the first-fruits, on brotherly solidarity, against adultery, on divorce, on assistance to the poor. This whole biblical section is animated by a strong ethical appeal, which we find taken up point by point in the parallel Gospel passages, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, or in the parable of the disobedient son (Lk 15), who is twice described as “dead” (Lk 15:24;32), since, as the *parasha* affirms, being a rebellious son (*sorer u-moreh*, according to Dt 21:18), he must die (cf. Lk 15:21). It is the perennial challenge of repentance and conversion.

3. The paradox of the sons

The paradox of this son, whether he be Israel “the eldest son”, or the Word made flesh, crucified – as and in the place of the disobedient son – meets and encounters the Jewish “holy first fruits” (Rom 11:16) of a Word which is still read every Sabbath in synagogue, so that this word can be put into practice in a continuous encounter between the splendor of the Mosaic covenant and the scandal of failure and of the enmity as regards the Gospel (cf. Rom 11:28).

This perennial effort and tension between the two brothers¹⁰ – the one who is faithful to Torah and the unfaithful one – embodies the task of “serving” (*avoda*) the Word, in order to practice it (cf. Ex 24:7: *na’aseh we-nishma* – we will do it and obey it); a task that is realized in a broth-



erly competition in caring (to care¹¹ – *lishmor*, cfr. Gn 2:15) for the world (*tiqqun olam*) for the Reign of the Most High (*be-malkhut shadday*), which both traditions read as a course to construct responsibly, while seeking to travel along paths of peace (*darke ha-shalom*) toward redemption, toward the fullness of eternal life.

4. *Be-reshit*: origin and aim of the Scriptures

Saint Bonaventure, a contemporary of Saint Thomas Aquinas, who like him died from the work connected with the Second Council of Lyon, summarizes this concept in the *Prologue* to the *Breviloquium* as follows:

Sacred Scripture does not result from the fruit of human research, but from divine revelation. This flows forth from the Father of lights, "from whom every paternity in heaven and on earth is named" (Eph 3:15) ... The aim, then, or better the fruit of Sacred Scripture is not just some undefinable thing but the very fullness of eternal happiness. (Breviloquium, Prologue)

5. *Be-reshit*: the whole earth belongs to the Holy One

We are reminded of the relevancy of a rigorous confrontation between brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of the Holy One, by another great master, this time of the Jewish tradition, Rashi de Troyes (ca. 1040–1105), who died nine centuries ago¹².

At the beginning of his powerful commentary on the Bible, he proposes this basic reflection on the *Beginning* (*be-reshit*):

Rabbi Yitzhaq said: "The Torah should have begun with the words: this month will be for you the beginning of months,"¹³ which is the first commandment given to Israel. Why then does it begin instead with the story of the creation? Because it is written: He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations¹⁴. In fact, if the people of the world were to say to Israel: "You are plunderers, because you took by force the lands that belonged to the seven nations!"¹⁵ they could reply: "The whole earth belongs to the Holy One, Blessed be He: it is He who created it and gave it to whoever appeared just in his eyes. By an act of his will he took it away from them and gave it to us."¹⁶

In the beginning [God] created

This text says nothing else but: "interpret me!", just as our rabbis have interpreted it. In the beginning means "for love of the Torah", which is called the beginning of his way,¹⁷ and "for love of Israel", who is called the first fruits of his harvest¹⁸

6. The relevancy of Rashi

The relevancy of Rashi did not escape Christians of his time, such as Andrea of San Vittore and Erberto of Bosham (12th century), and in the following century Nicolò da Lyra (1270–1340?), who referred to Rashi in his famous *Postillae*. The Jewish master is also justly renowned for his moderation, in a response which refrains from applying to Christians the Talmudic norms

that pertain to the pagan peoples, on the grounds that Christianity is not to be considered an idolatrous religion.¹⁹ A short time later the "great Aquila" of Cordoba, the doctor and philosopher Moses Maimonides (1138–1204), who is not coincidentally often the teacher of Saint Thomas Aquinas, will embrace this same course.



7. Particularism and universalism: the *haftarah* (Is 54:1-10)

The *haftarah* for today (September 17, 2005) – the prophetic reading that accompanies the sabbath proclamation of the *parashah* – picks up the theme of the salvific covenant: "your redeemer is the Holy One of Israel" (v. 5), "my covenant of peace will not be removed" (v. 10). I would offer the suggestion of complementing this reading with a later passage of Isaiah, 56:1-7, and with the Gospel for the Eucharistic liturgy of tomorrow (Mt 20:1-16), because both are very explicit on the universalistic openness of the covenant: "And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord ... these I will bring to my holy mountain" (Is 56:6-7), just as in the parable of Jesus the workers will all receive the same pay, even if they have arrived last, to work but one hour in the Lord's vineyard.

8. *Kasherut* and Eucharist

The link between Word of God, orthopraxis in Jewish *halakhah* and the centrality of the Christian Eucharist cannot be closer in the case of the *kasherut* (the kosher food laws) and the Berakot ("Benedictions") which accompany it. Let us consider for example the two ritual Jewish blessings for the bread and the wine which every Sabbath recall the creation of the world: *barukh atah adonay elohenu melekh ha-olam, a-motzi lekhem min*



ha-aretz / barukh atah adonay elohenu melek ha-olam, bore peri a-gafen (Blessed are you, Lord, God of the universe, who make bread rise from the earth. / Blessed are you, Lord, God of the universe, creator of the fruit of the vine). These two blessings are likewise pronounced in every Eucharistic celebration at the moment of the offering of the bread and the wine, before consecration. But even the matter of this offering itself which will become the body and blood of the Lord, according to the Latin rite preserves an intrinsic link with the *halakhah* and the *kasherut*. By strict regulation they must be unleavened bread and natural wine (*Codex Iuris Canonici* can. 924.926), and it is well known that many people have even risked their lives, in times of ancient as well as recent persecutions, to procure these offerings necessary for the holy Sacrifice.²⁰ The unleavened bread and the kosher wine perfectly satisfy these prerequisites. On this point we observe that, in spite of all the disregard and sometimes even the intentional aversion or dismissal of the Jewish dietary norms in the Christian sphere, in the central celebration of the Church fidelity to the *kasherut* has remained intact. We could perhaps see here a sign of brotherhood, just as the ancient church of Jerusalem always maintained a strict unity between the Eucharistic celebration and service to the poor, the *gemilut hassidim* of Jewish tradition.



There are many other aspects that recall in both of our traditions the inseparable connection between ritual, *halakhah*, community and brotherly love. We could mention but one case, that of the *minyan* (the ten persons necessary for public prayer in Judaism) and canon 906 of the *Codex Iuris Canonici* (CIC) which says that the priest should not celebrate the Eucharistic Sacrifice without the participation of at least a few of the faithful, except for a just and reasonable cause. Or that of the washing

of the hands before meals (*netilat yadayim*), which is evoked still today by the ablution which follows the offertory of the Mass (while the offerings for the poor are being received), and in a solemn way by the *Washing of the feet*, as an expression of the love of Christ, in the Holy Thursday liturgy.

9. A look to the “future full of hope”

The horizon that is opening up to Jewish-Christian collaboration on the basis of the Scriptures thus appears ever more vast. On the one hand, indeed, stands the Christian point of view which recognizes that the Jewish hope even now retains a vital and valid sense of its own: “Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain. It can become for us Christians a powerful stimulant to keep alive the eschatological dimension of our faith. Like them, we too live in expectation. The difference is that for us the One who is to come will have the traits of the Jesus who has already come and is already present and active among us.”²¹

On the other hand, there are the concrete passages that have already been fulfilled, which are attested by numerous documents of mixed Catholic-Jewish commissions. The third meeting, in Jerusalem, of the Bilateral Commission on Dialogue between the Israeli Rabbinate and the Commission of the Holy See for Religious Relations with the Jews, under the joint presidency of Cardinal Jorge Mejía and Rabbi Capo of Haifa, Shear Yashuv Cohen, treated in December 2003 the question of “the importance which the fundamental teaching of the common Sacred Scriptures has, with respect to contemporary society and to the education of future generations.”²² The topic was then explored in greater depth in the fourth meeting that took place in Rome, in October of 2004, on the theme: “A common vision on social justice and moral conduct”.²³

In similar fashion, the 18th plenary session of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee (ILC) in Buenos Aires in 2004 drew the inspiration for their deliberations on charity and justice (*mishpat u-tzedakah*) from the divine commandment “You will love your neighbor as yourself” (Lv 19:18; Mt 22:39). Starting from our different perspectives, we renewed our common engagement in the defense and promotion of human dignity, to the extent that this is derived from the biblical affirmation that every human being is created to the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:26).²⁴ The Jewish and Christian delegates at Buenos Aires also gave birth in Argentina to an important initiative connected with social assistance, convinced that “Our common commitment to justice is profoundly rooted in both of our faiths. We recall the tradition of helping the widows, the orphans, the poor and the strangers in our midst, in accordance with the divine commandment (Ex 22:20-22; Mt 25:31-46)”. The sages of Israel developed an extensive doctrine of justice and charity toward all, founded on an ele-



vated understanding of the concept of *tzedeq*. On the basis of the Church's tradition, Pope John Paul II in his first encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* (1979) reminded Christians that a genuine relationship with God requires a strong commitment of service to one's neighbor".

For this reason, when for the first time he received the delegates of the ILC in the Vatican on June 9 of this year, Benedict XVI also invited us to look at the relations between Jews and Christians with the eye of Jeremiah who was able to see "a future full of hope" (cf. Jer 29:10). Two months later in Cologne, speaking to the Jewish community on the occasion of the World Youth Day, in his already cited discourse of great synthetic and programmatic inspiration, the pope continued, inviting adults to "pass on to the youth the torch of hope which was given by God to the Jews as well as to the Christians", so that "future generations, with the help of God, may build a more just and more peaceful world", confident that, as the Psalm says: "The Lord will give strength to his people, the Lord will bless his people with peace" (Ps 29:11).

(Transl.: L. Maluf)

- ¹ Pope John Paul II gave Bea special credit for this: "Dans ses nom breuses interventions, il insistait sur la nécessité de faire apparaître clairement dans les textes conciliaires les bases bibliques de la doctrine proposée" (Papa Giovanni Paolo II, Discorso ai partecipanti al Simposio Card. Agostino Bea [Rome, December 16-19, 1981], in: *Communio* N. S. 14, Rome 1983, p. VII).
- ² Cf. Stjepan Schmidt, Agostino Bea, il cardinale dell'unità, Rome 1987, pp. 454-463; 476-479; 484-487; 491-494; 514-518, *et al.*
- ³ A general overview of this theme is offered by Johannes Willebrands, Die Einheit zwischen Altem und Neuem Bund, in: *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* 38, 4 (1987), pp. 295-310; Id. (in Italian), L'unità fra Antica e Nuova Alleanza, in *Fist Informazione* (Federazione Interreligiosa per gli Studi Teologici, Torino), 9/V, 1 (1989-1990), pp. 69-81; Id. (in English), Unity between Old and New Covenant, in Johannes Willebrands, *Church and Jewish People. New Considerations*, New York/Mahwah 1992, pp. 95-114; Walter Kasper, L'antica e la nuova alleanza nel dialogo ebraico-cristiano, in *Non ho perduto nessuno. Comunione, dialogo ecumenico, evangelizzazione*, Bologna 2005, pp. 95-115.
- ⁴ John Paul II in his address on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* (Rome, December 6, 1990) observed that "the Church therefore, particularly through her biblical scholars and theologians, but also through the work of other writers, artists and catechists, continues to reflect upon and express more thoroughly her own thinking on the mystery of this people. I am happy that the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews is intensely promoting study on this theme in a theological and exegetical context" (text published in various places, cf. among others Appendix to Johannes Willebrands, *Church and Jewish People: New Considerations*, New York/Mahwah 1992, p. 244).
- ⁵ Benedict XVI, Speech to the Jewish Community, Cologne, August 19, 2005 (*L'Osservatore Romano*, August 20, 2005, p. 9).
- ⁶ Cf. Fratelli prediletti. Chiesa e Popolo ebraico. Documenti e fatti, 1965-2005, Preface by Walter Kasper, with an introduction by Pier Francesco Furnagalli, Milano 2005.
- ⁷ Carlo Maria Martini, Christianity and Judaism, A Historical and Theological Overview, in: *Jews and Christians. Exploring the Past, Present and Future*, ed. by James H. Charlesworth, New York 1990, pp. 19-33 (here pp. 31-32); Id., Verso Gerusalemme, Milano 2004, pp. 101-102.
- ⁸ Pontifical Biblical Commission, The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible, preface by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Città del Vaticano, 2001.
- ⁹ Erich Zenger, Das Erste Testament. Die jüdische Bibel und die Christen, Düsseldorf 1991.
- ¹⁰ Or the two "sisters" Orpah and Ruth, the one of whom returned to her own among the pagans, and the other who follows Noemi to Bethlehem, sharing in her life and the life of her people and in faith in the God of Israel.
- ¹¹ Significantly the two terms, English and Latin, to care – *curare*, are etymologically related to the service/divine lordship of the *kyrios* and the human service of the *curia*.
- ¹² For a general introduction to Rashi cf. Chaim Pearl, Rashi. Vita e opera del massimo esegeta ebraico, Cinisello Balsamo 1995.
- ¹³ Ex 12:2.
- ¹⁴ Ps 111:6.
- ¹⁵ The Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites are the peoples recalled according to Dt 7:1.
- ¹⁶ Rashi de Troyes, Commento alla Genesi, Preface by Paolo De Benedetti, Introduction and translation by Luigi Cattani, Casale Monferrato 1985, p. 3.
- ¹⁷ Pr 8:22.
- ¹⁸ Jer 2:3.
- ¹⁹ Cf. Chaim Pearl, Rashi (see note 12), pp. 36-37.
- ²⁰ An example of such behavior is reported by Piergiorgio Confalonieri, La testimonianza del servo di Dio Giuseppe Lazzati (1909-1986): Nel lager custodiva strette al petto le ostie consacrate per la Comunione, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, September 17, 2005, p. 8: in order to celebrate Mass secretly it was necessary "to escape the surveillance of the guards."
- ²¹ Pontifical Biblical Commission, The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible, Vatican City 2001, II A, § 5, n. 21.
- ²² Cf. Information Service 114 (2003/IV), pp. 200-201.
- ²³ Cf. Information Service 117 (2004/IV), p. 166.
- ²⁴ Cf. Information Service 116 (2004/III), pp. 139-141.



The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible

Pontifical Biblical Commission

On May 24, 2001 the Pontifical Biblical Commission published the document The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible. The basic principles therein deal with the meaning, hermeneutics and interpretation of Sacred Scripture in Judaism and Christianity and describes the cornerstones of their reciprocal relationship. A few excerpts from this document are printed below:

2. It is above all by virtue of its historical origin that the Christian community discovers its links with the Jewish people. Indeed, the person in whom it puts its faith, Jesus of Nazareth, is himself a son of this people. So, too, are the Twelve whom he chose "to be with him and to be sent out to proclaim the message" (Mk 3:14). In the beginning, the apostolic preaching was addressed only to the Jews and proselytes, pagans associated with the Jewish community (cf. Ac 2:11). Christianity, then, came to birth in the bosom of first century Judaism. Although it gradually detached itself from Judaism, the Church could never forget its Jewish roots, something clearly attested in the New Testament; it even recognized a certain priority for Jews, for the Gospel is the "power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the *Jew first* and also to the Greek" (Rm 1:16).

A perennial manifestation of this link to their beginnings is the acceptance by Christians of the Sacred Scriptures of the Jewish people as the Word of God addressed to themselves as well. Indeed, the Church has accepted as inspired by God all the writings contained in the Hebrew Bible as well as those in the Greek Bible. The title "Old Testament" given to this collection of writings is an expression coined by the apostle Paul to designate the writings attributed to Moses (cf. 2 Co 3:14-15). Its scope has been extended, since the end of the second century, to include other Jewish writings in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. The title "New Testament" takes its origin from a message in the Book of Jeremiah which announced a "new covenant" (Jr 31:31), the expression is translated in the Greek of the Septuagint as "new dispensation", "new testament" (*kaine diathke*). The message announced that God intended to establish a new covenant. The Christian faith sees this promise fulfilled in the mystery of Christ Jesus with the institution of the Eucharist (cf. 1 Co 11:25; Heb 9:15). Consequently, that collection of writings which expresses the Church's faith in all its novelty is called

the "New Testament". The title itself points towards a relationship with the "Old Testament".

A. General Conclusion

84. At the end of this exposition, necessarily all too brief, the main conclusion to be drawn is that the Jewish people and their Sacred Scriptures occupy a very important place in the Christian Bible. Indeed, the Jewish Sacred Scriptures constitute an essential part of the Christian Bible and are present, in a variety of ways, in the other part of the Christian Bible as well. Without the Old Testament, the New Testament would be an incomprehensible book, a plant deprived of its roots and destined to dry up and wither.

The New Testament recognizes the divine authority of the Jewish Scriptures and supports itself on this authority. When the New Testament speaks of the "Scriptures" and refers to "that which is written", it is to the Jewish Scriptures that it refers. It affirms that these Scriptures must of necessity be fulfilled, since they define God's plan which cannot fail to be realized, notwithstanding the obstacles encountered and the human resistance opposing it. To that the New Testament adds that these Scriptures are indeed fulfilled in the life of Jesus, his Passion and resurrection, as well as in the foundation of the Church that is open to all the nations. All of these bind Christians and Jews closely together, for the foremost aspect of scriptural fulfillment is that of accord and continuity. This is fundamental. Inevitably, fulfillment brings discontinuity on certain points, because without it there can be no progress. This discontinuity is a source of disagreements between Christians and Jews, no purpose is served by hiding the fact. But it was wrong, in times past, to unilaterally insist on it to the extent of taking no account of the fundamental continuity.

This continuity has deep roots and manifests itself at many levels. That is why in Christianity the link between Scripture and Tradition is similar to that in Judaism. Jewish methods of exegesis are frequently employed in the New Testament. The Christian canon of the Old Testament owes its formation to the first century Jewish Scriptures. To properly interpret the New Testament, knowledge of the Judaism of this period is often necessary.



85. But it is especially in studying the great themes of the Old Testament and their continuation in the New which accounts for the impressive symbiosis that unites the two parts of the Christian Bible and, at the same time, the vigorous spiritual ties that unite the Church of Christ to the Jewish people. In both Testaments, it is the same God who enters into relationship with human beings and invites them to live in communion with him; the one God and the source of unity; God the Creator who continues to provide for the needs of his creatures, in particular those who are intelligent and free, and who are called to recognize the truth and to love; God especially is the Liberator and Saviour of human beings, because, although created in his image, they have fallen through sin into a pitiful slavery.

Since it is a project for inter-personal relationships, God's plan is realized in history. It is impossible to discover what that plan is by philosophical speculation on the human being in general. God reveals this plan by unforeseeable initiatives, in particular, by the call addressed to an individual chosen from all the rest of humanity, Abraham (Gn 12:1-3), and by guiding the destiny of this person and his posterity, the people of Israel (Ex 3:10). A central Old Testament theme (Dt 7:6-8), Israel's election continues to be of fundamental importance in the New Testament. Far from calling it into question, the birth of Jesus confirms it in the most spectacular manner. Jesus is "son of David, son of Abraham" (Mt 1:1). He comes "to save his people from their sins" (1:21). He is the Messiah promised to Israel (Jn 1:41,45); he is "the Word" (logos) come "to his own" (Jn 1:11-14). The salvation he brings through his paschal mystery is offered first of all to the Israelites.³⁴⁵ As foreseen by the Old Testament, this salvation has universal repercussions as well.³⁴⁶ It is also offered to the Gentiles. Moreover, it is accepted by many of them, to the extent that they have become the great majority of Christ's disciples. But Christians from the nations profit from salvation only by being introduced, by their faith in Israel's Messiah, into the posterity of Abraham (Ga 3:7,29). Many Christians from the "nations" are not aware that they are by nature "wild olives" and that their faith in Christ has grafted them onto the olive tree chosen by God (Rm 11:17-18).

Israel's election is made concrete and specific in the Sinai covenant and by the institutions based on it, especially the Law and the Temple. The New Testament is in continuity with this covenant and its institutions. The new covenant foretold by Jeremiah and established in the blood of Jesus has come through the covenant between God and Israel, surpassing the Sinai covenant by a new gift of the Lord that completes and carries forward the original gift. Likewise, "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Rm 8:2), which gives an interior dynamism, remedies the weakness (8:3) of the Sinai Law and renders believers capable of living a disinter-

ested love that is the "fulfillment of the Law" (Rm 13:10). As regards the earthly Temple, the New Testament, borrowing terms prepared by the Old Testament, relativises the adequacy of a material edifice as a dwelling place of God (Ac 7:48), and points to a relationship with God where the emphasis is on interiority. In this point, as in many others, it is obvious that the continuity is based on the prophetic movement of the Old Testament.

In the past, the break between the Jewish people and the Church of Christ Jesus could sometimes, in certain times and places, give the impression of being complete. In the light of the Scriptures, this should never have occurred. For a complete break between Church and Synagogue contradicts Sacred Scripture.



B. Pastoral Orientations

86. The Second Vatican Council, in its recommendation that there be "understanding and mutual esteem" between Christians and Jews, declared that these will be "born especially from biblical and theological study, as well as from fraternal dialogue".³⁴⁷ The present Document has been composed in this spirit; it hopes to make a positive contribution to it, and encourages in the Church of Christ the love towards Jews that Pope Paul VI emphasized on the day of the promulgation of the conciliar document *Nostra Aetate*.³⁴⁸

With this text, Vatican Two laid the foundations for a new understanding of our relations with Jews when it said that "according to the apostle (Paul), the Jews, because of their ancestors, still remain very dear to God, whose gifts and calling are irrevocable (Rm 11:29)".³⁴⁹

Through his teaching, John Paul II has, on many occasions, taken the initiative in developing this Declaration. During a visit to the synagogue of Mainz (1980) he said: "The encounter between the people of God of the Old Covenant, which has never been abrogated by God (cf. Rm 11:29), and that of the New Covenant is also an *internal* dialogue in our Church, similar to that between the first and second part of its Bible".³⁵⁰ Later, addressing the Jewish communities of Italy during a visit to the synagogue of Rome (1986), he declared: "The Church of Christ discovers its 'links' with Judaism 'by pondering its own mystery' (cf. *Nostra Aetate*). The Jewish religion is not 'extrinsic' to us, but in a certain manner, it is 'intrinsic' to our religion. We have therefore a relationship with



it which we do not have with any other religion. You are our favoured brothers and, in a certain sense, one can say our elder brothers".³⁵¹ Finally, in the course of a meeting on the roots of anti-Jewish feeling among Christians (1997) he said: "This people has been called and led by God, Creator of heaven and earth. Their existence then is not a mere natural or cultural happening, ... It is a supernatural one. This people continues in spite of everything to be the people of the covenant and, despite human infidelity, the Lord is faithful to his covenant".³⁵² This teaching was given the stamp of approval by John Paul II's visit to Israel, in the course of which he addressed Israel's Chief Rabbis in these terms: "We (Jews and Christians) must work together to build a future in which there will be no more anti-Jewish feeling among Christians, or any anti-Christian feeling among Jews. We have many things in common. We can do much for the sake of peace, for a more human and more fraternal world".³⁵³



On the part of Christians, the main condition for progress along these lines lies in avoiding a one-sided reading of biblical texts, both from the Old Testament and the New Testament, and making instead a better effort to appreciate the whole dynamism that animates them, which is precisely a dynamism of love. In the Old Testament, the plan of God is a union of love with his people, a paternal love, a spousal love and, notwithstanding Israel's infidelities, God will never renounce it, but affirms it in perpetuity (Is 54:8; Jr 31:3). In the New Testament, God's love overcomes the worst obstacles; even if they do not believe in his Son whom he sent as their Messiah Saviour, Israelites are still "loved" (Rm 11:29). Whoever wishes to be united to God, must also love them.

87. The partial reading of texts frequently gives rise to difficulties affecting relations with the Jews. The Old Testament, as we have seen, is not sparing in its reproaches against Israelites, or even in its condem-

nations. It is very demanding towards them. Rather than casting stones at the Jews, it is better to see them as illustrating the saying of the Lord Jesus: "To whom much is given, from him much is expected" (Lk 12:48), and this saying applies to us Christians as well. Certain biblical narratives present aspects of disloyalty or cruelty which today would be morally inadmissible, but they must be understood in their historical and literary contexts. The slow historical progress of revelation must be recognized: the divine pedagogy has taken a group of people where it found them and led them patiently in the direction of an ideal union with God and towards a moral integrity which our modern society is still far from attaining. This education must avoid two opposite dangers, on the one hand, of attributing to ancient prescriptions an ongoing validity for Christians (for example, refusing blood transfusions on biblical grounds) and, on the other hand, of rejecting the whole Bible on the pretext of its cruelties. As regards ritual precepts, such as the rules for pure and impure, one has to be conscious of their symbolic and anthropological import, and be aware of their sociological and religious functions.

In the New Testament, the reproaches addressed to Jews are not as frequent or as virulent as the accusations against Jews in the Law and the Prophets. Therefore, they no longer serve as a basis for anti-Jewish sentiment. To use them for this purpose is contrary to the whole tenor of the New Testament. Real anti-Jewish feeling, that is, an attitude of contempt, hostility and persecution of the Jews as Jews, is not found in any New Testament text and is incompatible with its teaching. What is found are reproaches addressed to certain categories of Jews for religious reasons, as well as polemical texts to defend the Christian apostolate against Jews who oppose it.

But it must be admitted that many of these passages are capable of providing a pretext for anti-Jewish sentiment and have in fact been used in this way. To avoid mistakes of this kind, it must be kept in mind that the New Testament polemical texts, even those expressed in general terms, have to do with concrete historical contexts and are never meant to be applied to Jews of all times and places merely because they are Jews. The tendency to speak in general terms, to accentuate the adversaries' negative side, and to pass over the positive in silence, failure to consider their motivations and their ultimate good faith, these are characteristics of all polemical language throughout antiquity, and are no less evident in Judaism and primitive Christianity against all kinds of dissidents.

The fact that the New Testament is essentially a proclamation of the fulfillment of God's plan in Jesus Christ, puts it in serious disagreement with the vast majority of the Jewish people who do not accept this fulfillment.



The New Testament then expresses at one and the same time its attachment to Old Testament revelation and its disagreement with the Synagogue. This discord is not to be taken as "anti-Jewish sentiment", for it is disagreement at the level of faith, the source of religious controversy between two human groups that take their point of departure from the same Old Testament faith basis, but are in disagreement on how to conceive the final development of that faith. Although profound, such disagreement in no way implies reciprocal hostility. The example of Paul in Rm 9-11 shows that, on the contrary, an attitude of respect, esteem and love for the Jewish people is the only truly Christian attitude in a situation which is mysteriously part of the beneficent and positive plan of God. Dialogue is possible, since Jews and Christians share a rich common patrimony that unites them. It is greatly to be desired that prejudice and misunderstanding be gradually eliminated on both sides, in favour of a better understanding of the patrimony they share and to strengthen the links that bind them.

³⁴⁵ Ac 3:26; Rm 1;16.

³⁴⁶ Ps 98:2-4; Is 49:6.

³⁴⁷ Declaration *Nostra Aetate* on relations of the Church with non-Christian religions, no 4.

³⁴⁸ Paul VI, homily of October 28, 1965: *ut erga eos reverentia et amor adhibeatur spesque in iis collocetur*: (that there be respect and love towards them and that hope is placed in them).

³⁴⁹ ASS 58 (1966) 740.

³⁵⁰ Documentation Catholique 77 (1980) 1148.

³⁵¹ Documentation Catholique 83 (1986) 437.

³⁵² Documentation Catholique 94 (1997) 1003.

³⁵³ Documentation Catholique 97 (2000) 372.

Glossary of Jewish Terms

Amoraim (interpreters): Third to sixth-century scholars who were occupied with commentaries on the Mishnah

Haftarah (conclusion): Prophet books; after the Torah reading in every synagogue service, there follows a reading from the Haftarah, a prophetic passage with a thematic link to the Torah reading

Haggadah (story): A part of oral teaching; stories and legends about wise men and prophets (the best known are the haggadah on the story of the exodus from Egypt)

Halakhah (*halakh*=walk): (religious) law, instruction on religious life praxis (interpreting biblical law)

Midrash (research, interpretation, teaching): rabbinic interpretation of the Tanakh, Mishnah and Talmud

Mishnah (repetition): Basis of the Talmud; rabbinic interpretation of the Torah and of the oral teaching, consisting of six parts or "divisions" on the themes of agriculture, appointed times (feasts), family law, penal law, sacrificial rites and purities (prescriptions related to food and ritual purity)

Parashah (introduction/separation): a reading taken from the Torah, also called Sidrah (pl. Parashoth/Sidroth), named according to the word with which the excerpted passage begins

Talmud: The principal work of rabbinic literature; collection of commentaries, discussions and expansions to the Mishnah, which originated between A.D. 400 (Palestinian Talmud) to 600 (Babylonian Talmud)

Tanakh/Tenakh: Jewish Holy Scripture consisting of 24 books in the three parts: Torah, Neviim (Prophets) and Ketuvim (Writings: Psalms, Proverbs, etc.)

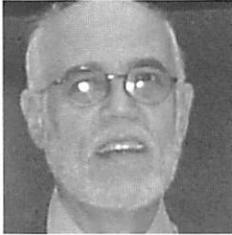
Tannaim: Scripture scholars; from the beginning of the Christian era to 220 A.D., responsible for the production of the Mishnah

Torah (instruction, teaching): Five Books of Moses (Pentateuch; written Torah); in a broader sense, the whole of Jewish tradition (oral Torah)



Word of God in Dialogue: For an Innovative Authenticity

Hmida Ennaifer



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*People who are awake have only one world,
but people who are asleep each have their own world*
Heraclitus

The issue

My working hypothesis is the following: God has revealed himself through His Word which became incarnate in Jesus Christ, who is himself the Divine Word made man according to Christians, while, according to Moslems, this word was expressed in the form of a dictated text: The Koran.

This Word, which is the foundation of faith and which does not have the same signification for the two groups, has been the source of sharp disagreements in the past. Must one assume from this past that this dissension will constitute a brake to dialogue and to mutual enrichment in our day as well? In my view, on the contrary, this apparent contradiction, but real difference, facilitates the common search and mutual dialogue, particularly in a universe which is inclined toward universalism, and consequently open to a better comprehension of the other.

My hope is that I will be able to demonstrate how pertinent this hypothesis is by attempting to develop just a bit the conditions necessary to establish a dialogue.

From the incomprehensible to the commonly perceptible

1. The Word of God, according to Moslem theological treatises, becomes concrete in the text of the Koran. The 6,236 verses that make up the Koran are the eternal Word on which the personality of the Prophet Mohammed has in no way rubbed off. The Prophet is the mere spokesman of a message, written for all eternity and preserved by God on the "well-guarded Table" (Sura 85:21f.)

Even if Christians and Muslims do have in common the sense of a revelation, they diverge when it comes to an understanding of its nature. For the Christian, the function of the Bible is to send one back to the person of Jesus Christ, the "Living and Eternal Word of God" and to Christ, raised to the status of universal Spirit. The Bible is inspired by God to give His Word its full radiance. It is with the baggage of their limited knowledge, their culture and their concerns that the authors of the Bible transcribed this Word, under the inspiration of God.

The Koran does not hold in Islam the role assigned to the Bible in Christianity. It is not a merely incidental book that came into being in a particular set of historical circumstances. According to traditional Moslem theology, the Koran, a dictated Word, contains the commands God has consented to reveal to men. From this point of view, the Koran, in contrast to the Bible, is in no way marked by any temporality. It is a text that transcends the human condition, because it is eternal and transmitted in "clear Arabic language" (Sura 12:2).

2. This presentation of the internal logic of Islam and of its tradition relative to the revelation of the Koran is the preamble to an authentic dialogue, which is impossible without a full knowledge of the divergences and convergences between the two religions.

In this regard, we could mention three fundamental elements:

a) If, traditionally, the emphasis is placed on the transcendent character of the revealed Text of the Koran, all the classical Moslem exegetes mention, for their part, some *asbab an-nuzul* or historical conditions of the revelation. From this point of view, the text of the Koran is the faithful illustration of the religious life as it was lived in antiquity. From a variety of angles the Koran takes up the treatment of Arab beliefs, myths and values. It does so in a very explicit way in the surahs that were revealed at the time of the clashes between the tiny and very young Moslem community and the Arabs of Mecca and their allies. So the temporal does have a place in a text that Moslems regard as thoroughly transcendent (cf. Sura 53:20).

b) The equation text = context highlights the major concern of Islamic theological discourse to break inelucta-



bly with any human contribution in the revelation of the Divine Word. Pre-Islamic Arab paganism, which did not contest his existence, found sacrilegious the idea that God could manifest himself in their lives and could communicate with them in commonly perceivable discourse. How then could they admit that the Koran is the Divine Word? The reading of the first chapters revealed to Mohammed attests to the evident contrast between paganism and Islam. In the eyes of the Arab pagans, the discourse of the Prophet to his small group of disciples could have only one explanation: "the man must be possessed" (Sura 68:51). So, between Arab polytheism and Islam, the great rupture centers about the perception and the manifestation of the Sacred in the world.

c) Later on, Moslem theology, when confronted with various beliefs, monotheistic or not, will develop in self-defense an apologetic rhetoric, appropriating an excessively abstract style of argumentation drawn from Greek philosophy. This style of argumentation, at the same time that it served as a support to polemics, will eventually yield a scholastic conception of dogmas that would have an evident impact on the Divine Word.

Thus, the Koran, a revelation that emanates from God, is at once Word of Allah, the one and indivisible, and also one of the Attributes of his perfection. Speculative development drives dogmatic theology to view as inseparable the Word and the Supreme Being himself, for fear of succumbing to a form of associationism with the divinity. The Koran as Word and Attribute of God cannot be a created text, because that would affect absolute uniqueness. For fear of an exaltation of the Divine existence, un-nameable and without attributes, and of the resurgence of an anthropomorphic idea of the creator, traditional Moslem theologians turned back to the old God of the philosophers.

3. To have a proper grasp of the totality of elements that go to make up the historical context of the Divine Word, it is important to remember that the Islamic message has been viewed sometimes as a heretical deviation of Christianity and sometimes as a local belief of insignificant Arab tribes. The leaders of the non-Moslem communities of the time made no effort to undertake an examination of their relationship with the Moslem religion. They persisted in their failure to acknowledge an authenticity of the Koranic message, and in refusing to see in it a divine manifestation. This refusal could only inflame the inter-community relations that would henceforth be marked by mutual suspicion. On both sides, the self-absorption and animosity continued to fester, with the most harmful of consequences to a genuine understanding of their own faith.

How can one envision, under such circumstances, the possibility of discussing the Divine Word? A discussion, however, which could bring Islam and Christianity clos-

er together, given that it helps to raise the question of the knowledge of God and of his mystery.

The Koran, in its wish to break with paganism and its conception of a God who is deaf and unpredictable, cannot but rejoice in the formation of bonds that show its relation to Christianity, tied as it is to a spirituality where man, in a position of subordination, derives his value only from an omnipresent God.

Monotheistic religions

	Christians	Moslems	Jews
no. in billions	2,1	1,3	0,015
ratio of world population in %	33	21	0,22

Source: www.adherents.com (as of Sept. 15, 2006)

The Scriptures and cultural unity

At the threshold of this new century, described as globalized and marked by cultural and religious pluralism, a theology of religions is a must, even if it proves to be painful for Muslims and for Christians alike. It is a question first of all of re-examining one's faith and becoming aware of the outmoded character of rigidity and resistance to change. More importantly still, the difficulty of the task can be seen on the theological terrain, because one must reflect on the inevitable plurality of ways that lead to God, without prejudice however to his unity. On the Christian side, Vatican II made a significant step toward Islam, without however transcending its historical dogmatism to the point of considering it a way of salvation. For Islam, Christianity remains, in the best possible case, the prelude to the ultimate and authentic divine message. On both sides of the divide, the absolutist position of a uniquely true revelation is insisted upon.

Concerning our subject, the Word of God, one could set a few milestones on the path of a dialogue in truth. In this sense, four essential points should be underscored:

1. What is interreligious dialogue on the Divine Word? Is it a question of convincing one's dialogue partner, of joining with him for the purpose of combating materialist ideologies, or is it simply to get to know each other better?

As far as I am concerned, a Moslem can become engaged in interreligious dialogue by accepting the fact that however indisputable the word of the Koran might be, his knowledge of that word can hardly exhaust its richness. The final verses of chapter 18 of the Holy Koran illustrate this polymorphic conception: "If the



waters of the sea were ink with which to write the words of my Lord, the sea would surely be consumed before His words were finished, though we brought another sea to replenish it” (Sura 18:109).



2. In parallel to the infinity of divine Grace and to the multiplicity of ways as gift of God, the unshakable faith of the Moslem necessarily implies an unending search for the truth. With the assistance and enlightenment of God he can envisage the other approach to truth, different from his own, as not only legitimate but rewarding for his own search. It is in this sense that God is called *al-Mu'min*: He is the One who confers safety and shelter. It is a new relationship to scriptures that results from this, opening the way to a life far removed from absolute legalism. Far removed, too, from a reductionist relativism which would claim that all religions are equally true – which eliminates, de facto, any authentic participation in a true encounter of universal scope. It is with the aim of putting an end to the conviction that one can be in definitive possession of the truth that chapter 5 stipulates that “Believers, Jews, Sabaeans, or Christians – whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does what is right – shall have nothing to fear or to regret” (Sura 5:69).

3. If dialogue about the Word of God is to be, for a Moslem, an instrument for getting to know other people, it can above all lead to the respect and recognition of otherness. In order for this to occur, dialogue presupposes a spirit of openness on the part of the Moslem with respect to his foundational text. This relationship, engendered by what is referred to as the “hermeneutical situation”, encourages the Moslem to view himself as invited by the revealed Word itself to acquire a unitive and dynamic awareness, impermeable to any kind of binary dualism. He can thus read the Scriptures as an invitation to live an encounter with God in the deepening of his faith. From that time forward revelation exhorts him to enlarge his view, to observe the world in its diversity and to look upon it with spiritual gaze. This whole

procedure has nothing to do with the traditional Moslem conception, which sees in the revealed Word only a series of strict rules, a precisely defined social comportment, prescriptions and precepts; an approach that tends to fossilize society by forging a rigid identity and a narrowly focused interpretation. For one for whom the Divine Word is a source of life and a liberating word, his relationship to others undergoes an inevitable transformation. The Scriptures become an invitation to re-read the phenomenon of religious, cultural and social diversity around him in the light of the divine revelation.

Iqbal (1878–1938), a Moslem thinker, poet and humanist thought that the reconstruction of religious thought in Islam should first of all give to revelation an historical, and therefore a pluralistic sense. An authenticity understood in the sense of a perpetual movement of efforts employed by the community to rekindle the values inspired by the Prophet. This amounts to the emergence of an innovative authenticity, a source of renewal of one’s religion and identity. This conception indicts as false the theory of traditional theologians, because it causes the believer to assume responsibility by making him understand authenticity no longer as submission to a revealed law but rather as an extension of the role of the prophet, minus the revelation. Iqbal sums up this procedure in a sentence: “One ought to read the Text as though one were receiving the revelation oneself”.

4. By basing itself on the Absolute rather than on its signs or symbols and by drawing from the Koran a complex and revealed image of Christianity, dogmatic Moslem theology sets itself in direct opposition to a Divine Word that is particularly attentive to a manifestation of the One toward the multiple. Could this be the origin of the misunderstanding between Islam and Christianity and the cause of the bloody conflicts of the past and present?

Our profound conviction is that the source of all our evils between our two religions is to be sought elsewhere than in essentially doctrinal motifs. Besides the two points examined, the objections of the Moslem authorities to Christianity are diverse (the changing of the message concerning the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, a religion that lacks the esoteric element, a too lofty ethics, a different moral vision with regard to sexuality ...). It remains true that these divergences have never led Moslem teachers to cast doubt on the divine origin of Christianity. They even admit that Christians will be saved if they practice their religion. A number of Hadiths (prophetic traditions) even speak of Christ leading his own into paradise on the final judgment day.

Moreover, faith in the One God who speaks to men confers on human beings an incomparable dignity and a sacred dimension, for it constitutes a substratum shared by both Muslims and Christians. It is moreover because



of this agreement in principle that, for the two religions, worship of God constitutes the highest of human activities and their practitioners are duty bound to sow the seeds of peace and justice in a world created for them.

In our analyses of the history as commonly presented, this fundamental aspect has a tendency to be obscured. It is an aspect, moreover, which explains the bonds of sympathy and inter-activity between devout Moslems and Christian philosopher disciples and teachers. An aspect which also explains how in Moslem Spain, the absence of tension between Moslems and "People of the Book" who fell under their authority was a reality. Many witnesses attest to this, as do the dietary and clothing customs common to the two communities and the frequency with which they attended each other's family and religious celebrations. It goes without saying that the purely religious life witnesses to a continuous expansion in the West of the Christian and Jewish faiths.¹

This relational peace is neither occasional nor superficial. It is precisely due to the hierarchical structure of the revealed Word in Islam.

In Islam, the spirit, often underestimated, of a fruitful dialogue among thinkers of the two religions, among their members, finds its basis in the Koranic Text itself. This text, in spite of various kinds of restrictions, made possible a great openness toward non-Moslems, thanks to its distinction between those who follow the injunction of religion or *al-islam*, those who have faith in its most interior sense *al-iman* and those who possess the spiritual quality *al-ihsan*. This distinction allowed people in the past, and in circumstances different from our own, to reconsider the points of theological disagreement which, when made primary, are capable of unleashing hatreds and rivalries. It is a different conception of the relationship to the other, whose authenticity one seeks to comprehend through witness and the practice of his faith. This does not dispense from the task of re-examining the theological divergences, but with this difference only, that these will then be perceived from the inside within the global panorama of their spiritual and human dimension. This will be a totally different day from the one where dialogue is content with an effort of rational demonstration and an arm of iron between two antagonists.

To conclude, let us first of all remark that this procedure, which is not totally new, is becoming possible today in spite of the fact that a fundamentalist biblical discourse and a punctilious Koranic language are being developed. Does this not make it all the more urgent to open a dialogue that is respectful of the mystery of religious pluralism?

Moreover, has not Christianity, since Vatican II, explored this avenue, which, while including the doctrinal dia-

logue, relocates it in a pluralist perspective? Did not this Council remind Catholics of their relationship with Islam by pointing out that "the Church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men" (*Nostra Aetate* 3)?

For a Moslem, this is an undeniable change of course which deserves to be supported and followed because it states that God, for the two parties, is not only the primary object of faith but that he is above all their light, that of His revealed Word who guides the gaze and the step of the believer.

(Transl.: L. Maluf)

¹ Alain Brissaud, *Islam et Chrétienté: 13 siècles de cohabitation*, Paris 1991; See also Mohamed Talbi, *Al Hurriya ad diniyya bi-l-andalous*, in: *Dirasat andalusia*, n° 7, January 1992. Cf. *Encyclopédie Islamique*, vol. III, Art. Nasara, 1936, pp. 906-913.



The Bible and the “People of the Book”

Sidney H. Griffith



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I. The Bible text and the Muslims

The renowned French Islamicist, Louis Massignon (1883–1962) once wrote that the Qur’an may be considered “une édition arabe tronquée de la Bible” (a distorted Arabic edition of the Bible). “Le Qor’an,” he went on to say, “serait à la Bible ce qu’Ismael fut à Isaac.” (The Qur’an is to the Bible what Ismael is to Isaac.)¹ Massignon here puts his finger on the central fact about the Qur’an: on the one hand its text insistently recalls the earlier biblical narrative and even appeals to it; on the other hand it pursues a reading of its own, often notably distinct from and contrary to the understandings of Jews or Christians about the Bible’s message. The Qur’an, as its name implies is expressly a “reading” or “proclamation”² of a scripture which, through the agency of the angel Gabriel, as Islamic tradition teaches, God serially put onto Muhammad’s heart in the course of his prophetic career in Mecca and Medina from 610, the year of his first revelatory experience, to 632, the year of his death.³ In contradistinction to earlier scriptures, such as those which the Qur’an itself calls Torah, Psalms and Gospel, the Qur’an insists that its distinguishing feature is that it is “an Arabic Qur’an” (Sura 20 *Ta Ha* 113), in “a clear Arabic tongue” (Sura 16 *an-Nahl* 103; Sura 26 *ash-Shu’ara’* 195).

Even a cursory glance at the text of the Qur’an is sufficient to remind the most casual reader that it presumes in its audience a ready familiarity with the stories of the principal narrative figures of the Old and New Testaments. In it there are frequent references to episodes in the stories of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Mary and Jesus, the son of Mary, to mention only the most prominent of biblical characters to be found mentioned in the Qur’an’s discourse (see hereto the article published in this issue). Yet not infrequently there are elements in the telling of the biblical stories that are not familiar to readers of either the Jewish or the Christian Bibles. Sometimes these seemingly dissonant elements can in fact also be found in

early Jewish or Christian, extra-canonical, apocryphal or exegetical lore; in other instances, the apparent novelities are unique to the Qur’an. This is the sort of narrative situation which in the broader areas of literary criticism has prompted scholars to propose a theory of “intertextuality”.⁴ As applied to the accounts of the biblical characters, just for the sake of narrative analysis and independently of any canonical or theological considerations, the theory considers their stories to be narratively incomplete as they actually appear in any single telling, be it in the Bible, in the non-canonical literature, or in the Qur’an. Rather, each textual source is conceived as participating to a greater or lesser extent in telling the full story of any one of the biblical characters.⁵

The “intertextual” consideration of the Qur’an’s participation in telling the stories of many of the principal biblical characters highlights the fact that the Islamic scripture came to Muhammad already in dialogue with the biblical traditions of the Jews and the Christians. Indeed, the Qur’an itself says that God “has enacted for you as a religion that which He charged Noah with and that which We revealed to you, and what We charged Abraham, Moses and Jesus with.” (Sura 42 *ash-Shura* 13) And God said to the Muslims, “If you are in doubt about what We have sent down to you, ask those who were reading scripture before you” (Sura 10 *Yunus* 94). Inevitably then the Bible called for special attention in the encounter of the Jews, Christians and Muslims from the very beginning of Islamic history.

The Qur’an calls the Jews and Christians “People of the Book” or “Scripture People” (e.g., Sura 2 *al-Baqarah* 105), a phrase which occurs some fifty-four times in the text;⁶ once the Islamic scripture refers to the Christians as “People of the Gospel,” saying, “Let the People of the Gospel judge in accordance with what God has revealed in it.” (Sura 5 *al-Ma’idah* 47). It is a settled Qur’anic doctrine that originally the Torah, the Gospel and the Qur’an were on a par, at least in the form in which the Qur’an teaches they were first delivered by their “messengers” (Moses, Jesus and Muhammad) to the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims respectively. But in the form in which the Jews and the Christians actually have their scriptures, the Qur’an itself is already aware of disparities in text and interpretation. For this reason, the Qur’an speaks of the corruption (*at-tahrif*) of the text of the Bible, the alteration of words, and the con-



cealment of meanings. (cf., e.g., Sura 3 *al 'Imran* 78). From the early Islamic period onward, in the arguments about religion that proliferated from the beginning until well into the Middle Ages, and indeed even into modern times, the charge and countercharge of corrupting the scriptures became a staple item in the apologetic and polemical texts composed by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.⁷ Needless to say, in the Islamic milieu the Qur'an itself then became for Muslims the ultimate arbiter of the interpretation of the earlier scriptural accounts, in the narration of which its own text came to participate.⁸

The interest of Muslim religious writers in the text of the Bible underwent a certain evolution as time went on. In the early Islamic period, some Muslim writers actually showed a keen interest in the biblical text familiar to Jews and Christians. In this connection, one might mention quotations, albeit often "corrected", allusions and paraphrases to be found in the work of scholars such as Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 732), in the *Sirah* of Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Ishaq (d. ca. 767), as transmitted by Abu Muhammad 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hisham (d. 834), and in the somewhat copious quotations in the works of Abu Muhammad 'Abd Allah ibn Muslim ibn Qutaybah (d. 889) and Ahmad ibn Abi Ya'qub ibn Ja'far ibn Wahb ibn Wadih al-Ya'qubi (d. 897), to name only the most prominent and well-studied authors.⁹ By the tenth century, however, the interest of Muslim scholars seems to have shifted away from quotations as such from the earlier scriptures, however much they may have "corrected" their wording, and more toward what one may call the "Islamicization" of whole biblical narratives by retelling them freestyle, with concomitantly less interest paid to the wording of the texts familiar to Jews and Christians. This was very much the case in the popular "tales of the prophets" (*qisas al-anbiya'*) and in the so-called *Isra'iliyyat*, of which more below. But it was also the case *mutatis mutandis* in the exegetical literature and in the early Islamic historiography, in which Muslim writers put forward the biblically inspired, Islamic version of salvation history.¹⁰ At the same time, Muslim scholars in the later ages who did pay attention to the biblical texts of the Jews and Christians in some detail did so with a deconstructive intent, designed to demonstrate their corruption, falsification and utter unworthiness.¹¹

The shift in interest on the part of Muslim scholars around the eleventh century from the text of the pre-Islamic scriptures as the Jews and Christians actually have them, to their own narratives or stories of the biblical messengers may well have been due in some part to the pressure exerted by the arguments about religion between Muslims and Christians, which had come into full force in the ninth century.¹² It was common for controversialists on both sides to develop their arguments from both scripture and reason. But even in the early

period there is evidence that Muslims were distrustful of Christians quoting from the Bible. For example, in one text, now preserved only in Greek, Theodore Abu Qurrah (c.755–c.830), one of the earliest Christian writers in Arabic whose name we know,¹³ recalled the challenge of his Muslim adversary as follows: "Persuade me not from your Isaiah or Matthew, for whom I have not the slightest regard, but from compelling, acknowledged, common notions."¹⁴ Similarly, another Christian text in Arabic from the ninth century has the Muslim interlocutor make the following declaration when the Christian apologist proposes to substantiate his claims "from the scriptures of the prophets and messengers." The Muslim character in the dialogue is made to say, "We do not accept anything from the Old [Testament] nor from the New [Testament] because we do not recognize them."¹⁵ And later in the same work, the Muslim character is made to give voice to the Islamic charge of the corruption of the Gospel text as the Christians actually have it. In regard to the Gospel according to John he says,

What you have said you report only from your distorted Gospel and your distorted scriptures. But we have the original Gospel. We have gotten it from our prophet. John and his associates, having lost the Gospel after Christ's ascension into heaven, set down what they pleased. Our prophet Muhammad informed us of this.¹⁶

As Christian writers in Syriac and Arabic thus strove to prove from the Bible that Christianity was the true religion, Muslim writers were in their own turn the more strongly motivated to authenticate the "signs of prophecy" (*dala'il an-nubuwwah*) which testified to Muhammad's status as a prophet and messenger from God, in fact as the "seal of the prophets" (Sura 33 *al-Ahzab* 40). This concern, along with the concomitant development of the doctrine of the "inimitability" (*al-i'jaz*) of the Qur'an, seems to have carried with it a renewed Muslim interest in the topic of the corruption of the previous scriptures at the hands of Jews and Christians.¹⁷ By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, major writers, such as al-Ghazali (1058–1111)¹⁸ and Ibn Hazm (994–1064),¹⁹ again to mention only the most prominent names, were concerned to refute the arguments of Jews and Christians by demonstrating in great detail the unreliability of their scriptures. After their time, and certainly after the time of Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328),²⁰ and for the rest of the Middle Ages, Muslim authors seem to have lost interest in any possible authoritative or probative value to be found in the texts of the scriptures of the Jews or Christians, or in anything emanating from Jewish or Christian exegetical traditions. Aside from their arguments against the integrity of the received texts of the Bible, Muslim scholars did not themselves compose commentaries on any part of the Bible, nor did they systematically use the Torah or Gospel as authoritative sources of religious teaching. As one modern scholar has put it, in the world of Islam biblical exegesis "never became a literary genre on its own, nor did it ever



play an important role in Muslim medieval theology."²¹ Rather, the emphasis seems to have shifted in this period to demonstrating the untrustworthiness of the Bible. In modern times, in the wake of the great achievements of western biblical scholars, both Jews and Christians, whose scholarship has for the most part been based on the historical critical methodologies of modern scholarship, many Muslim writers, taking note of the deconstructive conclusions these scholars have reached, have themselves felt vindicated in reaffirming the claims of their community's earlier scholarly traditions about the textual corruption of the Bibles of Jews and Christians.²²

II. The Torah, the Muslims and the "Religion of Abraham"

While Muslims thus gradually lost interest in the text of the Bible, in the textual form in which it actually circulates among Jews and Christians, following the lead of the Qur'an they certainly did not lose interest in pre-Qur'anic, divine revelation nor in the stories of the biblical prophets and messengers.²³ Rather, the evident intertextuality of many biblical and Jewish/Christian folkloric narratives in the Qur'an prompted Muslims from an early period to engage in a double appropriation of biblical revelation. On the one hand, early writers were concerned to claim the authority of the Bible to warrant the scriptural authenticity of Muhammad, the Qur'an, and Islamic teaching more generally; one may call it a process of "biblicizing" the Islamic prophetic claims. On the other hand, given the concomitant Islamic concern about the corruption of the text of the Bible, and observing the consequent, divergent cast of many of the early Islamic presentations of biblical narratives, one may also speak of a simultaneous process of "islamicizing" the biblical narratives.

In the first instance, that of "biblicizing" the Islamic prophetic claims, the effort was basically to claim a place for the Qur'an alongside the Torah and the Gospel as the locus of a continuing but final divine revelation in scripture. Concomitantly, the purpose was also to show that the earlier scriptures foretold the coming of Muhammad and his mission. In this context, Muslim controversialists often appealed to biblical texts to support their arguments, or to refute what they saw as wrong interpretations on the part of Christian apologists and polemicists.²⁵

It is in the long process of "islamicizing" the biblical narratives in the burgeoning literature of Muslim piety, presenting the Bible stories in Islamic diction and in an Islamic interpretive framework, as was mentioned above, that one sees the enormous presence of Bible revelation in Islamic life. This development is particularly evident in the ever popular "tales of the prophets" (*qisas al-anbiya'*)²⁶ and the associated material which is

collectively known among Muslims as "Israelite lore" (*Isra'iliyyat*).²⁷ Even more than the Qur'an itself, these narratives betray their oral origins, calling attention to the fact that they originally came into circulation in homilies and oral commentaries on the stories of the biblical characters whose careers exemplified the prophetology of the Qur'an. Their currency in turn calls attention to the fact that prior to the rise of Islam, and during the time of Muhammad's proclamation of the Qur'an to its intended, Arabic-speaking audience, the Torah and the Gospel themselves, to which the Qur'an often refers, both directly and indirectly, were available to Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians themselves only in an oral form. As far as the available evidence indicates, there were no pre-Islamic translations of the Bible into Arabic which circulated as written texts.²⁸ Rather, every indication suggests that Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians *heard* the scriptural word of God proclaimed and discussed by Arabic-speaking rabbis, monks and priests who transmitted the narratives *viva voce* from Hebrew, Aramaic/Syriac and Greek texts and commented on them, probably in largely liturgical settings. Text and commentary drawing on apocryphal and folkloric material in the two communities would have intermingled in an enriched religious discourse which then formed the Jewish and Christian consciousness of the original Arabic-speaking audience of the Qur'an.

The Arabic Qur'an in its turn addressed its first audience with the presumption of their familiarity with the orally circulating, biblical narratives embedded in homiletic commentaries as just described. With its own rhetorical strategies, the Qur'an faced its audience with a critique of the beliefs and practices of the earlier "Scripture People". In its own right, and within the nascent Islamic community, the Qur'an thus became what some recent scholars have described as "a canonical recital of God's Holy Word that reconfigured aspects of both Hebrew Bible and New Testament discourse in a context of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim interaction."²⁹

The Qur'an did not become a canonical scripture in the Islamic community, that is to say an authoritative written text, until after the death of Muhammad. Neither the Hebrew Bible nor the Christian New Testament were translated into written Arabic texts until well after the written, Arabic Qur'an had established the parameters for literary Arabic and Arabic had itself become the public language of all the peoples who lived within the world of Islam, whether or not they were Muslims. The first translators of the Bible into written Arabic were not the Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians of pre-Islamic Arabia but Jews and Christians who lived in the conquered territories outside of Arabia, whose own languages had been eclipsed by Arabic.³⁰ This means that the original, Arabic-speaking arena in which Jewish, Christian and proto-Muslim scriptural narratives interacted with one another was an oral/aural, Arabic-speaking



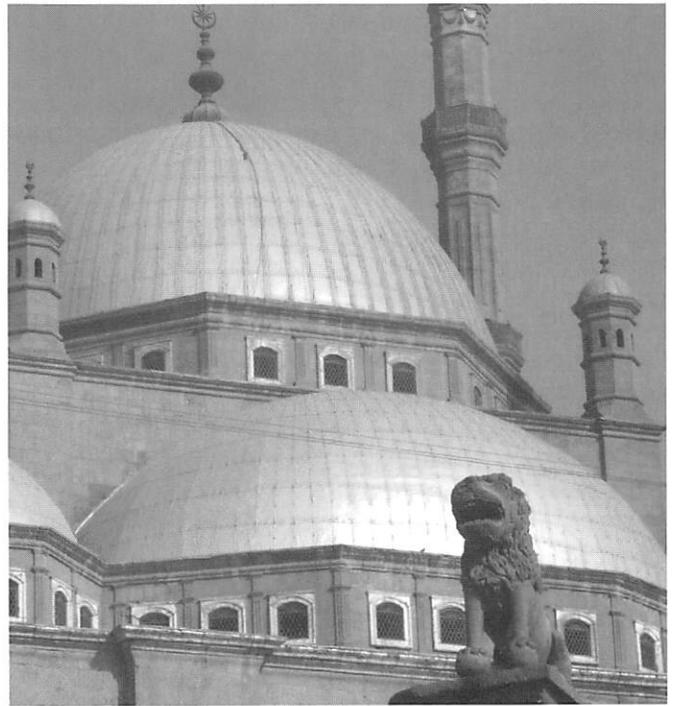
space with a biblical dynamic all its own. It admitted a high quotient of homiletic discourse into the transmission of the scriptural narratives. It was this oral dynamic that prevailed in the later enterprise on the part of Muslims to “Islamicize” biblical history.

Once the Islamic doctrine of the Jewish and Christian corruption of the Bible had gained a general currency, and Muslim scholars lost respect for the texts of the Bible as Jews and Christians actually had them, Muslims seem nevertheless to have recovered a fuller appreciation of divine revelation according to the dynamic mode in which the biblical narratives had interacted in the oral, homiletic milieu of early Qur’anic times. And so it came about that the stories of the Bible’s principal characters, such as Abraham, Moses and Jesus, have inspired many subsequent generations of Muslims in a virtually “midrashic” literature which presents them as messengers of the Word of God, who seem to bear revelation in their very persons. Of no one of them has this been more evidently the case than in the narratives of the patriarch Abraham, whose story has in Islamic times become a paradigm for interfaith relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Already in the Qur’an, in the context of encounters with the “People of the Book”, God gives this instruction to the believers, “They say, “If you become Jews or Christians, you shall be well-guided.” Say, “Rather, we follow the religion (*millah*) of Abraham, who was upright and not a polytheist.” (Sura 2 *al-Baqarah* 135) Even more to the point, in another place in the Qur’an, after posing the question, “O People of the Book, why do you dispute concerning Abraham?” God makes the following declaration, “Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a *hanif* and a *muslim*.³¹ He was not one of the polytheists.” (Sura 3 *al ‘Imran* 65 & 67) And finally, the Qur’an says, “Who has a better religious judgment (*din*) than one who submits himself to God, does right and follows the true religion (*millah*) of Abraham the *hanif*? God has taken Abraham for a friend (*khalilan*).” (Sura 4 *an-Nisa* 125) The last phrase provides a moment of intertextuality, in that the epithet for Abraham, “God’s friend”, can be found both in the Hebrew Bible (Is 41:8) and in the New Testament (Jm 2:23). But surely the main point is the evocation of the concept of “following the religion of Abraham” as a proposed common point de repère for Jews, Muslims and Christians together.

The Qur’an’s concept of “following the religion of Abraham” (*ittiba’ millat Ibrahim*) may be taken as one of the principles which inspired the development of the distinctively Islamic prophetology which Muslim scholars elaborated in early Islamic times, and especially during the period between the eighth and tenth centuries, the period of the so-called “Sectarian Milieu” of competing religious communities, when, as Brian Hauglid has

pointed out, “a lively textual interchange existed between Jews, Christians and Muslims.”³² The story of Abraham as it is presented in the Qur’an then became in that milieu one of the nuclei for both the evolving paradigm of “prophethood” in Islamic thinking and the impetus for the mushrooming, *midrashic* accounts of the deeds of Abraham and his sons, as we find them in the medieval Islamic works of exegesis, Bible history and the tales of the prophets.³³ In these compositions, biblical revelation took on a new life in an “Islamicizing” mode which could confidently leave behind the disputed biblical texts of the Jews and the Christians and yet still lay claim to the authoritative biblical persona, “God’s friend” Abraham. In this way the concept of the “religion of Abraham” emerged for Muslims as a *theologoumenon* which would prove to have a considerable potential for their conversations and controversies with Jews and Christians.



Prompted by the Qur’an, in their exegetical and historical narratives early Muslim scholars traced their own religious ancestry and the geneology of the Arabs back to Abraham by way of the lineage of his eldest son Ishmael/ Isma’il, whose mother was Hagar.³⁴ For Muslims, Ishmael was the immediate patriarch of the North Arabians, from whom, they taught, Muhammad descended, just as Isaac, Abraham’s second son, whose mother was Sarah, was the immediate patriarch from whom the people of Israel descended. And while Christians claimed a spiritual relationship with Abraham through Isaac, the son of the free woman, as opposed to Ishmael, the son of the bondswoman, (Rm 4:9-12; Ga 3:6-18; 4:22-31) the fact remained that in the Torah, Ishmael too, and his descendants, were recipients of the divine blessing. (Gn 16:11-12; 21:13,17-21; 25:9,12-18)



In consequence of the perceived spiritual relationship between Jews, Christians and Muslims which can be traced back to Abraham in different ways in the several communities which reverence the biblical traditions, those engaged in interreligious dialogue in modern times have not been slow to speak of the “Abrahamic faiths” or the “Abrahamic traditions”, and to use such phrases as umbrella terms to designate the three monotheist world religions. One finds this recognition of Islam’s “religion of Abraham” *theologoumenon* even in the documents of Vatican II, when the texts speak of the Muslims. In *Lumen Gentium*, the council fathers spoke of “the Mohamedans, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind” (LG 16). Similarly in *Nostra Aetate*, the Conciliar Declaration on non-Christian religions says of the Muslims that they “take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even his [i.e., God’s] inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God” (NA 3). While these expressions of awareness of the Islamic *theologoumenon* on the council’s part do not amount to a theological endorsement of its veracity from the Church’s point of view, they do show that the continuing, revelational authority of the personae of the biblical Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac in the three scriptural traditions can nevertheless provide the occasion for Muslims and Christians to recognize a moment of common interest in the faith of Abraham, if not a common spiritual relationship, and on this basis to enter into a meaningful interreligious conversation with one another about all that the profession of this “religion of Abraham” entails.³⁵ In the past, Christian controversialists had used the names of these same biblical personae as polemical epithets, regularly calling the Muslims “Ishmaelites” or “Hagarenes”, with the understanding that they are among the children of bondage, who will have no part in the inheritance of freedom promised to the adopted children of Sarah’s son Isaac (cf. Ga 4:21-31). Now the names of these same biblical characters can be symbols of a biblical tradition which both communities cherish as foundational for their own religious identities.

III. Jesus, the Gospel and the Muslims

In nine of the twelve instances in which the Qur’an mentions the Gospel, it includes also a mention of the Torah. According to the Qur’an, the Gospel, like the Torah, is a scripture which God taught to Jesus. (Sura 3 *al ‘Imran* 48; Sura 5 *al-Ma’idah* 110). One notices immediately the difference between this Islamic idea of the Gospel as a message which God communicated to Jesus, just as He communicated the Torah to Moses and the Qur’an to Muhammad, and the Christian idea.³⁶ For Christians, the Gospel is the “Good News” of the salvation which God has accomplished for humankind through Jesus, the Messiah. It is proclaimed both orally and in writing by

those whom God has inspired to proclaim it. This difference with the Islamic conception is exacerbated in the instance of the Gospel as scripture, which according to the Christians is recorded in the originally Greek texts of the four canonical evangelists, by the Islamic charge of *at-tahrif* (“corruption”) which, as we have seen, is often leveled by Muslim scholars against the texts of the Gospel as the Christians actually have them.³⁷ In this connection it is interesting to observe that in his apologetic work, written in Arabic in the Islamic milieu, Theodore Abu Qurrah (750–820) enunciated the following principle regarding the authority of the Gospel for Christians. He wrote,

*Christianity is simply faith in the Gospel and its appendices, and the Law of Moses and the books of the prophets in between.*³⁸ *Every intelligent person must believe in what these books we have mentioned say, and acknowledge its truth and act on it, whether his own understanding reaches it or not.*³⁹



Jesus depicted in an Ottoman miniature dated 1583

It is relevant to the usages of the Islamic milieu in which he wrote that Abu Qurrah here presents the whole Bible succinctly by reference simply to the Gospel and its appendices, and the Torah, along with the prophets between it and the Gospel; the Qur’an normally refers to the full Bible simply as “the Torah and the Gospel” (Sura 3 *Al ‘Imran* 48; Sura 4 *al-Ma’idah* 110). What is more, as if in response to the Qur’an’s admonition to the “People of the Gospel” to make their religious judgments in accordance with what God sent down to them (Sura 5 *al-Ma’idah* 47), Abu Qurrah further says in another Arabic treatise, “Were it not for the Gospel, we would not acknowledge Moses to be from God. ... Likewise, we acknowledge the prophets to be from God because of the Gospel.”⁴⁰

In spite of the differences between Muslims and Christians about the nature of the Gospel, there is nevertheless much Gospel material, both canonical and



apocryphal, in the Qur'an and in Islamic tradition, history and exegesis. For the most part, this Gospel material is concerned with Jesus, the Messiah, his sayings and his actions. In the early Islamic period there were some Muslim commentators who did consult the canonical Gospels in connection with their studies of this material,⁴¹ but as early as the time of the historian and Qur'an commentator, Abu Ja'far Muhammad at-Tabari (839–923),⁴² Muslim scholars were already turning away from the canonical Gospels and were developing a distinctively "Muslim Gospel," with its own "Muslim Jesus," as one modern Muslim scholar has described the tradition.⁴³ While this material has remained largely unfamiliar to Christians, it has enjoyed an enormous circulation in the Islamic world, where the veneration of Jesus as a messenger from God is second only to that accorded to Muhammad himself.⁴⁴

In addition to the textual and narrative divergences between the Christian and the Islamic presentations of Jesus, there is also the obvious major confessional difference (expressed in the phrases, "son of God" vs. "son of Mary"), which persists in the face of the fact that the scriptures of the Christians and the Muslims in one important instance use the same titular epithet in reference to Jesus, the Messiah, albeit that they mean radically different things in the predication. Both the New Testament (Rev 19:13)⁴⁵ and the Qur'an (Sura 3 *al-Imran* 39; Sura 4 *an-Nisa'* 171), each for their own reasons, speak of Jesus as the "Word of God". This coincidence of titular terminology, while very different in meaning in the two faith traditions and indeed expressive of the major confessional difference between them, nevertheless provides a scriptural moment for mutual reflection.

For Muslims, the Qur'an's affirmation that Jesus, the Messiah, Mary's son, is the Word of God and a Spirit from Him (Sura 4 *an-Nisa'* 171),⁴⁶ is a testimony to the perceived, personal creatureliness of Jesus in Islamic thought, strongly affirmed in other passages of the Qur'an (e.g., in Sura 3 *al-Imran* 59; Sura 5 *al-Ma'idah* 75). Christians contrariwise, taking their cue from John 1:1 & 14, affirm that the identification of Jesus with God's Word is an affirmation of his divinity and of his divine sonship, while the Spirit of God, who, according to the scriptures, came upon Mary at the Annunciation (Lk 1:35), and whom Jesus promised to send upon his disciples after his ascension into heaven (Jn 15:26), is the one God in person come to guide God's people. The crucial point to observe in this fundamental, confessional contradiction between Christians and Muslims is the occurrence in the Gospel and the Qur'an of the same scriptural terms, "Word" and "Spirit" of God, carrying with them echoes of the language of the Torah and the Prophets, to ground the opposing Christian and Islamic affirmations about Jesus, the Messiah. This identity of terms, given their scriptural origins, while used to

express opposite creedal affirmations in the two communities of faith, nevertheless also offers the opportunity for a renewed inter-communal conversation about their significance, when they are read against the wider horizon of the shared sacred narratives to which both communities pay allegiance. While such conversations well may not lead to any significant interreligious rapprochement in doctrine, they can certainly help to clarify the mutual understanding of the crucial points of difference and highlight the central tenets of the Christian and Islamic calls to faith in the modern world.

IV. The Bible and Christian/Muslim dialogue

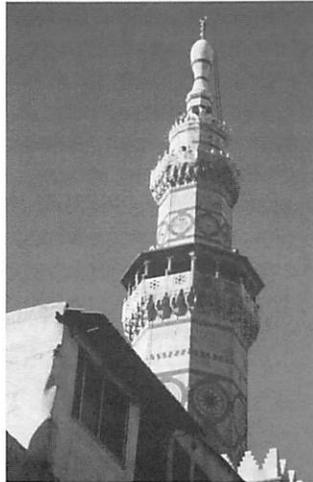
The persistent presence of the Bible to the Qur'an throughout Islamic history indicates that Islam has been in dialogue with Judaism and Christianity from its origins. One could say that the "Word of God" in its several senses could actually work as a powerful magnet to pull Jews, Christians and Muslims together. The Qur'an even now assumes that Jews, Christians and Muslims will be in dialogue with one another. The text instructs the Muslims, "Do not dispute with the People of the Book save in the fairest way; except for those of them who are evildoers. And say: "We believe in what has been sent down to us and what has been sent down to you. Our God and your God are one and to Him we are submissive." (Sura 29 *al-Ankabut* 46)⁴⁷ Similarly, the Qur'an presumes that the moment of dialogue will be a moment of truth determined by reference to the scriptural "word of God". So in connection with a point of disagreement, the text exhorts the Muslims to say, "Bring forth your proof (*burhan*) if you are telling the truth." (Sura 2 *al-Baqarah* 111) In the context it is clear that the "proof" in demand is a corroborating passage from the sacred scriptures.

Furthermore, in a particularly telling passage in the Qur'an it emerges that in the dialogue between Christians and Muslims, the Islamic scripture envisions the requisite proof of personal authenticity in faith statements to consist in putting one's very life on the line in attestation to the religious truth one professes; it is effectively a call for the willingness for martyrdom in the Christian/Muslim encounter. On the occasion of Muhammad's meeting with a delegation of visiting Christians from the south Arabian town of Najran,⁴⁸ as the later Islamic traditions recalled the moment of the revelation, the subject of the truth about Jesus, the Messiah, came up. The traditions record the memory that it was on this occasion, and in connection with the challenge to tell the truth about Jesus, that the following verse of the Qur'an came down to Muhammad, proposing that he and the Christian spokesmen put themselves to the test. The verse says, "To those who dispute with you about it after the knowledge which has come to you, say: 'Come now; let us call our sons and your sons, or wives and your wives, ourselves and yourselves. Then



let us pray to God and so call down God's curse upon those speaking falsely'." (Sura 3 *al 'Imran* 61)⁴⁹

On the face of it, this Qur'anic charge can be taken to require that Christians and Muslims in dialogue with one another about the truth concerning Jesus Christ should leave the judgment of the veracity of their authentically professed witness to one another in the hands of God. It implies not only good faith on their part, in the moral sense of the expression, but also that the terms of their witness should be in accord with "the knowledge which has come to you." That is to say, according to this reading of the Qur'an's charge, Muslims and Christians must testify to the truth attested in the scriptures which God has sent down to each community. And this requirement brings the matter back full circle to the issue of the texts of the scriptures and the question of their integrity in the forms in which each community actually possesses them.



As we have seen, Muslim controversialists have customarily accused the "People of the Book" of having distorted or corrupted their scriptures. In the early Islamic period, Muslim scholars who in their apologetic and polemic works quoted verses from the Torah or the Gospel to verify their own claims sometimes ventured to "correct" the presumed "distorted" passages, especially those which speak of Jesus and the Father, or are supposed to foretell the coming of the prophet Muhammad.⁵⁰ Christians, for their part, viewed these Islamic "corrections" of the Jewish or Christian scriptures as in fact "distortions" of the received text. And in the early Islamic period, in texts written in Syriac and Arabic by Christians who lived in the Islamic milieu and who responded to the challenges posed by Muslim scholars one can actually trace changes in the traditional interpretation of certain scriptural passages to reflect the new religious challenges posed to them by the Muslim polemicists.⁵¹

So from the early Islamic period until modern times, dialogue between Christians and Muslims in regard to the biblical text has remained at something of a stalemate. But the matter is otherwise in regard to the large body of narrative traditions about biblical characters that are central figures in both the Bible and the Qur'an. These traditions in both communities have a "haggadic", even "midrashic" quality about them, which recalls the oral stage of the transmission of biblical narratives in Arabic, when the "Word of God" circulated from person to per-

son without the benefit of a fixed, canonical text easily available in the appropriate language. In the instance of stories about Jesus' sayings and doings in particular, Christians and Muslims are both familiar with a large body of canonical and non-canonical, apocryphal and pseudepigraphic material which circulates in the intertextual milieu of both communities in a way which constitutes almost an "oral Gospel" after the manner of the "oral Torah" in the Jewish community. There is ample room for dialogue between Christians and Muslims in connection with these narratives of biblical personae, especially in terms of the major lines of salvation history and the cultivation of a moral way of life in accord with biblical admonitions.⁵²

Vatican II's document *Dei Verbum* does not mention the Qur'an, nor does it speak of dialogue with Muslims, albeit that it does mention some of the same, pivotal figures in salvation history, such as Abraham, Moses and Jesus, who also appear in the Islamic scripture and tradition. But toward the end of the document there is a passage which has considerable potential for encouraging dialogue between Christians and Muslims about the scriptures. In connection with the discussion of the necessity for providing up-to-date translations of the Bible for Christians of the modern era, the council fathers said, "Furthermore, editions of the Sacred Scriptures, provided with suitable footnotes, should be prepared also for the use of non-Christians and adapted to their situation." (*DV* 25) Given the wealth of biblical traditions which circulate among the Muslims, and the Qur'an's own formal endorsement of the Torah, the Psalms and the Gospel, the time seems to have come to take heed of *Dei Verbum's* suggestion and to propose the preparation of an edition of the Bible specifically for the Christian/Muslim dialogue, with suitable notes and adapted to the requirements of Muslim/Christian mutual understanding. It could become an important moment for the Christian and Muslim "Scripture People" of the twenty-first century to reaffirm their faith in the word of God as they find it in the Torah and the Gospel, scriptures which they both affirm in principle, while commending their differences to the mercy of God. ■

¹ Louis Massignon, *Les trois prières d'Abraham*, Paris 1997, p. 89.

² The Arabic term *qur'an* is cognate to the Syriac term *qeryana*, regularly used by Aramaic-speaking Christians to refer to a liturgical "lesson" or "reading" from the scriptures. See Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, Baroda 1938, s.v. *qur'an*.

³ On the Qur'an as "scripture" (*kitab*), see Daniel Madigan, *The Qur'an's Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture*, Princeton 2001.

⁴ See, e.g., Thais E. Morgan, *Is There an Intertext in This Text? Literary and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Intertextuality*, in: *American Journal of Semiotics* 3 (1985), p. 1-40.



- ⁵ Earlier scholars have studied the stories of biblical characters in the Qur'an in a similar manner. See, e.g., Marilyn R. Waldman, *New Approaches to "Biblical" Materials in the Qur'an*, in: *Muslim World* 75 (1985), pp. 1-16; Mohammed Arkoun, *The Notion of Revelation: From ahl al-kitab to the Societies of the Book*, *Die Welt des Islams* 28 (1988), pp. 62-89.
- ⁶ On the dynamic sense of this expression, see Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur'an's Self-Image*, esp. the appendix, *The People of the Kitab*, pp. 193-213.
- ⁷ On this topic see especially Jean-Marie Gaudeul / Robert Caspar, *Textes de la tradition musulmane concernant le Tahrif (falsification) des Écritures*, *Islamochristiana* 6 (1980), pp. 61-104.
- ⁸ See Andrew Rippin, *Interpreting the Bible through the Qur'an*, in: Gerald R. Hawting / Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (eds.), *Approaches to the Qur'an*, New York 1993, pp. 249-259; Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *The Qur'anic Context of Muslim Biblical Scholarship*, in: *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7 (1996), pp. 141-158.
- ⁹ For a discussion of this process in connection with the quotation of John 15:23-16:1 in Ibn Ishaq's *Sirah*, see Sidney H. Griffith, *The Gospel, the Qur'an, and the Presentation of Jesus in: al-Ya'qubi's Ta'rikh*, in: John C. Reeves, *Bible and Qur'an: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality (Symposium Series, 24)*, Atlanta, 2003, pp. 133-160; Id., *Arguing from Scripture: The Bible in the Christian/Muslim Encounter in the Middle Ages*, in: Thomas J. Heffernan / Thomas E. Burman, *Scripture and Pluralism: Reading the Bible in the Religiously Plural Worlds of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, Leiden 2005, pp. 29-58.
- ¹⁰ See John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History (London Oriental Series, 34)*, Oxford 1978.
- ¹¹ See Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism*, Princeton 1992; Theodore Pulcini, *Exegesis As Polemical Discourse: Ibn Hazm on Jewish and Christian Scriptures*, Atlanta 1998.
- ¹² For a good survey, see Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Encounters and Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History (2 vols)*, Rome 2001.
- ¹³ See John Lamoreaux (introduction & translation), *Theodore Abu Qurrah*, Provo, UT 2005.
- ¹⁴ Theodore Abu Qurrah, *Greek Opusculum 24*, PG, vol. 97, col. 1556B.
- ¹⁵ Giacinto Bulus Marcuzzo (edition & translation), *Le dialogue d'Abraham de Tibériade avec 'Abd al-Rahman al-Hashim i à Jérusalem vers 820 (Textes et Études sur l'Orient Chrétien, 3)*, Rome 1986, pp. 342-343.
- ¹⁶ Marcuzzo, *Le dialogue d'Abraham de Tibériade (see note 15)*, pp. 394-395.
- ¹⁷ See Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm*, Leiden 1996.
- ¹⁸ A refutation of the Christian doctrine of the divinity of Christ based on the Gospels is attributed to al-Ghazali. See Robert Chidiac (edition & translation), *Al-Ghazzali, Refutation excellente de la divinité de Jésus-Christ d'après les Évangiles*, Paris 1939. The authenticity of the work is challenged in: Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in al-Ghazzali*, Jerusalem 1975, appendix A, pp. 458-487.
- ¹⁹ See Pulcini, *Exegesis as Polemical Discourse (see note 11)*.
- ²⁰ See Thomas F. Michel, *A Muslim Theologian's Response to Christianity: Ibn Taymiyya's al-Jawab al-sahih Delmar*, New York 1984.
- ²¹ Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds (see note 11)*, p. 110.
- ²² See Kate Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face*, Oxford 1997.
- ²³ See Brannon M. Wheeler, *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis Richmond 2000*; Id., *Prophets in the Quran: An Introduction to the Quran and Muslim Exegesis*, London 2002.
- ²⁴ It is important to emphasize that the processes of "Biblicization" and "Islamicization" are not mutually exclusive; they often operate simultaneously in a text, albeit that one or the other of them may be a more dominant concern for a given author.
- ²⁵ See David Thomas, *The Bible in Early Muslim Anti-Christian Polemic*, in: *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7 (1996), pp. 29-38.
- ²⁶ See Tilman Nagel, *Die Qisas al-Anbiya': Ein Beitrag zur arabischen Literaturgeschichte*, Bonn 1967; Brian Hauglid, *Al-Tha'labi's Qisas al-Anbiya': Analysis of the Text, Jewish and Christian Elements, Islamization, and Prefiguration of the Prophethood of Muhammad*, (PhD diss.; The University of Utah, 1998 – Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Microform 9829755, 1998); Wheeler, *Prophets of the Quran (see note 23)*; Roberto Tottoli, *I Profeti Biblici nella Tradizione Islamica*, Brescia 1999. One of the most popular texts in this genre has an English translation; see Wheeler M. Thackston Jr. (translation), *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisa'l*, Boston 1978.
- ²⁷ See Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Assessing the Isra'iliyyat: an Exegetical Conundrum*, in: Stefan Leder (ed.), *Story-telling in the Framework of Non-fictional Arabic Literature*, Wiesbaden 1998, pp. 345-369; Roberto Tottoli, *Origin and Use of the Term Isra'iliyyat in Muslim Literature*, in: *Arabica* 46 (1999), pp. 193-210.
- ²⁸ So far no convincing evidence has appeared for a pre-Islamic Arabic translation of any substantial portion of the Bible. It is possible that a few literate individuals among Arabic-speaking Jews or Christians may have had notes or some other rudimentary texts for personal use. See Gregor Schoeler, *Écrire et transmettre dans les débuts de l'islam*, Paris 2002, esp. pp. 26-29. See also Sidney H. Griffith, *The Gospel in Arabic: An Inquiry into its Appearance in the First Abbasid Century*, in: *Oriens Christianus* 69 (1985), pp. 126-167.
- ²⁹ Vernon K. Robbins / Gordon D. Newby, *A Prolegomenon to the Relation of the Qur'an and the Bible*, in: Reeves (ed.), *Bible and Qur'an (see note 9)*, p. 23.
- ³⁰ See Griffith, *The Gospel in Arabic (see note 28)*; Sebastian P. Brock, *A Neglected Witness to the East Syriac New Testament Commentary Tradition: Sinai, Arabic MS 151*, in: Rifaat Y. Ebied / Herman G. Teule (eds.), *Studies on the Christian Arabic Heritage (Eastern Christian Studies, 5)* Leuven 2004, pp. 205-215.
- ³¹ On the sense of the term hanif as roughly equivalent to the sense of the term "gentile" in Judeo-Christian usage, see François De Blois, *Nasrani (Ναζωραῖος) and hanif (εθνικός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and Islam*, in: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65 (2002), pp. 1-30.
- ³² Brian Hauglid, *On the Early Life of Abraham: Biblical and Qur'anic Intertextuality and the Anticipation of Muhammad*, in: Reeves, *Bible and Qur'an (see note 9)*, p. 105.
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- ³⁴ See in this connection the critical observations of Yisrael Eph'al, "Ishmael" and the "Arabs": A Transformation of Ethnological Terms, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 35 (1976), pp. 225-235. A considerable controversy arose among European scholars over the issue of Ishmael considered as the ancestor of the Arabs. See Massignon, *Les trois prières (see note 1)*, pp. 61-77; Michel Hayek, *Le mystère d'Ishmael*, Paris 1964; René Dagorn, *La geste d'Ismael d'après l'onomastique et la tradition arabes*, Geneva 1981.
- ³⁵ See Lewis R. Scudder Jr., *Ishmael and Isaac and Muslim-Christian Dialogue*, in: *Dialog* 29 (1990), pp. 29-32; Sidney H. Griffith, *Sharing the Faith of Abraham: The "Credo" of Louis Massignon*, in: *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations* 8 (1997), pp. 193-210; Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Abraham: Sign of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims (translation John Bowden)*, New York 1995.
- ³⁶ See Sidney H. Griffith, *Gospel*, in: Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, Leiden 2001, vol. II, pp. 342-343.



- ³⁷ The so-called "Gospel of Barnabas" is a special case in Christian/Muslim controversies. The text of this work was discovered in an Italian manuscript in Amsterdam in 1709. The modern scholarly consensus has it that the "Gospel of Barnabas" was composed in the western Mediterranean world (Spain) in the 16th century. See Jan Slomp, *The Gospel in Dispute*, in: *Islamochristiana* 4 (1977), pp. 67-112; Mikel De Epalza, *Le milieu hispano-moresque de l'Évangile islamisant de Barnabe*, in: *Islamochristiana* 8 (1982), pp. 159-183; R. Stichel, *Bemerkungen zum Barnabas-Evangelium*, in: *Byzantinoslavica* 43 (1982), pp. 189-201; David Sox, *The Gospel of Barnabas*, London 1984. Since being translated into Arabic early in the 20th century, the 'Gospel of Barnabas' has been widely acclaimed by some popular Muslim writers as a more authentic record of Jesus' life and sayings than is offered in the four canonical Gospels of the Christians. See Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face* (see note 22), esp. 45-46, 50-71.
- ³⁸ By the Gospel's "appendices" (*tawabi'ih*) Abu Qurrah means the New Testament books, Acts to Revelation, which follow the Gospel according to the four evangelists in the canon. Similarly, the prophets who come "in between", as he says in the next phrase, refer to all the Septuagint books from Joshua to Malachi, which follow the Torah.
- ³⁹ Constantin Bacha, *Les oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara, évêque d'Haran*, Beyrouth 1904, p. 27.
- ⁴⁰ Louis Cheikho, *Mimar li Taurus Abi Qurrah fi wujd al-khaliq wa d-din al-qawim*, *al-Machriq* 15 (1912), p. 837.
- ⁴¹ See in this connection, e.g., Sidney H. Griffith, *The Gospel, the Qur'an, and the Presentation of Jesus in al-Ya'qubi's Ta'rikh*, in: Reeves, *Bible and Qur'an* (see note 9), pp. 133-160.
- ⁴² See André Ferré, *La vie de Jésus d'après les Annales de Tabari*, in: *Islamochristiana* 5 (1979), pp. 1-29.
- ⁴³ Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*, Cambridge, MA 2001, p. 3.
- ⁴⁴ See Roger Arnaldez, *Jésus, fils de Marie, prophète de l'Islam*, Paris 1980; Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration*, London 1985; Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, Albany/NY 1991.
- ⁴⁵ See also Jn 1:1;14, where nevertheless the full phrase, *ho logos tou theou* applied to Christ, does not appear as it does in Rev 19:13.
- ⁴⁶ The Qur'an's statement that Jesus is a Spirit from God (Sura 4:171) should be read in connection with other passages, such as the one recalling the Annunciation to Mary, where the text says, "We sent to her Our spirit in the semblance of a full-grown man," who said to her, "I am but your Lord's emissary and have come to give you a holy son." (Sura 19 *Maryam* 17;19) In other places the Qur'an says that God strengthened Jesus with the Holy Spirit; see Sura 2 *al-Baqarah* 87;253; Sura 5 *al-Ma'idah* 110. In a particularly pertinent passage the Qur'an says of Mary, "She who guarded her chastity, We breathed into her of Our Spirit and made her and her son a sign unto the world." (Sura 21 *al-Anbiya'* 91)
- ⁴⁷ See Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Debate with them in the better way: The Construction of a Qur'anic Commonplace*, in: Angelika Neuwirth et al. (eds.), *Myths, Historical Archetypes and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature: Towards a New Hermeneutic*, Beirut / Stuttgart 1999, pp. 163-188.
- ⁴⁸ See Irfan Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najran: New Documents* (*Subsidia Hagiographica*, 49), Brussels 1971; René Tardy, *Najran: Chrétiens d'Arabie avant l'Islam*, Beirut 1999.
- ⁴⁹ See Louis Massignon, *La Mubahala de Médine et l'hyperdulie de Fatima*, in: Louis Massignon, *Parole donnée*, Paris 1983, pp. 147-167.
- ⁵⁰ See, e.g., the discussion of the presentation of Jn 15:23-16:1 in Ibn Ishaq's *Sirah*, as noted above, note 9.
- ⁵¹ See Martin Accad, *Did the Later Syriac Fathers Take into Consideration Their Islamic Context When Reinterpreting the New Testament?* in: *Parole de l'Orient* 23 (1998), pp. 13-32. See also Id., *The Gospels in the Muslim Discourse of the Ninth to the Fourteenth Centuries: An Exegetical Inventorial Table*, in: *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 14 (2003), pp. 67-91, 205-220, 337-352, 459-479.
- ⁵² See the recent effort of one scholar to take advantage of the common heritage in: John Kaltner, *Ishmael Instructs Isaac: An Introduction to the Qur'an for Bible Readers*, Collegeville/MN 1999.

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Bible and Qur'an in Dialogue

Christian W. Troll



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Introduction

Dialogue with Islam will always be dialogue with one (or several) among other possible understandings of Islam. Belief in the Qur'an as the revealed Word of God, in Muhammad as the seal of the prophets and the "good example" (Sura 33:21) of a God-pleasing life, in addition to the acceptance of a few basic religious practices as prescribed by God are common to all Muslims. However, the Muslim world, and certainly the Sunni section of it, does not know of any kind of *magisterium* that would or could claim to teach authoritatively the authentic interpretation of Qur'an and Sunna and would meet with wide acceptance among the Muslims. The various understandings of Islam follow from different ways of "reading" its normative texts (esp. the Qur'an) and of interpreting its central founding events and symbols. I shall limit myself here to mainstream Sunni understanding of Islam as we find it taught and practised e.g. in Al-Azhar University in Cairo and those innumerable institutions that are close to its teaching. Furthermore, I shall limit myself here to a few remarks that seem to be of immediate relevance to Christian-Muslim dialogue: (1) The "Word of God" in Christian and in Muslim understanding; (2) Muslim beliefs concerning the Qur'an and the Bible and their relevance for the encounter between Christians and Muslims; (3) The Bible and the Qur'an in their spiritual significance for Christians and Muslims; (4) Initiatives in studying the Bible and the Qur'an together.

1. The "Word of God" in Christian and in Muslim understanding

Following closely the *Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims*¹ we can say: Both Christians and Muslims believe that God took the initiative in history to speak to human beings. Believers in both religions consider themselves the fortunate beneficiaries

of the "gift of the Word." To Muslims the Qur'an is the final, unique and fully authentic manifestation of the Word of God, addressed to humankind through the ministry of Muhammad (cf. e.g. Sura 42:52). And from their side, Christians are persuaded that "in many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days He has spoken to us by a Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things" (Heb 1:1-2).

In the effort to clarify to each other the ways in which the Christian and the Muslim religion receive and understand the Word of God, Christians and Muslims will point out the different ways in which the two religions identify the Word addressed to them by God. For Muslims this Word is the Qur'an itself, "... a revelation of the Lord of the Worlds ..." in plain Arabic speech (Sura 26:192, 195), and mention will be made of the Qur'an's importance for them as discourse about God and as a law for humankind. According to the Christian view, the Word of God came into the world "in the fullness of time" (cf. Mk 1:15) not in the form of a Scripture, but in the person of Jesus Christ, revelation of the Father and presence of God in the world of human beings. For Christians "Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the Word of God, [which is] committed to the Church" (DV 10), "for there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and sacred Scripture ... both of them flowing from the same divine wellspring" (DV 9). Consequently, according to Christian teaching the holy books of the Old and the New Testament, jointly the work of God and the divinely inspired authors, are only one means, albeit an exceptional and normative means, of coming to know the Word of God in life's experience.

For a dialogue to be authentic, the *Guidelines* emphasize, the partners must take account of the profound difference in the faith convictions of Muslims and Christians regarding the nature and message of their respective Holy Scripture so as to avoid useless confusion and irrelevant criticism. In the Muslims' religious experience, the Word of God became "the Book, wherein is no doubt" (Sura 2:2), "the Book with the truth" (Sura 5:48 et al), "the Book making clear everything" (Sura 16:89), namely the Qur'an, whereas Christians believe that the Word of God "became flesh" in the person of Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord.



2. Muslim beliefs concerning the Qur'an and the Bible and their relevance for the encounter between Christians and Muslims

2.1 The Qur'an and Christian-Muslim dialogue

From the many passages of the Qur'an that speak about the Christians and about relations with them, we take into account here only verses from suras five and nine. These suras are considered to belong to the last phase of Qur'anic revelation. Thus, Muslim faith holds them to be "the last word" of the Qur'an on the subject, overriding or correcting possibly conflicting earlier relevant statements of the Book.

Christians, together with the Jews, are called by the Qur'an "People of the Book" and at times "People of the Gospel" (e.g. Sura 5:47). Thus, in a sense, the Qur'an challenges Christian believers to re-examine their behaviour and practices in the light of the Gospel. Behind the frequent single explicit or implicit question from Muslims to Christians as to why they do not conform to clear prescriptions of the Torah (e.g. circumcision or dietary prescriptions) stands the real question: "How do you obey the Word of God?" A single scriptural quotation made to a Christian by a Muslim interlocutor may well seem too narrow a criterion, and in fact it is. But in dialogue Christians must answer the real question that is being asked of them and answer it in such a way as to be understood by the Muslim. Furthermore, it may not be entirely useless for Christians to realise that this or that of their practices does in fact stand in tension with, if not in flat contradiction to, biblical teaching.

For the Muslim in any case there is no doubt that he/she must judge everything according to the teaching of the Qur'an. He/she does not see the need to read the Bible; the Qur'an, according to Muslim belief, has come as the last Word of God. It has been preserved authentically and thus confirms or cancels whatever came before (e.g. Sura 5:48: "And unto thee have We revealed the Scripture with the truth, confirming whatever Scripture was before it, and a watcher over it. So judge between them by that which Allah hath revealed, and follow not their desires away from the truth that has come unto thee ..."). The Christian may follow his/her conscience and obey the Word of God as he/she sees it. However, the Muslim will consider everything in the Bible which is not in agreement with the Qur'an as either obsolete or falsified.

We should take note of the view of the Qur'an expressed in the same verse 5:48, that in religion pluralism is a fact, that this fact is to last till the end of the world and that the presence of other religions existing side by side with Islam will be a test willed by God to

try the fidelity of the Muslims ("For each We have appointed a divine law and a traced-out way. Had Allah willed He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He hath given you (He hath made you as you are). So vie with one another in good works. Unto Allah ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ.").

We find in Sura 5:82 the famous passage where in one and the same verse Jews and idolaters are described as "the most vehement of mankind in hostility to those who believe" and, on the other hand, "those who say: Lo! We are Christians" to be "the nearest to them in affection", and the verse adds: "That is because there are among them priests and monks and because they are not proud." The following verse makes it clear that Christians are expected to have, besides the qualities of love and humility, a warm sense of God's overwhelming greatness. Now, the text in question here may well have been referring to a group of Christians who were more favourable to Islam. However that may be, this passage forms part of the text of the Qur'an and therefore it is accepted by Muslims as the Word of God.

Besides such texts we find other restrictive ones, which certainly are not likely to encourage dialogue. Take for instance: "O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and Christians for friends" (Sura 5:51) and the famous call to fight the Christians and to reduce them to a subordinate political status under Islamic rule (Sura 9:29). Although this verse clearly distinguishes between some "People of the Book" who believe in God and some others who don't, that distinction has not been made in practice, and the verse has been applied in the past to all Christians as such.

From the overall evidence as to Qur'anic verses concerning the Christians and relations with them, J.-M. Gaudeul concludes:

It seems possible to find in the Qur'an texts that could lead Muslims to accept fruitful dialogue with Christians. Of course, it is not up to us to tell Muslims how they should understand the Qur'an, this is their affair. But what we could do is to lay aside our fears, and approach Muslims as we are expected to, not only in the Gospel, but even on the part of verses in the Qur'an.²

Gaudeul is convinced that if Christians show themselves to be really and truly the "People of the Book", that is, a People obedient to the Word of God, with a deep sense of God's majesty, then there can be no doubt that this attitude will be used by God to remind the Muslims of the texts more favourable to Christians. This, in turn, may facilitate a meeting between Christians and Muslims as partners and not as rivals or adversaries engaged in fruitless controversies.



2.2 Some salient differences between the Christian and Muslim faiths concerning Scripture

Christian teaching on the inspiration of the biblical scriptures implies the affirmation that God took human beings, individually and as groups, as his instruments in such a way that He respected their freedom, their mental processes, temperaments, faculties, traditions. The given biblical text for Christian belief is always at the same time entirely the word of the writer and the Word of God. Thus the Word of God in the Bible comes to the listener or reader with different styles, images, and expressions, in which they recognize the person or group(s) of persons who formulated and gave shape to the given text. In contrast, according to mainstream Muslim faith, the Word of God came to Muhammad by way of dictation: God, or His Spirit (= the angel Jibril) tells Muhammad, word for word, what he has to say; Muhammad is the mouthpiece of God in the sense that in no way does he share in the choice of words, sentences and so forth, that he is ordered to pronounce.

Muslims never quote the Qur'an by saying: "Muhammad says this ..." but by announcing purely and simply: "God says ..." The way in which modern Christians, when quoting the Bible, mention only the human instrument: "Isaiah teaches", "Moses says", tends to mislead the Muslims into thinking that by so doing Christians want to deny that these texts come from God. One may well ask with Jean-Marie Gaudeul,³ whether, when quoting from the Bible, it would not be more adequate for Christian believers – especially in dialogue with Muslims – to use phrases that express our belief in God's guidance and inspiration, formulae as we find them in the Bible itself: "The Holy Spirit speaking through David or through Paul, says" (Mk 12:36) or simply: "It is written in the Scriptures" (cf. Ga 4:27).

The Muslim belief in revelation as dictation of a text leads to another consequence. While both the Bible and the Qur'an contain a great number of literary forms, the Qur'an presents the totality of its text as one overarching literary genre: the "prophetic". The various Qur'anic forms of style or subject matter (prayers, rules, exhortations, stories etc.) are fitted into this overall frame of the "prophetic". The Qur'an as a whole rightly can be viewed a kind of one, long sermon or exhortation: spoken by God (or by angels) and addressed to Muhammad or to believers or to humans in general.

From the conviction that the Qur'an is direct dictation from God the Muslim will conclude that the Qur'an is absolutely perfect, divine as to content and style. The beauty of the Arabic style of the Qur'an and the clarity of the content of its message (with its focus: unity of God and brotherhood of humankind) will be perceived as,

and believed to be, a miracle of ultimately irresistible convincing power.



A further, major difference in the content of the Bible and the Qur'an is such as to lead Christians and Muslims in quite different directions. If we were to summarize the message of the Bible in a few lines, we would say: God reveals Himself in the course of one history of salvation. This history is essentially characterized by the election of a specific people, the promise of the Messiah and then the covenant with this people. This people however turns out unfaithful, is punished yet not rejected, is led through divine pedagogy to a higher and higher idea of God and, simultaneously, to a deeper sense of sin and to a greater expectation of messianic promises. Then in the faith of the Christian Church, the new Israel with its body of Scripture, eventually named "the New Testament", the "mysterious" plan of God, perceived to have been hidden from the beginning, is believed to have been revealed through the Son, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the focus of all history, who dies, who saves humankind by His death and resurrection, and gives those who believe in Him a share in His glory through His Spirit so that they may prepare for the second coming. It is one plan, unfolding from the beginning to the end of time, and strictly centred on Jesus, "the Messiah (Christ)", in whom God enters our history and takes history in His own life.

In Islam there is no such history of salvation, understood as progress in the revelation of God's mystery leading to incarnation, the cross, resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit. The Muslim faith views the relationship of God to humankind quite differently:



- ❑ Periodically God sends prophets to remind humans of the one unchangeable religion: a religion based on human nature into which God has created an orientation towards monotheism. The message of this innate religion is always the same: God is unique. Worship Him only. Keep social justice. Believe in the last day.
- ❑ These prophets are sent in different places and at different times to different communities, and these are not connected with each other. Instead of one continuous history of God with his people and through them with all humankind, in the Qur'anic vision we have rather the juxtaposition of separate interventions of God.
- ❑ In each of these interventions, the same process is repeated: the prophet preaches; the people rebel against his message; God destroys this community but saves his messenger. The punishment motive in the stories of the Old Testament concerning Noah and the Flood, Loth and Sodom, Moses and the Egyptians, Jonah and Nineveh is taken up by the Qur'an. These stories prefigure Muhammad's own experience.

Finally, when humankind has come of age, Muhammad is sent by God, as the last, decisive prophet, to preach this same, one message of all genuine prophets, but now with insuperable clarity and through the victorious *umma muslima*, the community of Muslims, eventually, to the whole of humankind. From Muhammad, the final prophet, onwards the Muslim community is charged not only with making Islam as ideal faith and practice known but to struggle for the eventual rule of God by way of Islam and the divine law, in all places and in all spheres of life.

2.3 The Muslim view of the Bible

What has been stated concerning the Qur'an and its vision of history conditions the Muslim's encounter with the Bible.

The first reaction of a Muslim to being exposed to the Bible will be a reaction of estrangement und bewilderment. Being used to the literary style of the Qur'an, he or she is faced in the Bible with a whole library of different writings belonging to different epochs and cultures, with different styles and different subject matters.

The Muslim will have been taught by the Qur'an, catechism and Muslim preaching that the book of the Torah was given to Moses, the book of the Psalms to David and the Gospel to Jesus. He/she will find it difficult to identify the Torah with the five different books of the Pentateuch. Then he/she will discover that the Psalms are not words attributed to God, but are throughout prayers addressed to God.

In the light of this, normally Muslims all over the world tend to feel confirmed in the belief that the Bible has been falsified by the Jews and Christians. Already in the Qur'an, the "People of the Book" are accused of forging new texts and/or changing words in the Bible. Since, as we have stated, the Qur'an and thus Islam do not consider the possibility of a proper history of salvation in the sense of a history implying a steady progress of revelation leading to a point of irreversible culmination, the Muslim looking at the Bible will tend to reason as follows:

"Look at the Torah: If this book, as it stands, has been revealed by God, how is it possible that we find in it no mention of essential truths such as the resurrection of the dead, or the existence of heaven and hell? Any truly revealed book should contain these essentials. If the Torah does not teach them, it is because the Jews have suppressed all the passages containing these truths. And in any case: the real Torah was given by God to Moses himself; how could the book contain an account of Moses' death? It is because the Jews added texts of their own making to the Word of God."

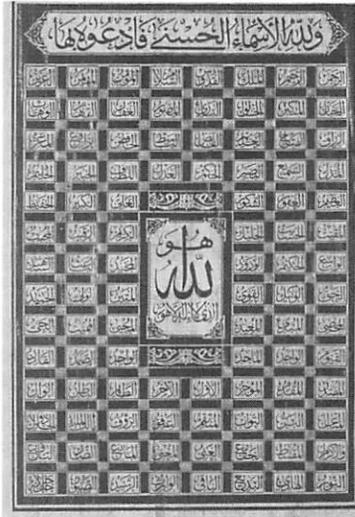
It is important for Christians to realize that such accusations follow logically, if one takes for granted that revelation comes down ready-made from heaven through dictation. Hence, for instance, the question becomes understandable that was put to me recently by a Muslim reader of my homepage (www.answers-to-muslims.com): "If present-day Christianity is authentic, how can there be different Gospels?" The Muslim wonders, what happened to the unique Gospel, the *injl*, revealed word by word by God to "*Isa*, son of Mary". In the New Testament the Muslim finds in place of this one *injl* (Gospel) four different ones. And these "Gospels" turn out to be simply a collection of traditions concerning Jesus, put together by his disciples, some of whom never even met Jesus personally. Furthermore, the "gospels" show clearly that they derive from human hands only, for they are full of discrepancies and contradictions among each other. Finally, the Qur'an states (and for the Muslim this means: "God Himself states") clearly, that Jesus never claimed to be more than a prophet, that he did not die on the cross and that he announced explicitly the coming of Muhammad.

Why can't we find in the New Testament of the Christians a clear foretelling of Muhammad? The Muslim answer is: because the Christians removed it from the text. In consequence, we are left, in the Muslims' view, with only a few traces of this foretelling of Muhammad in the Bible, as for instance in Deuteronomy 18:18, in which God promises to the Israelites that he will raise up from their brothers a prophet like Moses and in the Gospel according to John (14:26), which contains the promise of the paraclete or comforter. Whereas the Christians understand this foretelling of the coming of



the paraclete as referring to the Holy Spirit, Muslims read *periklutos* (famous, praiseworthy) for *parakletos* and claim that there is promised Muhammad, whose name is “praised”.⁴

Christians should not be discouraged to discover that they are accused of having falsified the Bible. These objections and accusations are not meant personally. However, they should use all possible means provided to them by modern scholarship and communication media, not least the electronic ones, to make educated Muslims aware of how untenable the Islamic doctrine of the “corruption” of the Bible in its traditional understanding is in fact.



The 99 names of God

Not surprisingly, some Muslim scholars, past and present, have accepted the text of the Bible as it stands today. They suggest that the falsification, of which the Qur’an speaks, refers to the misguided interpretation of the text by Jews and Christians from earliest times rather than to alteration of the actual text. Other contemporary Muslim scholars recognise that the Gospels are based on knowledge of historical events, but add that the Christian interpretation of these events need not exclude other (e.g. Muslim) interpretations.⁵

3. The Bible and the Qur’an in their spiritual significance for Christians and Muslims⁶

3.1 Getting to know our Holy Scriptures and what they mean to us as believers – an inevitable task for both Christians and Muslims today

Contemporary living together (*convivencia*) between Christian and Muslim believers in various constellations and worldwide has become a fact. Many Christians and many Muslims are convinced that it is part of their vocation to get to know one another and to promote, wherever possible together, what is good and to ward off what is evil. From the point of view of Muslim believers, simply to disregard the other “books” would amount to disobeying the message of the Qur’an. Even Muslims who believe that “the People of the Book” have falsified the text of their respective Holy Scriptures and who may be interested in Jews and Christians only as potential

converts to Islam, will increasingly become aware of the “need” of learning from Christians about their own understanding of their Holy Scriptures. The positive statements of the Qur’an about the “People of the Book” which certainly, as we have seen, go together with negative ones, all the same have to be taken seriously by the Muslims, if they take the Qur’an at all seriously.

Of the People of the Scripture there is a staunch community who recite the revelations of Allah in the night season, falling prostrate (before Him). They believe in Allah and the Last Day, and enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency, and vie with one another in good works. They are of the righteous. And whatever good they do, they will not be denied the meed thereof. Allah is Aware of those who ward off (evil) (Sura 3:113-115).

But extra-Islamic considerations, too, will lead Muslims to come to see more and more that they cannot avoid taking the Bible seriously and getting to know it properly, just as non-Muslims in our day will want to acquaint themselves with the text of the Qur’an itself. Inevitably, in modern societies, Muslims will meet with a critical approach to spiritually relevant texts, an approach that they had not been acquainted with hitherto. In a first reaction to modern and critical Bible scholarship Muslims may well have somewhat triumphantly proclaimed that such critical scholarship goes to confirm traditional Muslim claims to textual falsification of the Bible. However, eventually they will come to ask themselves why the historical-critical approach to Bible studies, instead of leading simply to the end of Christian faith, in fact has on the whole turned out to be a factor promoting meaningful interpretation of the Christian faith for today. In this sense historical-critical exegesis no doubt has led to recognizing in a new way the spiritual and theological relevance of the Scriptures.

In Christian circles, too, a new impetus can be made out towards looking out for the Qur’an. Thoughtful Christians ask themselves how it is possible that the Qur’an in our day continues to convey considerable spiritual energy. Muslims seem to receive today, as in the past, spiritual energy in the Qur’an. It is not so much the Muslim claim of the corruption of the Bible that challenges Christians, but rather the fact that a book like the Qur’an, which entered history about six hundred years after the birth of Christ, continues to nourish a vibrant world faith with more than one billion adherents. What does it mean, these Christians may well wonder, that the God of Jesus Christ has allowed or even caused this to happen?

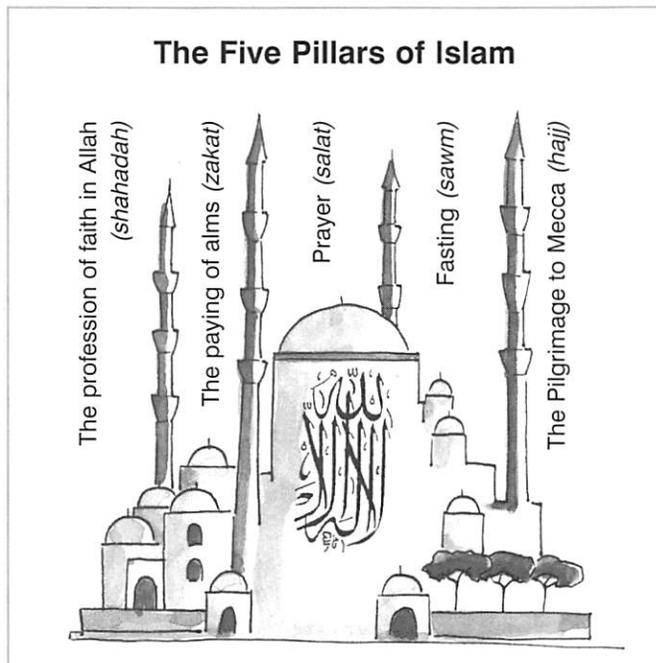
3.2 Spiritual growth and cleansing through mutual attention to our Holy Scriptures

However difficult it may seem to relate the Bible and the Qur’an in their spiritual relevance to one another, the task would seem to be inevitable, except if one were to wilfully decide to shut oneself off from another spiritual-



ly. Christians and Muslims can at least to some extent convey to one another what constitutes their inner basic attitude, what is religiously relevant to them and from which spiritual perspective they try to lead their lives. It is true that the Bible and the Qur'an are for Christians and Muslims no more than one possible focal point among many others, yet they certainly constitute a central focal point for the faith of those who put their faith into them. What relevance does it have for Muslims to become aware of the spiritual relevance which the Bible has for each Christian and for the Christian Church? What do Christians learn when they come to realise how the lives of individual Muslims and, in a sense, of the whole *umma muslima* are shaped with and through the Qur'an?

Biblical texts constitute a polyphonic response to the encounter with "God's wonderful works", the *magnalia Dei*. The Word, which is God himself in Jesus Christ, continues to find ever new responses, and these responses turn into words of witness, of proclamation and of good news. The Christian lives in the grateful realisation that the ever greater God wishes to meet him/her in Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and risen, who shares his life with us at the "table of the Bread" and the "table of His Word".



In contrast, Muslim understanding of faith does not seem to conceive the Qur'an as a response on the part of the prophet Muhammad or any other witness of faith. Rather, the Qur'an for the Muslim believer is nothing less than the text of the Word of God, existing from eternity, preserved in heaven, written on the well-guarded tablet (Sura 85:22). This text was conveyed to Muhammad and delivered by him absolutely faithfully to his listeners, who preserved it integrally by memory and even-

tually in written words as well. The believer is asked to respond to the creator's and judge's revealed guidance by the faithful practice of the "five pillars" of Islam. From the Qur'an's injunctions the law can be deduced as clear orientation for the individual and the community. If the Qur'an can be an object of mystical love and a sacrament-like source of energy, yet, in the first place and primarily, it is guidance as the clear expression of the will of the merciful God.

4. Initiatives in studying the Bible and the Qur'an together

Recently, on behalf of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rev. Michael Ipgrave organized a pioneering Christian-Muslim seminar at Doha that was hosted by the Emir of the State of Qatar. The volume "Scriptures in Dialogue" presents the proceedings of that seminar, the major part of which consisted of the work carried out in four parallel small groups, each composed of Christian and Muslim scholars. These groups met on a total of six occasions for intensive reading of paired passages from the Qur'an and the Bible. In a postscript Ipgrave writes:

Christianity and Islam both have long traditions of scriptural understanding, and many ways of developing these traditions further to meet new situations and questions. But there are almost no places and occasions where Christians and Muslims can learn from each other and engage in dialogue around the scriptures together ... Any progress towards deeper understanding and peacemaking between the two faiths must, therefore, take these scriptures seriously, because they are linked to the best and the worst in history and the current situation.⁸

Small groups of educated Christians and Muslims, for some time now, come together regularly here and there to read biblical and Qur'anic texts together. Such study groups are a hopeful sign. Already by the mid-1980s, Fr. Jacques Jomier published most helpful materials for such study circles. Inspired by Jomier's initiatives and publications over the past years, groups of religiously educated Jews, Muslims and Christians have met regularly in Berlin and now in Frankfurt to read together Qur'anic and related biblical texts. Each side tries by way of this shared reading of, and response to, the texts to grow in appreciating the reasons for which biblical and Qur'anic texts continue to fascinate and inspire those who listen to them or read them with open hearts. Does the probability that such shared spiritual reading will remain a matter of relatively small numbers detract from its intrinsic value?

Simultaneously, Christians should do everything possible to invite young Muslim scholars to participate in biblical study and scholarship, and vice versa. For genuine theological Christian-Muslim dialogue to succeed, Muslim "christianologists" and Bible exegetes would seem to be needed. The teaching and writing of such



scholars and the scholarly dialogue between them and their Christian (and of course also Jewish) counterparts definitely would help to elaborate and better understand the distinctive contours of the two religions and their respective bodies of religious scholarship.

In this context the unique, long-range project of the Muslim-Christian Research Group GRIC (Groupe de Recherches Islamo-Chrétien)⁹ merits special mention. Here Muslim and Christian scholars from Europe and North Africa meet on a regular basis in a number of local groups for research and discussion – as independent and individual representatives of their faith traditions and as friends with neither a political nor religious agenda. In the year 1987 this group published, in French and in English, the results of their work.

The work involved several stages. First, they defined and described scripture, its role and its meaning, to both Islam and Christianity. They also discussed methods and reasons for reading and studying scripture, its transmission to the individual and the community, and how it is received and responded to. The book concludes with two “assessments”: Islamic scholars commenting on the Bible and Christian scholars on the Qur’an.

In his opening remarks to the Doha seminar just mentioned, the Archbishop of Canterbury explained the rationale of shared study of one’s respective scriptures in the following words:

Christians are Christians and Muslims are Muslims because they care about truth, and because they believe that truth alone gives life. About the nature of that absolute and life-giving truth, Christians and Muslims are not fully in agreement. Yet they are able to find words in which to explain and explore that disagreement because they also share histories and practices that make parts of their systems of belief mutually recognizable – a story reaching back to God’s creation of the world and God’s call to Abraham; a practice of reading and absorbing scriptures and of shaping a life in response to the Word God speaks to creation. We are here to discover together more about how each community believes it must listen to God, conscious of how very differently we identify and speak of God’s revelation ... Listening to God and listening to one another as nations, cultures and faiths have not always had the priority they so desperately need. So this space for reflection is all the more important; it is both a symbol and an example of this kind of engagement.¹⁰

Any Christian who has taken part in such a shared reading of the Bible and the Qur’an or, more generally, in dialogical exchanges between Muslims and Christians on theological themes knows that in such a process, together with the discovery of substantial common elements of faith, he/she also comes to know ever more deeply the equally substantial differences between the two faith visions; differences that in fact permeate all

areas of the two faith visions and theological teachings. Ultimately, they have to do with the singularity of the fundamental fact and absolute centre of Christian faith: Jesus, the son of Israel and the Son of God. Encountering Muslims and their Islam in depth, the Christian believer and theologian constantly lives with questions such as these: Could and should Christians qualify Muhammad theologically as a prophet? Can, or even must, Christians confess that the Qur’an “is bearer of a Word of God”, as Robert Caspar has put it? What status and salvific value should Christian theology ascribe to Islam?

It has not been the aim of this paper to go into these questions which I have discussed elsewhere.¹¹ However, in conclusion, we should all the same indicate with due brevity our position on this central question. On the one hand, Muhammad and the Qur’an merit the utmost attention on the part of the Christian believer and theologian, since Muhammad and the Scripture which he has proclaimed in the name of God are doubtlessly marked by genuine religious experience and in consequence by religious and ethical teachings that in part must be considered the fruit of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, in the light of the revelation that culminates in Jesus Christ, the claim of the prophet of Islam and of the Qur’an to be the perfect and final revelation, judging and superseding all previous revelations, cannot but meet with rejection on the part of the Christian believer. Moreover, the teaching of the Qur’an displays aspects and teachings that do not meet with the standards Jesus Christ represents and sets and that even contradict the teaching he embodied and proclaimed: self-giving and non-violent offering of self including love of the enemy. In other words, the Qur’an, from the point of view of the Christian faith, is marked by at least a partial rejection of the call of the Gospel to perfection and holiness on the pattern of Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord, and it clearly rejects the Good News of God’s gift of Himself to humankind in Jesus Christ.

For us, reading and studying the Qur’an and sharing some such reading and study with Muslim believers belongs to the larger Christian and theological task of discerning the fruits of the Spirit in the foundational texts as well as in the actual life of the religions and their followers. Christians are called in the Church to live ever more effectively their vocation to be the light, salt and yeast of the world. They do so as participants in the event of universal history, in which cultures and religions are being transformed through a process of learning, as well as critically discerning and mutual “cleansing” memory and heart under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. All are invited to let themselves be taken ever more deeply into the fullness of the triune life of God – who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ as unconditional love. This is the Good News, the Holy Scriptures that our faith preserves and proclaims.



A detailed bibliography can be requested from the CBF General Secretariat.

- ¹ Maurice Borrmans, *Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims*, New York/Mahwah 1990, pp. 104-105.
- ² Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Bible and Qur'an*, in: *Encounter. Documents for Muslim-Christian Understanding* (Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies 13), Rome 1975, p. 5.
- ³ Gaudeul, *Bible and Qur'an* (see note 2), p. 7.
- ⁴ Cf. William Montgomery Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters. Perceptions and Misperceptions*, London 1991, pp. 33ff.
- ⁵ Cf. Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Art. Tahrif*, in: *Encyclopédie Islamique X* (2000), 111f.; Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan on Matthew 5,17-20*, in: *Islamochristiana*, vol. 3 (1977), pp. 99-105.
- ⁶ In this part of the paper I follow closely parts of the magisterial essay of Hans-Martin Barth, *Nimm und lies! Die spirituelle Bedeutung von Bibel und Koran*, in: Hans-Martin Barth / Christoph Elsas (ed.), *Hermeneutik in Islam und Christentum. Beiträge zum interreligiösen Dialog*. Rudolf-Otto-Symposium 1996, Hamburg 1997, pp. 9-23.

⁷ Archaic: for reward or wage.

⁸ Michael Ipgrave (ed.), *Scriptures in Dialogue. Christians and Muslims studying the Bible and the Qur'an together*, London 2004, p. 144.

⁹ Cf. Groupe de Recherches Islamo-Chretien (eds.), *Ces Écritures qui nous questionnent. La Bible & le Coran*, Paris 1987.

¹⁰ Ipgrave, *Scriptures in Dialogue* (see note 8), pp. xi-xii.

¹¹ Christian W. Troll, *Der Islam im Verständnis der katholischen Theologie. Überblick und neuere Ansätze*, in: Marianne Heimbach-Steins / Heinz-Günther Schöttler / Heimo Ertl (eds.), *Religionen im Dialog. Christentum, Judentum und Islam*, Münster 2003, pp. 51-67 (here 58ff.); Id., *Prüfet alles! Der Dienst der Unterscheidung als unabdingbares Element dialogischer Beziehungen von Christen mit Muslimen*, in: Andreas Renz / Hansjörg Schmid / Jutta Sperber (eds.), *Herausforderung Islam. Anfragen an das christliche Selbstverständnis* (Hohenheimer Protokolle 60), Stuttgart 2003, pp. 69-82.

FEATURE
ARTICLE

Important Biblical Characters in the Koran

Heribert Busse



Prof. Heribert Busse gave lectures on Oriental Studies at Hamburg, Bochum, Bordeaux, Beirut and Jerusalem Universities and was Director of the Seminar for Oriental Studies at the University of Kiel from 1973 up to 1991 when he became Professor Emeritus. His areas of specialization concentrate on Islamic History and Culture and on Christian-Islamic relations.

The Koran contains numerous references to characters from the Jewish or Christian traditions, from the Bible or from apocryphal writings. Only those particulars of the accounts, however, are reproduced that are in agreement with the core message of the Koran. In all twenty-five prophets appear. After Mohammed, Moses (Musa), who is named 136 times, appears most frequently; Noah (Nuh) 33 times, Abraham (Ibrahim) 69 times, Jesus (Isa), the Messiah (al-Masih) 36 times. Mary (Maryam) is mentioned 34 times, 25 times in connection with her son Jesus.

Abraham – Ibrahim

The biblical patriarch is a key figure in the theology of the Koran. Mohammed's whole mind and energies were

after all aimed at nothing else than the restoration of the religion of Abraham (*millat Ibrahim*)! According to the prophet, this religion had been corrupted by Jews and Christians: "People of the Book, why do you argue about Abraham when both the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed till after him? ... Abraham was neither Jew nor Christian. He was an upright man, one who had surrendered himself to Allah. He was no idolater." (Sura 3:65,67). Through the contemplation of the starry heaven Abraham had found the one true God (Sura 6:74-79 par). His understanding of God could be called a kind of nature religion, but in his preaching (Abraham himself speaks in the Koran) he speaks of Allah's divine guidance (*hudo*), of which he has been made to partake (Sura 6:80). The remark is attributed to Mohammed that man is by nature born with the right faith (*fitra*). It is their parents who make a person a Jew, or a Christian or a Zoroastrian.

The Jews misunderstood Abraham, according to the Koran. Descent from the Patriarch includes no guarantee of salvation. John the Baptist likewise polemicized against this view: "Bear fruits that befit repentance, and



do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our Father" (Lk 3:8). Jesus picks up this theme: "If you were Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did" (Jn 8:39). The Koran, too, knows of the promise of a posterity made to Abraham and of the covenant God made with him. When as yet he had no son, God "put Abraham to the proof" (Sura 2:124). What is meant are the promises and the covenant of God in Gen 15. When Abraham then asks whether all of his descendants are included in the covenant, God answers in the Koran with a restriction: "My covenant does not apply to the evildoers." God gave his blessing to Abraham and to Isaac, but "among their offspring were some who did good works and others who clearly sinned against their souls" (Sura 37:113).

The Koran sees Abraham more through a Christian perspective. He is the father of all believers, as Paul had already said (Ga 3:7). But Christians have fallen away from the religion of Abraham because they have turned Jesus, the son of Mary and emissary of God, as he is always called in the Koran, into the Son of God. It is not his bodily descendants that are nearest to Abraham, nor are Christians nearest to him; rather "the men who are nearest to Abraham are those who follow him, this Prophet (i.e. Mohammed), and the true believers" (Sura 3:68).

Prophecy and Scripture are, according to the Koran, native to the descendants of Abraham (Sura 29:27). This corresponds to the Jewish understanding, but it is broadened in the Koran in such a way that prophecy and Sacred Scripture are not limited to the Holy Land, otherwise Mohammed himself would have been excluded therefrom. The Koran tells about Abraham's readiness to offer his son in sacrifice (Sura 37:101-110). But Moslem exegetes are inclined to the view that the son to be offered was Ishmael, not Isaac. And the offering took place not on Mount Moriah, but at Mecca. With the banishment of Hagar and her son, Abraham, with the support of Ishmael, becomes the architect of the Ka'aba in Mecca and the founder of the yearly pilgrim feast (Sura 2:125-129 par). This idea is perhaps based on an extension of Genesis 12:8f where the story is told that Abraham erected an altar in Bethel and then travelled on, "still going toward the Negev." Through his relationship by marriage with Arab settlers in Mecca, Abraham's son Ishmael founded a line of descendancy from which Mohammed later sprang. In the Ka'ba dedication prayer Abraham included the petition, with reference to Mohammed, for the sending of a prophet to the Arabs (Sura 2:129).

All prophets are persecuted by the heathen and ultimately saved because of their preaching. The prophet cannot renege on his mission, but God in his righteousness will protect him from his enemies. Noah and the flood serve as a model for this protective shielding

of the prophet by God. Abraham, as the rabbis also believed, was to be burned at the stake because of his faith; however, through God's intervention he was saved and migrated with Lot "to the land which we had blessed for all mankind" (Sura 21:71). As in the Bible, the story of the apparition under the oak of Mamre of the angels who announced the birth of Isaac is closely linked with the account of the impending punishment on Sodom and Abraham's dispute with God (Sura 11:74-76 par). The judgment on Sodom and the salvation of Lot and the believers appears as an independent account no fewer than eight times in the Koran (Sura 7:80-84 par).



"We ransomed his son with a noble sacrifice and bestowed on him the praise of later generations. 'Peace be on Abraham!'" (Sura 37, 107-109)

Mohammed understood himself as the heir of Abraham. Like Abraham he preached to the pagan world and broke with the existing religion of the fathers; he was persecuted, he emigrated, conquered his enemies and restored the monotheistic cult at Ka'ba. Abraham was the first Moslem. In the *millat Ibrahim* Jews, Christians and Moslems can trace their common origin. It is even stated that Mohammed resembled Abraham in appearance.

Moses – Musa

Although the image of Abraham in the Koran agrees with the Bible on many points, it also exhibits significant departures, such as for example the incident of his being saved from burning at the stake and the building of Ka'ba, of which neither the Bible nor the rabbinic literature show any knowledge. In contrast, what the Koran says about Moses is very close to the Bible on almost every point. His life from the time he was exposed as an infant in a basket made of reeds to the murder of an Egyptian, the flight to Midian and his calling at the thornbush, to his appearance before Pharaoh and the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt – all of this is told in detail in Sura 28:1-42. An account of other events that link back to the sermon before Pharaoh and the exodus are found in Sura 7:103-162: Moses resists the Israelites' demand for idolatry and he receives the tablets of the Law on Mount Sinai; the Israelites worship the golden calf in his absence; Moses chooses seventy elders and performs the water miracle; the Israelites are



fed with manna and quail; the cloud provides them with shade, instead of leading them by day, as it says in the Bible; because the Israelites hesitate to fight for possession of the land they are punished with a forty-year period of wandering in the desert. In isolation from this account, the Koran knows of the rebellion of Korah (Sura 28:76-84) and, in dependence on Numbers 19, the offering of the yellow heifer (Sura 2:67-73).



"We gave the Torah to Moses, but before long men disagreed about it." (Sura 41, 45)

In line with the Christian tradition the Koran locates the calling of Moses as prophet and leader of his people at Sinai, "on the right side of the mountain" (Sura 19:51; 28:29), by which is certainly meant the thornbush which is exhibited at the Monastery of Saint Catherine as the place of the calling. The Koran returns to this event a number of times (Sura 20:9-48 par), because it was of significance for Mohammed's understanding of his own calling, of which he was at first doubtful. God made himself known to Moses, equipped him with confirmatory miracles and gave him Aaron his brother as a helper. The latter was not the first highpriest – the Koran knows nothing of sacrifice, nor does it describe the construction of a tabernacle – but a helper (*wazir*, Sura 20:30; 25:35), a prophet like Moses (19:53), equipped with signs and wonders (23:45), and a receiver of revelation (*furqan*, Sura 21:48). In the description of the task assigned to Moses the Koran fluctuates between conversion of Pharaoh (Sura 79:18f) and release of the Israelites.

At the center of interest in the Koran stands the appearance of Moses and his brother before Pharaoh (Sura 7:103-136f. par), the exodus of the Israelites and the downfall of the Egyptians (Sura 7:136f. par). As was the case already with the calling, Moses' task is not all that clear; his preaching has as its goal sometimes the conversion of Pharaoh, who has described himself as a god (Sura 28:38; 79:24), and at other times the release of the Israelites (Sura 44:17-22). It is, however, also said that Pharaoh had wanted to drive the Israelites out of the country (Sura 17:103). Moses' preaching on the resurrection (Sura 20:49-55; 26:23-29) is both Christian and also Islamic. The Koran knows of the Egyptian plagues (Sura 7:130-135 par) and it contains at least hints of the Passover feast (Sura 10:87). Considerable space is given to the exchange with the Egyptian magicians.

They are defeated and come to believe, whereupon the Pharaoh threatens them with punishment (Sura 7:120-126). A believing Egyptian enters the scene and offers the counsel of Gamaliel (Ac 5:34-40); "If he (Moses) is lying, may his lie be on his head; but if he is speaking the truth, a part at least of what he threatens will smite you" (Sura 40:28).

In many respects, Moses was a model for Mohammed. Moses was poor, despised and halting in speech, such that he needed Aaron as a helper; "why have no bracelets of gold been given him", Pharaoh asks himself, and why does he not have the heavenly hosts behind him, "why were no angels sent down with him?" (Sura 43:52f.). Just as Moses was poor and yet was able to appear before the powerful Pharaoh, so Mohammed came from a poor family, challenged the powerful of this world, was a prophet and leader of a community that embraced all Arabian tribes. And already before his death the spread of Islamic rule over Byzantium and Persia loomed. His enemies at Mecca were the distinguished and wealthy merchants, just as the Pharaoh was supported and counseled by the distinguished men of the kingdom (Sura 7:109, 127f.; 28:38). But more than anything else Mohammed understood the drowning of the Egyptians as a model for judgment on the infidel; he set it in line with the flood and the judgment that befalls other peoples and communities who opposed the preaching of their prophets, tried to kill them and were therefore brought to the ground (Sura 25:35-40).

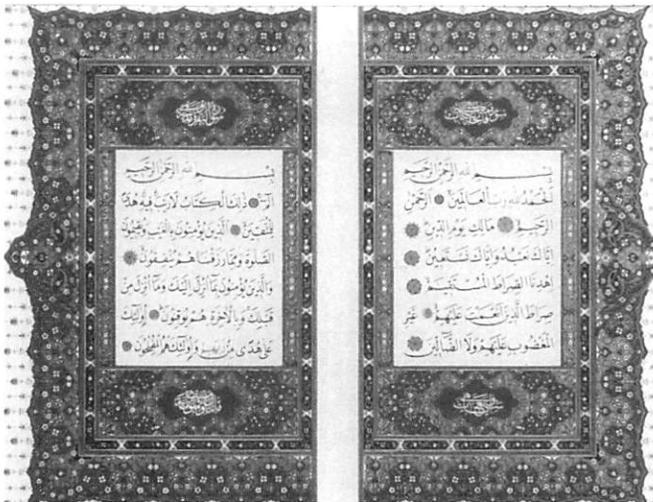
But the accounts of the drowning of the Egyptians also witness to the triumph of the Israelites and their prophets over those who opposed them. The discourse was aimed at Jews, who stubbornly resisted the recruitment of Mohammed. As in the "Improperia" (complaints of God about his people), which in the Christian East were very early known and recited in the liturgy, the Koran lists the sins of the Israelites from the time of Moses to the attempt to crucify Jesus; God would always forgive them, and they would always fall back into other sins (Sura 4:153-157).

Mary and Jesus – Maryam and Isa

Mary enjoyed high respect in Arabia already in pre-Islamic times. The Koran even attests to the existence of a Christian group, of doubtful orthodoxy, however, which awarded her divine honors (Sura 5:116). A mural of the madonna with child is supposed to have been found on Ka'ba. The story is that Mohammed blocked the destruction of the image when he was purifying Ka'ba following the conquest of Mecca from idolatrous worship. In the Koran, Mary is called *siddiqa*, "the saintly woman" (Sura 5:75). Since in the case of Abraham the expression *siddiq* is used in close connection with *nabi*, "prophet" (*siddiq nabi*, cf. Sura 41:19), some exegetes ascribe a prophetic role to Mary, because she was the receiver of a divine revelation when the birth of



the angels “Jesus Christ, the son of Mary” (*al-Masih Isa b. Maryam*, Sura 3:45), whereby *al-Masih* (Arabic for “Messiah”) however is to be understood only as a name, not as a title of honor. He is created like Adam, not God’s “only-begotten Son”. With this and with the denial of the death on the cross the foundation of Christian soteriology crumbles. The Koran knows neither original sin nor salvation through the blood of the Crucified One. Every human being is himself responsible before God for his sins. God redeems human beings by revealing himself and announcing his will. This is salvation from ignorance. Paganism, as Paul already said (Ac 17:30) is identical with ignorance (Sura 3:154 par).



The Gospel brings right guidance, light, admonition (Sura 5:46). Christianity properly understood is according to the Koran identical with Islam, for Jesus preached

the one God and recommended prayer (*salat*) to the faithful and alms (*zakat*, Sura 19:31), which covers three of the five “pillars” of Islam. Just as all the prophets before Mohammed confirmed their predecessors and announced their successors, Jesus confirmed Torah and predicted the coming of Mohammed (Sura 61:6). He corrected the Torah, in that he softened the harsh regulations of the food laws (Sura 3:50). The Koran recommends that believers become helpers (*ansar*) of the Prophet, just as the disciples were helpers of Jesus (Sura 61:14).

In closing one can say that the Koran highly honors the Mother of Jesus, denies the divine nature of Jesus, but confirms his human nature without reservation. All in all the Koran is more kindly disposed toward Christians than toward Jews. As God announced to Jesus his taking up into heaven, he let him know at the same time that his followers would be superior to unbelievers, i.e. to the Jews, till the day of the resurrection (Sura 3:55).

(Transl.: L. Maluf)

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Glossary of Islamic Terms

Hadith (report/communication/story): tradition of the words, deeds, recommendations and instructions of the Prophet

Koran/Qur'an (reading/recitation): the verbatim revelation of God's Word to Mohammed, communicated by the archangel Gabriel, put into writing by about 610 over a period of two decades by followers of the Prophet

Shariah (clearly marked out way/religious law): Islamic religious law, which includes both moral as well as juridical components; it has never been codified

Shiites (*shi'at ali* = followers of Ali): second largest branch within the Islamic faith, with over seventy different groups, who view Ali ibn Abi Talib, the son-in-law of the Prophet, as his successor and the first of the Imams; and they believe that the prophetic succession can only be exercised by an

Imam. Sunnites and Shiites originally did not differ in their theological outlooks, but rather in the question over the leadership of the community of the faithful. The Caliphate developed within Sunni circles, the Imamate with the Shiites.

Sunna (custom): exemplary and model life-praxis of the Prophet whose foundation is constituted by the Haditha; part of religious law in Islam and according to the Torah the second source of Islamic jurisprudence

Sunnites: majority of Moslems (about 90%) for whom the model life of Mohammed is the most important rule for the understanding of revelation

Sura (series): chapter of the Koran; the Koran contains in all 114 Suras, with anywhere from 6,200 to 6,600 verses, depending on the numbering method employed



On the Death of Fr. Gerhard Mellert, svd (1938–2006)



The death of Fr. Gerhard Mellert, svd, on the isle of Montserrat in the Caribbean on 22 July 2006, where he had been pastor of Saint Patrick's Parish since 2002, was totally unexpected and for many incomprehensible.

Fr. Gerhard Mellert was born in Freiburg, Germany, in 1938, and he joined the Order of the Divine Word Missionaries (SVD). After novitiate, the study of philosophy in Vienna and the study of theology in Manila and Tagaytay he was ordained a priest on 29 August 1965 in Tagaytay. In the course of his missionary work Fr. Mellert was active in almost every part of the world: initially in the Philippines, in Mindoro, Calapan and Mamburao, then in the General House in Rome (1984-1988), from 1989 to 1997 in Colombia and finally, since 1997, in the Caribbean. His linguistic knowledge and his organizational skills always came in handy wherever he went.

Alexander M. Schweitzer, CBF General Secretary, writes in his letter of condolence:

"The Catholic Biblical Federation owes a great debt of gratitude to Fr. Mellert, and his contributions to biblical pastoral ministry, especially in Latin America and in the Caribbean will keep his memory very much alive for a long time to come. In 1990, as secretary of the organization team he played a lead role in the successful outcome of the Fourth Plenary Assembly of the CBF in Bogotá, Colombia. In the aftermath of the Plenary he took on the responsible office of CBF coordinator for the Latin American and Caribbean Subregion, which he exercised with tireless engagement, great human warmth and a practical sense of the doable, till 1997.

It is no exaggeration to say that through his work Fr. Mellert had a decisive influence on the subregion and caused it to blossom. His personal commitment to biblical pastoral ministry on the entire continent, his care for CBF members and his intensive exchanges with the General Secretariat also number among his many credits, as does the construction of structures within the subregion that are functioning till today and the establishment of the subregional bureau in Bogotá. Even after his departure from Colombia he remained very closely connected with the Federation and did his part through his parochial work in the Caribbean to bring the life-giving message of the Word of God to as many people as possible. All of us in the CBF have lost in Fr. Gerhard Mellert a good friend, a committed missionary and a convinced and inspiring collaborator in the service of the Word. In just a few weeks Fr. Gerhard Mellert intended to begin a well-earned earthly retirement. But before it could come to this, the Lord called him home into the eternity of heaven. We are grateful to Gerhard Mellert for his engagement in the CBF and the tireless commitment to biblical pastoral ministry through which he contributed to make 'the word of the Lord speed on and triumph' (2 Thess 3:1). We pray that God, the Creator of all life, will grant him eternal life and allow him to share in His glory and in His light. R.I.P."

On the Death of Johannes Cardinal Willebrands (1909–2006)

Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, former President of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (since 1988: The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity) and the oldest cardinal of the Catholic Church, died on 2 August at the age of 96 in the Franciscan cloister of Denekamp, in the Netherlands. Willebrands was one of the pioneers of ecumenical dialogue between the Christian denominations and co-founder of the Catholic Biblical Federation.



Ordained to the priesthood in 1934, Willebrands became the secretary of the newly established Secretariat of Christian Unity under Cardinal Augustin Bea. This was during the pontificate of Pope John XXIII. In 1969, after the death of Cardinal Bea, Pope Paul VI appointed him as President of the Secretariat for Christian Unity, an office he held till 1989.

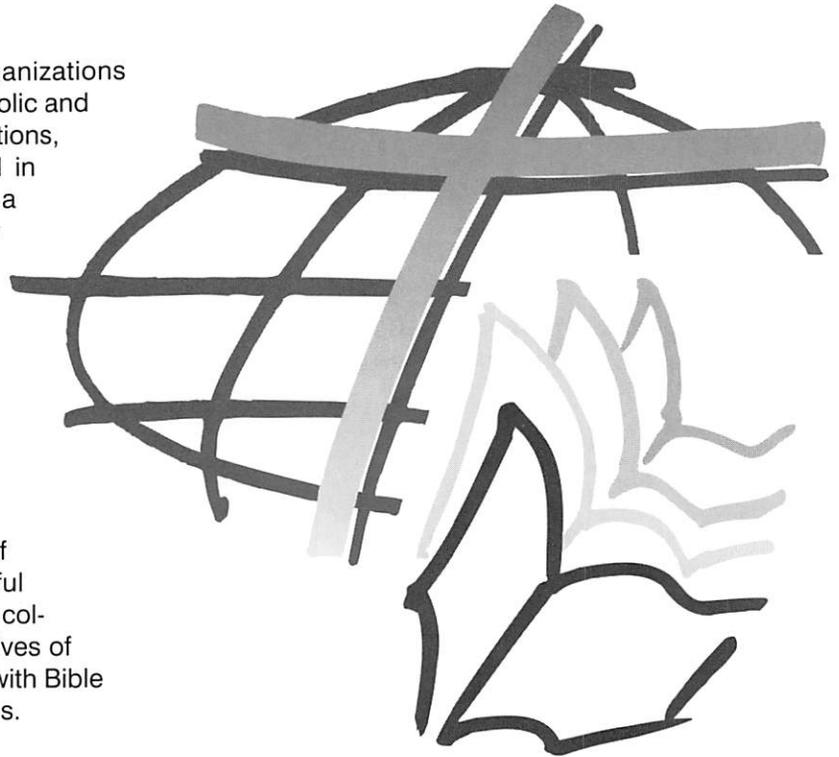
The Catholic Biblical Federation had close ties with Cardinal Willebrands. It was through his initiative, after the death of Cardinal Bea, that progress was made toward the founding of a Catholic organization for the world-wide promotion of biblical pastoral ministry, and he brought the initiative to positive fruition. So it was that on April 16 the Catholic Biblical Federation was brought into being, at that time still under the name of the World Catholic Federation for Biblical Apostolate. In the years that followed, he supported the Federation through numerous contacts and personal statements. Until lately he took an active interest in the life of the CBF. Due to his advanced age, however, he was sadly unable to attend the Dei Verbum Congress in Rome in September 2005.

In a telegram of condolence to Cardinal Adrianus Simonis of Utrecht, Pope Benedict XVI called the deceased "a tireless shepherd in the service of God's People and of the unity of the Church." According to the Pope, "he gave a new thrust to ecumenical dialogue." The CBF also remembers with gratitude its "founding cardinal" and will forever honor his memory. R.I.P.

The Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF) is a world-wide association of Catholic organizations committed to the ministry of the Word of God. At the present time, the CBF membership includes 92 full members and 232 associate members coming from a total of 127 countries.

The activities of these organizations include the preparation of Catholic and interconfessional Bible translations, the propagation of Bibles and in general the promotion of a deeper understanding of Holy Scripture.

The CBF promotes the biblical pastoral activities of these organizations, provides a forum for the world-wide sharing of experiences in this field, searches for new ways of bringing the joy of God's Word to the faithful throughout the world. It seeks collaboration with the representatives of biblical scholarship as well as with Bible Societies of various confessions.



In particular, the CBF works towards the promotion of the reading of the Bible within the context of concrete life situations and the training of ministers of the Word in this direction.

At the beginning of the third millennium Holy Scripture can be viewed as the great textbook of humanity. Especially in times like this the reading of the Bible not only helps the Christian community to grow in faith and love, but it can and should also offer to the whole world those words of brotherhood and of human wisdom that it so desperately needs. This is the great challenge that the Catholic Biblical Federation sets for itself.

Vincenzo Paglia, Bishop of Terni-Narni-Amelia, Italy, President of the CBF